I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

...............................................

Ken Miller
Abstract

The dominant discourse of screen acting has always revolved around a commitment to transparent philosophical realism which is grounded in notions of authenticity, coherence and the existence of a deep, unifying vein of human nature – our own and that of the characters we see on screen. The philosophical position of realism is typically associated with the Stanislavskian system of acting. In spite its apparent naturalness, however, this code of performance has been subject to continuous questioning with subtle, and at times not-so-subtle consequences. This thesis explores the trajectory of these challenges to realism within the specific context of screen performance.

Departures from the dominant code of psychological realism in screen acting can broadly be accounted for by changes to prevailing philosophical perspectives which bring the interrelated notions of the unified subject and realism into question. Shortly after the invention of cinema, the unified subject begins to be conceptualized as either a psychoanalytical or an ideological subject with correspondent manifestations in the nature of screen performance – typified most vividly by the psychoanalytic emphasis inherent in Method acting and the making-strange techniques of anti-realist formalism respectively. Other developing philosophical fashions similarly have consequences for screen performance: The psychoanalytic and ideological subject gives way to the split subject of Lacan and the schizological subject of R.D. Laing, both of which have the effect of shifting the locus of performance towards the exteriority of the subject rather than its interiority. The elegant correspondence between philosophical fashions and screen performances begins to break down once the notion of screen performance becomes involuted and screen performance itself emerges as a focus of philosophical interest due to the growing importance of screen
media in cultural studies and in our everyday lives. This moment is accompanied by
an ever-increasing degree of self-reflexivity in films and performances while
postmodern philosophical perspectives, such as those of Foucault, Deleuze and
Guattari, Baudrillard and others, gradually dissolve the subject into a multiplicity of
non-unified parts.

The overall philosophical and cultural trajectory that I describe takes us away from
notions of subjective depth and interiority (which are the hallmarks of both
humanism and realism) towards an emphasis on surfaces and the exteriorization of
experience. I propose that this cultural trend impels us towards a need to perform our
identities in exteriority and, as a consequence, that the notion of having some kind of
“media presence” is increasingly becoming the currency by which we validate
ourselves as individuals. At the same time, however, I also argue that a tension
remains between this self-reflexive/postmodern tendency to create and perform
versions of self, and the persistence of an existential anxiety about individual identity
and authenticity. I conclude that this tension drives many contemporary screen
performances, including those performances that we have recently begun to describe
as “user generated”.

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Introduction

This thesis concerns itself with the changing nature of screen performance. The notion of an actor giving a memorable performance in a film tends to evoke a number of familiar and ingrained ideas, such as: The actor is an artist imbued with particular skills and sensitivities; the actor draws on these skills and sensitivities to “get inside the head” of the character, and, through a combination of specialized techniques and intuition, the actor accesses his or her own inner resources of emotion, memory and life-history to give an authentic performance. It is generally agreed that the task of the actor is to “breathe life” into a fictional, scripted character by communicating traits to an audience that make the character seem like a believable (“three dimensional”) human being. The actor will work closely with the director, and between them, they will construct a performance that meshes with the overall aims of the film script. While the actor may consider the overall meaning of the film, its style, and its genre, it is the director who will have her or his eye on the “big picture”, ensuring that each actor’s performance is consistent throughout the film, that it follows an appropriate emotional and dramatic arc, and that it fits in with the overall narrative, the “through-lines” of other characters, and the themes of the film. The film might be of a particular genre requiring a certain style of acting. However, it is usually expected that the actors will “play it for real” (instead of acting as if they are in a film), and that they will react with apparent spontaneity to narrative events in the film so that it seems that each event is “happening for the first time”.¹

The audience, for their part, will be passive “consumers” who have had no influence on the production of the film, and who have no opportunity to interact in any
material sense with the film or its actors. Audience members might, however, engage at an emotional and psychological level with the performances and the narrative by forming attachments of some kind to both of them. While it is unlikely that they will forget that they are sitting in a cinema watching a film, if the film is sufficiently engaging they may temporarily “suspend disbelief” so that they can be taken up by the emotion, fear, excitement, thrill, or fantasy of the experience. And, finally, the director and all the other key crew members will employ techniques and conventions to help the audience engage with the narrative and performances by distracting attention from the fact that they are simply watching a fantasy construction, and not an experience of reality. In terms of the acting, this will usually include ensuring that the actors do not look at the camera or acknowledge the presence of the audience in any way.

These prescriptions do not apply to all films or all film performances. However, this has remained the firm basis of mainstream filmmaking practice throughout the history of the medium. Still today, filmmaking students in universities and colleges are taught the continuity techniques of “classical” film realism as the default position of professional practice. Similarly, most acting training – especially training for the screen – is geared towards the aesthetics of realism.

Many assumptions are built into the practices and ideals of realist filmmaking and realist screen acting. At a fundamental level, these assumptions relate to our understanding of the nature of the reality that is supposed to be represented in a film, and to the nature of the individual subject who perceives that reality. However, while realism has been dominant throughout the approximately century-long history of cinema, this same era has experienced sustained questioning and growing scepticism.
about assumptions pertaining both to the nature of reality and to the status of the individual perceiving subject. In accord with these trends, significant developments in the cinema (amongst other art-forms) have problematized the straightforward practices and assumptions of realism. In this respect, various forms of realism, non-realism and anti-realism have existed, evolved and interacted with each other throughout screen history.

Conventional realist filmmaking implies certain conditions and relations between the various components of the creative process. For example: a clear division between an actor and the fictional character being portrayed (even if the actor sources their own memories and emotions in the performance of a role); an unequal power relationship between the “omniscient”/“omnipotent” director and the actors who are responsible only for their own performances and who must perform according to the wishes of the director,⁴ and an unambiguous separation between the audience and the production. These features characterize the conventional model of filmmaking as a relatively esoteric (and very expensive) field of endeavour in which specialist skill and knowledge is required, and in which the audience is relegated to the status of seemingly passive recipient.

If we jump forward from this traditional model of filmmaking and film acting, however, we are likely to see that a very different picture has emerged in the contemporary media landscape. In addition to the continued existence of mainstream feature films that exhibit the usual realist forms and that maintain the conventional divisions between actor, role, director, and audience, we also see a plethora of other forms. The increasing availability of sophisticated, low-cost digital video equipment has dispersed the production base of screen productions. Increasingly, films are
being made on miniscule budgets by a diverse range of filmmakers and in a variety of digital formats. An ever-mutating array of actuality-based television forms is increasingly becoming the mainstay of the medium’s programming. There is a tendency in this actuality-based programming to turn “ordinary people” – i.e. the erstwhile TV consumers - into TV performers, and/or to conflate the private and the public by following the daily lives of celebrities. Media is transforming in ways that enable the screen productions and media performances of “amateurs” to be seen by (or at least be accessible to) vast numbers of people. This is especially true of the internet and the trend towards greater interactivity and increasing amounts of “user-generated content”.

These developments have not just happened, nor have they happened overnight. They have not occurred in a vacuum, nor have they been determined purely and simply as a result of technological change. Rather, they have arisen out of a complex range of economic, social, historical and cultural factors. In this thesis, I look at these changes primarily through the lens of screen-based media performance. I do this in two main ways. First, I explore the idea that changes in the way we think about ourselves and our social reality have tended to move screen performances away from the paradigm of realism and towards a position of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity. And second, I consider the idea that screen performances have intruded into our consciousness to such an extent that they change how we see ourselves. In this context, I argue that the ubiquity of the screen performances that surround us tend to have the effect of making us feel as if we too are performers.

Just as media practices and technologies are not static, neither are we. Broadly speaking, we can say that, as subjects of the contemporary world, we are defined as
much as anything by our high degree of reflexivity. That is to say, we reflect upon our environment and our sense of self, and we attempt to modify them both.

According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, individuals in contemporary society are required to continually navigate a “reflexive project of the self” — a process of creating (and continually “re-editing”) a biographical narrative of identity in the context of a society which offers a multiplicity of options and lifestyle choices. In the specific context of this thesis, we can also say that we are highly reflexive consumers of media. As a culture, we have lived alongside our screen media for over a century. The images, sounds and performances that are available to us via screen media are increasingly pervasive and there can be little doubt that we all carry thousands of fragments of these images, sounds and performances around in our minds. There can also be little doubt that we reproduce aspects of these images, sounds and performances when we perform our social roles in the world. While it may be true that for the last century we have all been filmmakers and film actors inside our heads, it is evident that this process has intensified radically over the past few decades, and even more particularly over the past few years. In fact, many of us are now literally becoming the producers of (and performers in) our own media in the contemporary online/digital era of video file-sharing, social networking, webcasting and the like. And even if we don’t make films, upload clips on to YouTube, broadcast our everyday lives via webcams, or even merely post images of ourselves on Facebook, we increasingly seem to act as if we are performing for an unseen camera at all times. My interest in this thesis is not just in screen performances per se, but in the relationship between screen performances and audiences – a relationship which, as I have already suggested, seems to be coalescing in a number of significant and interesting ways.
**Argument and Trajectory of the Thesis**

In this thesis I argue that screen performance is becoming increasingly central to understanding what it means to be a social subject in today’s world. In essence, I contend that we are witnessing a complex intertwining of media performances and our own self-images and self-understandings. I identify three interrelated aspects of this apparently symbiotic relationship between changing forms of screen performance and our changing status as social subjects.

The first aspect is that, as highly reflexive and sophisticated consumers of media, we are relatively unlikely to be fully engaged by simple forms of realism which require us to “fall under the spell” of a self-enclosed fictional diegesis. Rather, I argue that we are now more likely to be engaged by quite complex and layered screen performances and screen productions which acknowledge their own status as constructed representations and which tend to revel in the spectacles of performance that they offer. Or, to put this in another way, contemporary screen performances and productions increasingly cater for a growing appreciation of performances as performances. This tendency has the twin effect of foregrounding the importance of the phenomenology of performance, and of implicitly incorporating the audience into a performance (by contrast with the realist position of pretending that the audience does not exist). The second aspect of the relationship is that the ubiquitous presence of screen performances in our heavily mediated world creates a tendency for us to view our own identities through the refracting prism of a multiplicity of media performances. I propose that we do not simply identify with particular screen performers but, rather, that we are continually absorbing a multitude of
heterogeneous and fragmentary screen performances which virtually fill our sensory field. In this context, I argue that our understanding of identity tends to be heavily influenced by what has become a virtual “universe of performances”, and as a consequence, our own expression of identity increasingly tends to take on the tenor of a performance. The third aspect of the relationship between screen performances and contemporary subjectivity is that, in addition to being avid consumers of media, we are becoming equally enthusiastic producers of media – a fact which is now enabling many of us to literally become the (screen) performers of our own subjectivity.

In exploring these relationships, I track a trajectory in which screen performances tend to be moving away from straightforward realism and towards a form which can best be described as “postmodern”. Much has been written about theories of postmodernism and it seems unnecessary to reiterate such work at this point. Instead, I will simply list the tendencies in many contemporary screen performances and productions which mirror some of the main features that have been identified as constituting postmodernism’s “cultural logic”. These features include: intertextuality; pastiche; self-reflexivity; multiplicity; fragmentation; a focus upon surfaces rather than depths; a preference for the exaggerated, camp or theatricalised; a conflation of past, present and future into a kind of “eternal present”; scepticism about the notion of authenticity and genuine self-expression; and a form of almost “hysterically sublime” exhilaration. I also contextualize this proposed trajectory of screen performance by referencing it to a parallel philosophical trajectory which begins with a loss of faith in the humanist idea of the individual as a unified entity at the centre of all experience, and moves towards a post-humanist/postmodernist view.
of the individual as the necessarily fragmented, protean and multiple subject of a pluralistic, contradictory and rapidly changing world.

The central concerns of this thesis require me to take an interdisciplinary approach which draws upon a varied range of theorists and theories in areas including cinema/screen studies, media studies, cultural studies, theories of technoculture, theories of performance and performativity, and studies in visual culture, as well as psychoanalytical, sociological and historical perspectives. As I develop my thesis argument, I also source a diverse range of screen texts from cinema, television and the internet to provide relevant examples, and in some cases, detailed analyses. My thesis contributes to inter-related theories of communication, media, performance, representation and subjectivity/identity. The original contribution to knowledge that I make in this thesis resides substantially in the trajectory that I describe, and in the way that I define and delineate a mode of subjectivity which I propose is conditioned by a highly acute awareness of media performance, and by an equally intimate relationship to the technologies of camera/screen mediation. This original contribution is further enhanced by detailed analyses of a number of screen productions and screen practices/performances which serve to substantiate the central arguments of the thesis.

As this thesis attempts to chart a broad sweep in the development of screen performance and its relationship to contemporary experience, I necessarily limit my engagement with a diverse range of theorists and theoretical works to touching upon particular ideas which are directly relevant to my argument rather than focussing in depth on any particular theorist or theory. Having said this, there are a number of theorists who have been especially influential in the formation of a theoretical
underpinning to this thesis. These theorists include: Jacques Lacan, R.D. Laing, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard. In addition, there are numerous other theorists and commentators who have been important reference points for various aspects of my work. It seems unnecessary to say more about individual theorists at this point, as they will be referred to in due course during the elaboration of my argument. However, as the central topic of this thesis is screen performance, it does seem appropriate to specifically (albeit briefly) address the scholarly work that has been done in this area.

In their introduction to a 1999 anthology on screen performance, Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros pointed to ‘a lack of theorisation about cinematic performance’, while in that same year Peter Kramer and Alan Lovell, the editors of another anthology, declared that film acting still constituted ‘a limited and relatively underdeveloped area of film scholarship’. While a few other scholarly investigations into screen performance have begun to emerge in the past decade, the observations cited above seem still largely valid. James Naremore’s 1988 book, *Acting in the Cinema*, still stands as one of the most systematic explorations into the dramaturgical/rhetorical codes and techniques of screen acting. More recently, Andrew Klevan has provided even closer analyses of a range of “classic” Hollywood film performances, using an approach which treats performance as one stylistic element of a film’s overall *mise en scene*, while Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke provide a detailed semiotic analysis of the gestures and expressions of a range of film actors and performances. In addition to these works, a handful of other theoretical/analytical anthologies about screen acting have also been published in recent years.
To a large extent, these studies remain focused upon performances that operate in the mode of cinematic realism. However, as this thesis is particularly interested in performances that diverge from realism, some of the most relevant works included in these anthologies and elsewhere are those which have been written by Lesley Stern, George Kouvaris, Sophie Wise, Frank P. Tomasulo, Doug Tomlinson, and Robert T. Self. Their various contributions investigate performances which operate in excessive, histrionic, and (neo)-Brechtian modes, or which undermine notions of a stable and unified self within a modernist/“art film” discourse. Beyond this, three of the most relevant essays that I have encountered — all from the anthology, *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* — are Dennis Bingham’s “Kidman, Cruise and Kubrick: A Brechtian Pastiche”, Cynthia Baron’s “Suiting Up for Postmodern Performance in John Woo’s *The Killer*”, and Vivian Sobchack’s “Thinking through Jim Carrey”. These essays are amongst the very few scholarly works I have discovered that specifically engage with the notion of postmodern screen performance: Bingham briefly explores, amongst other things, how Kubrick utilizes the star personas of Cruise and Kidman to provide a kind of “meta-performance” in *Eyes Wide Shut*; Baron demonstrates how performances in *The Killer* operate within the film’s overall postmodern eclecticism, while Sobchack provides a detailed analysis of how the hyperbolic, self-reflexive and intensely physical performances that constitute Carrey’s body of work help us to ‘become aware of how we are caught up in a network of self-conscious appearances, self-reflexive performances, and self-constructed identities constituted through “sampling” the identities of others’. Sobchack’s essay, in particular, is an exemplary examination of a highly self-reflexive/postmodern screen performer, and the concerns that she addresses resonate strongly with some of the main themes I explore in this thesis.
It is also important to point out that my use of the term “screen performance” goes beyond acting in cinematic narrative fiction to also include a range of performances on television, in documentaries and avant-garde productions, and (towards the end of the thesis) in cyberspace. Each of these “non-feature film” forms of screen performance become increasingly relevant as the trajectory of my study moves ever closer to the present moment which, as I have suggested, is characterized by a conflation of “screen performer” and “screen consumer.” In recent years, scholarly works have started to emerge in areas such as reality television and the participatory culture of the internet. However, I have not found any work which addresses either of these phenomena in the specific context of screen performance, or in terms of the intertwining of screen performance and contemporary subjectivity.

**Structure of the Thesis**

In general terms, each chapter develops the thesis argument by describing an historical and intellectual trajectory, engaging with a range of theories and theorists, and citing or analysing relevant creative practices and practitioners. In a fundamental sense, if we are to understand how a particular society engages with both representational and social performance, we need to consider how that society views itself – how it conceives of its own reality. In this context, there are points in the thesis where I engage with a range of theories and theorists that are not specifically related to media or performance in order to be able to chart a “trajectory of the subject” which parallels the trajectory of screen performance that I am primarily concerned with. In such cases, however, I continually tie such engagements back to
my primary foci of screen performances, screen practitioners, and the relationship between media performance and contemporary subjectivity.

In Chapter One, I begin by reviewing some key aspects and implications of realism. I do this for a number of crucial reasons. First, realism is generally considered to be the foundation of screen acting. Second, the cinema has often been defined by its relation to reality and has therefore been intimately connected to the discourse of realism. Third, the fundamental assumptions that underpin realism are aligned with a particular humanist view of the self — a view that in some respects is still firmly entrenched in our thinking, but in other respects has come to be treated with considerable scepticism.

Any discussion of realism and acting must necessarily refer to the ideas of Konstantin Stanislavsky. I explore the significance of Stanislavsky insofar as his system is the cornerstone of all realist acting. I also review realism in terms of cinema’s trajectory from an initially “primitive” form of ostentation and self-consciousness to a tightly self-enclosed form of fictional/psychological realism that is constituted by its acting style, along with other formal aspects of mise en scene, cinematography and editing.

After establishing the normative ground of realism, I next explore aspects of the ongoing dialectic between realist and non-realist/anti-realist forms of screen representation (which centrally includes acting). This includes a brief account of how the assumption of a transparent and readily observable reality came to be increasingly questioned from various theoretical and ideological positions. In this context, I refer to the prevalence of a dualistic way of thinking which did not deny
the existence of an objective reality \textit{per se} but, rather, deemed it necessary to dig below the surface of manifest appearances to locate more deeply buried truths. Starting from the highly influential dualisms of Marx and Freud, I review two broad reactions to the kind of “naïve” realism referred to at the beginning of the chapter. The first of these was an anti-realist tradition (inspired by Marxism and exemplified by Eisenstein\textsuperscript{37} and Brecht\textsuperscript{38}) which aspired to locate true consciousness beneath the ideological distortions of capitalist society. The second was a desire (exemplified by the Surrealists) to dig beneath misleading and superficial conscious awareness in order to locate an unconscious, and therefore more profoundly truthful reality, via techniques inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis. I emphasise that both of these traditions had significant implications for approaches to screen acting and to screen representations more generally.

In this chapter, I also introduce the significance of Freud’s influence in post-WWII America, noting that by the 1950s psychoanalysis had become embedded into the culture and imagination of middle class America.\textsuperscript{39} This provides a context for the contemporaneous prominence of Method acting\textsuperscript{40} which, taking its cue from (an Americanized version of) psychoanalysis, looked to locate authentic performances by delving into the interiority of the actor’s psyche, in order to cut through distorting and debilitating layers of social conditioning. I note that, while Method acting claimed an allegiance to Stanislavsky, it diverged from Stanislavskian principles in fundamental ways – not least in its privileging of the self of the actor ahead of the textual/fictional character.

I conclude the chapter by pointing out that, while relatively straightforward ideas of a manifest reality may have come to be seen as problematic in a number of respects
in all of the social theorizing and performance praxis discussed so far, the dualistic model of a unified Cartesian self who stands apart from, and is able to perceive, a truthful reality (no matter how deeply buried) remained more or less intact.

In Chapter Two, I describe a trajectory beyond realist acting’s focus on the interiority of the individual and its assumption of an authentic and central core of humanity. I do so by mapping a tendency towards exteriority across theories of subjectivity and styles of performance. The chapter explores the philosophical decentring of the humanist subject in terms of the implications that it has for performance, and especially screen performance. As a starting point for this exploration, I discuss Lacan’s theory of Imaginary identification as a way into thinking about performance in the dialectical terms of self and other, giving the notion of otherness a broad-ranging sweep that includes the director, the audience, the camera, and the sense of the other that resides within the mind of the performer.

In this chapter I also explore some of the pathological dimensions of performance which, in one sense, can be thought of as yet another significant divergence from realism’s reliance on notions of a coherent and unified self. I begin this exploration by once again emphasizing the connection between performance and those conceptualizations of subjectivity which move us away from the tenets of humanism and realism, towards a focus upon exteriority. For example, I draw parallels between, on the one hand, the Lacanian idea that a paranoid/psychotic element is integral to all human experience due to the complex relationship with otherness that constitutes our sense of identity, and, on the other hand, the various iterations of alterity which permeate a performance and which arguably underpin it with a similarly paranoid sense.
Continuing to tease out these links between pathology, performance and exteriority, I then move to R.D. Laing’s characterization of schizophrenic experience as a division of the subject. According to Laing, the schizophrenic often creates an outer persona which is directed to the world in an attempt to protect whatever remains of an authentic interiority. In fact, there are occasions in Laing’s writing when he refers specifically to the idea of the schizophrenic as an actor. In this context, I propose that Laing’s phenomenological investigation into schizophrenic experience can be thought of as having a broader resonance, in terms of how we increasingly tend to think of the self in the reflexively exteriorized manner of an identity, or persona, which is performed to the world.

While insights such as those provided by Laing and the early Lacan contributed significantly to the idea of an identity determined by its relations to exteriority and otherness, these perspectives nevertheless continued to enshrine the notion of a phenomenological self in relation to an outside world. I note, however, that such perspectives were virtually swept away by the tide of structuralism and poststructuralism (to which, in his later works, Lacan was a key contributor), and were replaced by the conceptualization of an abstract subject which was the very opposite of the unified and interiorized humanist individual.

In order to highlight the connections between these post-humanist notions of subjectivity and their relation to both media/screen and social performances, I refer specifically to two aspects of such theorizations. First, I refer to Foucault’s proposition that “limit experiences”, such as madness and transgression, can potentially liberate the subject (and therefore dissolve subjection). Second, I
consider how the Deleuze and Guattari model of the “schizo-subject” attempts to shatter the notion of the subject altogether, by exploding it into a multiplicity of ever-mutating fragments. Theoretical conceptions of subjectivity such as these represent a dramatic and explicit departure from the notion of the central and authentic individual which is a necessary precondition of realism and realist acting. In this context, I explore how such departures can be seen in a number of different examples of screen representation and performance. In particular, I focus on how a range of transgressive screen performances and screen productions virtually operate as the antithesis of psychological realism because of their predilection for the camp, the grotesque, the theatrical and the carnivalesque and, in turn, how such performances can be linked to notions of the performativity of identity. I also explore the connections between the Deleuze and Guattari conception of the schizo-subject, the idea of postmodern experience as inherently schizophrenic, and the notion that contemporary screen performances (and the world of screen mediations more generally) are not only “symptomatic” of these schizophrenic tendencies but can in some respects be thought of as the agents which actively help to produce them.

According to Frederic Jameson, the postmodern era is characterized by a ‘schizophrenic structure’ which can have the effect of rendering us ‘unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life’, while for Deleuze and Guattari ‘schizophrenia is the universe of productive and reproductive desiring machines’ and the schizo-subject’s ‘code of delirium or of desire proves to have an extraordinary fluidity.’ In ideas such as these (with all of their negative or positive connotations) schizophrenia becomes a model and metaphor for dealing with the ambiguities and contradictions of postmodern experience. It is in this context that the chapter foregrounds the notion that, while the
inability to distinguish between many conventional dualisms – for example, self/other, past/present, interiority/exteriority, reality/fantasy – has traditionally been seen as a signifier of insanity, it may now be that the ability to see such states as being simultaneously co-existent, rather than mutually exclusive, provides a crucial compass for navigating our way through a “schizophrenic” jumble of mediations and mediated performances.

Chapter Three further explores this proposition by invoking two interrelated notions about the nature of contemporary performances: Firstly (borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari), the idea of “schizo” performances where both social and mediated performances begin to be characterized by multiplicity, mutability and fragmentation rather than coherence and unity (as in realism). Secondly, the model of the Mobius strip, via which the sorts of dualisms referred to above become twisted and intertwined in such ways that many contemporary performances seem imbued with what could be thought of as a psychotic sensibility culminating in a virtual collapse in the distinctions between self and mediated other.

In this context, I note that there is much about the characterization of the postmodern subject as decentred, fragmented and mutable that resonates strongly with the way that many contemporary screen performances and screen representations are also constructed as scattered and somewhat schizophrenic fragments of exteriority, rather than as reflections of a supposedly deep, unified and coherent interiority. I discuss how this can be applied to performances across the range of screen media – television, the internet, and cinema. I then provide a detailed examination of the way in which a number of the films of David Lynch are representative of a type of filmmaking that eschews unified, linear and coherent narratives and performances, in
favour of a schizophrenic mode that continually twists reality and non-reality inside-out (and outside-in) in a way that seems appropriate to the contemporary world and contemporary subjectivity. I argue that Lynch’s most recent films, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, are particularly apt examples for this thesis as they deal explicitly with cinema and performance (as well as, implicitly, with the fragmented, multiple and paradoxical nature of postmodern experience).

Moving from the psychopathologies inherent in the films of David Lynch to the “real world” psychopathology of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), I argue that MPD can be considered a “performative disorder” for a number of reasons, including the close relationship between its escalating prominence in the 1980s/early 1990s and the intense media attention that it received. I also argue that, just as the multiplicity of identities that define MPD hold a particular fascination for contemporary subjects (and audiences), so too do a range of media performances and media representations that similarly deal with the theme of multiplicity. Sometimes this can be the ability of an actor to portray a multiplicity of characters or, at other times, it can be the notion of a subject who cycles through a multiplicity of identities in the “performance” of their life. (I provide a number of screen examples of the former, and then examine in some detail the representation of Bob Dylan in the film *I’m Not There* as an example of the latter.)

In Chapter Four, I primarily focus on the significance of screen media in relation to what I characterize as the contemporary “performing subject”. In this context, I briefly review how Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard variously theorized that the world of mediation is steadily encroaching upon the world of actuality to such an extent that the former can virtually be said to have become a “replacement” for the
latter. This idea of mediated signs existing as their own self-referential reality leads me to argue that there is an ever increasing trend towards self-reflexivity in media performances, and in media content more generally. I contextualize this proposition by pointing to the historical emphasis in “post-68” film theory, and radical/avant-garde screen practice, on self-reflexivity as an anti-realist strategy designed to awaken the passive spectator (more or less in the manner of Brecht, formalism, and the like). I also refer to the fact that certain elements of mainstream cinema and television have always tended towards ostentation, theatricality and self-consciousness in ways that are at odds with the aesthetics and conventions of “invisible” realism. While the ideological imperatives of the anti-realism agenda might seem largely irrelevant in the context of today’s highly knowledgeable and media-sophisticated contemporary audiences, I argue that the trend towards greater self-reflexivity is central to understanding how we increasingly see ourselves in performative terms. In essence, I propose a type of “feedback loop”, via which the media and its audience are locked into an escalating state of mutual fascination with the construction and performance of self-image. I propose that we are becoming increasingly attracted to complex plays of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality, that create intricate twists between the fictive and the real, and between performers and fictional characters. Further, I argue that we now see ourselves as being caught up in these interplays, conceptualizing ourselves as the performers of our own identities.

In the context of what I characterize as an ongoing and developing intertwining of screen media and the contemporary subject, I also introduce the theme of filmmakers who have turned themselves into the subjects of their own films. Beginning once again at the margins of the avant-garde, this is a significant development that becomes increasingly prominent in the thesis as I discuss the growing fascination
contemporary subjects demonstrate with documenting their own images and performances in front of cameras, on screens, and for audiences.

In Chapter Five, I contend that for all the detached and ironic self-reflexivity that seems to characterize the contemporary subject, if we are to understand the intense attachment to screen images that seems to be such an essential component of contemporary experience, it may be necessary to reconsider the psychic/desiring relationship between an individual’s sense of self and the screen images that proliferate in exteriority. I commence the chapter with reference to Christopher Lasch’s argument that we live in a “culture of narcissism” that manifests itself in a preoccupation with self, an inability to distinguish between self and other, and a focus upon externality and appearance. I then note that narcissism is fundamentally image-based, proposing that, despite notions of the creative construction of identity inherent to the discourse on postmodern subjectivity, it may be that our fascination with images (and the dialectic of self/other that this fascination implies) is the driving force that propels what seems to be an increasing urge to display and perform oneself as a mediated image.

In this context, I return to the Lacanian conception of the Imaginary. In doing so, I argue that there is evidence to suggest that we still yearn to find answers to the question of identity (that is, the question of “who am I?”), and that this yearning is manifested in our fascination with screen images and performances. Further, I propose that this psychic tendency is in tension with the belief that we are entirely free agents who can create/discard/exchange identities at will. After reviewing the fact that 1970s film theory attempted to create a more or less direct analogy between the infant beholding an image of itself in the mirror and the immobile spectator
viewing projected images in a cinema, I acknowledge that any link between
Imaginary identification in the formation of ego, and the consumption of a
multiplicity of image fragments in the re/creation of identities in our hyper-mediated
world, cannot be nearly so neat or straightforward. Nevertheless, I propose that the
model of Imaginary identification, and the play of self/other that it implies, may well
be helpful to our understanding of these matters.

For this reason, I turn to an hypothesis put forward by Josko Petkovic, who
speculates that, in a world engulfed by images, we may be said to be returning to an
Imaginary-like state based on exteriority that is more in keeping with the “logic” of
carelessness, dreams, contradictions and Dionysian impulses, than with the Symbolic
order of rationality and linear thinking. Petkovic’s characterization of
contemporary/postmodern subjectivity brings together, via an “inclusive disjunctive
synthesis”, the Lacanian notion of the Imaginary subject with the nomadic “schizo-
subject” conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari. In doing so, Petkovic argues that
the postmodern subject can best be described as returning to a kind of symbolic
infancy. I use his hypothesis of “Lacan plus Deleuze and Guattari” as a jumping-off
point to consider how we appear to so readily attach ourselves to a multiplicity of
mediated object-images of desire in the form of screen actors/celebrities, and how
we increasingly seem to project ourselves into such idealized forms as the “schizo-
templates” for the performance of our own subjectivity. In concluding the chapter, I
propose that, as a result of our exposure to, and intimacy with, this increasingly
ubiquitous and fragmented mediascape, screen images and screen performances have
become the new “currency” for interpreting and transmitting our own identities and
personalities.
My aim in these first five chapters of the thesis, is to establish the theoretical framework for my argument that screen performance is now a central aspect of contemporary subjectivity and, in fact, that screen performances and social performances have undergone a process of collapsing into one another throughout the twentieth century and into the present. I propose that this process was gradual at first but now seems, like nearly everything else in our world, to be accelerating exponentially.

In Chapter Six, I look in considerable detail at two case studies of screen practitioners – Sadie Benning and Jonathan Caouette. I argue that both are representative of the sort of postmodern performing sensibility that I have been describing so far in the thesis. In differing ways, both Benning and Caouette use performances of the self and/with the camera as a way of constructing their own subjectivity. Benning can be said to bring her subjectivity into being via a process of mediated performance that is quintessentially postmodern in its self-reflexivity, and in its ironic and media-savvy approach. Nevertheless, I also identify an aspect of Benning’s work that retains the sense of searching for a grounded and authentic self. In this respect, I argue that her creative/performative project is, to some degree, still characterized by a dramaturgy of existential anxiety about loss and aloneness. I propose that it is the dynamic tension between the two discursive poles of self-reflexive distance and psychic/narcissistic attachment that makes Benning’s work compelling.

Jonathan Caouette’s film, *Tarnation* is also examined in this chapter as an example of the sensibility of a contemporary performative filmmaker. In this instance, the documentation of all aspects of the filmmaker’s life (and his family’s life) becomes a
kind of therapeutic “spectacularization” of the private sphere. I interpret *Tarnation* as a complex contemporary text that is a kind of performative version of domestic ethnography, while simultaneously co-mingling fact and fiction in order to become a “hysterically sublime”, camp-inspired, family melodrama. I also note that the works of both Caouette and Benning are examples of how the camera and the screen often become, almost literally, extensions of the self.

In Chapter Seven, the final chapter of the thesis, I provide a brief recapitulation of my thesis argument, before touching upon a range of screen-based media performances which exist outside the parameters of “fictional filmmaking”. The first of these I have grouped together under the heading of “media actualities”, and the second are those performances which operate in cyberspace.

I propose that these increasingly prevalent “media actualities” — including news and current affairs, television chat shows, observational and performative documentaries, confessional “video diaries”, reality and “celebreality” TV — may be even more revealing of the growing interpenetration of media performance and social identity than are conventional screen fictions. Or, to put this another way, I suggest that the performative aspects of these media actualities tend to conflate the everyday and the dramaturgical in a way that seems close to what Baudrillard defined as the “hypperreal” replacement of real world experience by mediated experience. In discussing the attraction of these media actualities, I contend that, because we have become so familiar with the conventions and tropes of screen fiction, we are decreasingly able to engage with them on an emotional/psychic level and consequently we feel compelled to look elsewhere in order to find some kind of meaningful encounter with reality. Related to this, I also propose that the sense of
realness in media actualities encourages a more intense identification than is possible with the performers that we know are not really “being themselves.” Finally, I argue that the phenomenon of exhibiting oneself (and watching others exhibit themselves) on-screen has become a new form of currency through which one’s worth and significance is felt to be validated.

I next move on to propose that the notion of “cyber-performance” is the most recent example (and perhaps the future) of mediated screen performance. I explore the idea that the realm of cyberspace has turned theoretical notions of the dispersed and fragmented subject into practical reality, with the corollary that the online environment now readily allows contemporary subjects to perform their postmodern/plastic/multiple selves to audiences in order to validate their existence. Then, via a range of examples, I illustrate how various styles (and projections) of cyber-performance demonstrate extreme forms of many of the aspects of performing subjectivity that have been examined earlier in the thesis: hyper self-reflexivity; the urge to document and exhibit oneself; the need for an audience to authenticate oneself; the movement towards the “amateur-as-performer”, and, more generally, the increasing virtualization and diffusion of the performing subject. My purpose in canvassing these instances of performances in media actuality and in cyberspace is two-fold: First, to provide further evidence for my argument that the significance of screen performances in our lives is proliferating and intensifying, and, second, to point to possible areas of more detailed research beyond the bounds of this thesis.
The idea that a performance should seem to be happening “in the moment” and “for the first time” is one of the fundamental tenets of realist acting as espoused by Konstantin Stanislavsky, along with the various versions of American Method acting. As Lee Strasberg describes the idea: ‘…. the actor has to know what he is going to do when he goes on the stage, and yet has to permit himself to do it so that it seems to happen for the first time. This means that the body, the voice, every facet of expression, must follow the natural changes in impulse; even though the actor repeats, the strength of the impulses may well change from day to day.’ Quoted in David Krasner, “Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting”, in Twentieth Century Actor Training, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2000), 131-2.

Or, as Stanislavsky put it simply, ‘….you must live the part every moment that you are playing it, and every time.’ Konstantin Stanislavsky, An Actor Prepares, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1980) (First published 1937), 19.

I make this statement on the basis of my own experience as a university lecturer in film and television production, and from my discussions with colleagues from other tertiary institutions.


This power relationship can shift considerably in some cases, for example when a “marquee”/star cast member has more power than the director. Nevertheless, the director makes many decisions during shooting and editing which have a determining effect on overall performances.

For a recent discussion which usefully interrogates some of the key assumptions of, and ambiguities surrounding, the idea of “user generated content”, see José van Dijck, “Users like you? Theorizing Agency in user-generated content”, in Media Culture Society, 31; 41 (2009), located at http://mcs.sagepub.com (accessed January 17 2009).


In fact, Giddens is one of a number of theorists, particularly in the area of sociology and anthropology, who have written extensively about the notion that reflexivity is an inherent factor of late modern/post-traditional/postmodern society. Others include Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash. See, for example: Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash and Anthony Giddens, Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Another important and relevant theory of reflexivity comes from the “social performance” theory of the anthropologist Victor Turner who, along with Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman, theorised “dramaturgical/performance” models of human social behaviour in a way that would prove highly influential to the performance theory and performance studies which became prominent in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Turner coined the term Homo performans to describe that way that, via performances, human cultures are reflexively self-revealing. See Victor Turner, The Anthropology of Performance (New York: PAJ, 1988), 81.

This is a reference to Frederic Jameson’s highly influential essay on postmodernism. See Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991; reprint, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Jameson, Postmodernism, 1-54. Also see David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990); and Zygmunt Bauman, Intimations of Postmodernity (London: Routledge, 1991). There are, of course, a great many other texts which also deal with the question of postmodernism/postmodernity.


These theorists and commentators include: Judith Butler, Sharon M. Carnicke, Colin Counsell, Anthony Giddens, Ervin Goffman, Donna Haraway, Frederic Jameson, Martin Jay, Christopher Lasch, Marshall McLuhan, James Naremore, Bill Nichols, Roberta Pearson, Josko Petkovic, Dana Polan, Michael Renov, Theresa Senft, Sherry Turkle, Paul Virilio, Peter Wollen, and Patricia Zimmerman. Amongst others, these writers have been important reference points for various aspects of my work. Their works will be cited at the appropriate time throughout the thesis.


Lesley Stern, “Acting out of Character: The King of Comedy as a Histrionic Text”, in *Falling for You*, 277-305; and “Putting on a Show, or the Ghostliness of Gesture”, in *Senses of Cinema* 21 (July-


30 Cynthia Baron, “Suiting Up for Postmodern Performance in John Woo’s The Killer”, in More than a Method, 297-329.

31 Vivian Sobchack, “Thinking through Jim Carrey” in More than a Method, 275-96.

32 Sobchack, 291.

33 I only discovered this article towards the end of my writing, and, in fact, it is the only writing about screen performance I have located that specifically links the self-reflexivity of a screen performer to wider notions of the postmodern performativity of identity within the context of a heavily mediated culture. While it is relatively limited in scope, as a single chapter/essay dealing with just one performer (i.e. Carrey), I have found it not only particularly insightful but I also see it as supporting the work in this thesis insofar as its analysis of Carrey’s oeuvre provides a detailed evidentiary example of the tendency towards self-reflexivity in contemporary screen performances that I explore in this thesis.


The use of the adjective “primitive” in this context particularly evokes Noel Burch’s notion of the earliest cinema as a “Primitive Mode of Representation” (PMR) which he characterizes as being in a dichotomous relationship with the illusionist principles of the “Institutional Mode of Representation” (IMR), or classical realism as it is often known. For Burch, this primitive mode existed not only as an early form of cinema which was swallowed up by classical realism, but was also the forerunner to the more reflexively oppositional or “crestline” films of modernism which intentionally challenged illusionist cinema. For an informative account of Burch’s approach, see David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 83-115.


See especially Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.*

Jameson, *Postmodernism, 6.*

Ibid., 27.

Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, 5.*

Ibid., 15.


See Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle and Comments on the Society of the Spectacle.*

See especially Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation and The Ecstasy of Communication.*


Chapter One — Performance, Realism and the Search Beneath and Beyond the “Simple Truth”

According to Hallam and Marshment, realism remains ‘the most dominant form of representation in Western culture’ and there can be no doubt that psychologically-inflected realism is at the core of conventional thinking and judgments about acting.¹ From this realist perspective, a performance is considered to be exemplary when it conveys a sense of truthfulness, provides a coherent and unified characterization, and deals deeply and honestly with emotion. The realist actor is expected to go beyond the text of the script or play by calling upon his or her own resources of imagination and emotion in order to locate a deeper truth. In this respect, realist acting is intimately tied to a humanist conviction that all such truths can be located within the self.

The idea of artistic representation as a reflection of reality can be found in Shakespeare’s writing (for example, in Hamlet’s advice that a performance should hold ‘a mirror up to nature’), and can even be located as far back as Aristotle’s Poetics.² Realism as an artistic movement, however, emerged around the middle of the nineteenth century. It emanated from a post-Enlightenment confluence of scientism, secularism and social critique, and was underpinned by the ideology of liberal humanism which posited a universal and unchanging human nature and an autonomous individual capable of objective knowledge.³ Realism assumed the existence of an objective reality which can be comprehended and transparently recorded via language (in the case of literature and theatre) or via images (in the case of painting and photography). This view of realism is summed up by E.B.
Greenwood who described it as the ‘artistic rendering of a universal truth about human nature.’

While realism aspired to scientifically accurate methods of observing and transcribing the external details of human behaviour (as exemplified in naturalism), it was also motivated by a desire to reveal the authentic truth of the human condition in all of its complexity. It is this latter aspect of realism which propelled it on an inner-directed trajectory towards attempting to represent the interiority of the individual. Hallam and Marshment note that during the nineteenth century ‘discoveries in the emerging field of psychology started to question easy assumptions about the underlying causes of human behavior’, and as a consequence of the influence of psychology, a form of psychological realism became prominent in literature and theatre. Without question, the dominant figure of psychologically realist acting was (and in many respects still is) Konstantin Stanislavsky.

**The Influence of Stanislavsky**

As Daniel Meyer-Dinkgrafe observes, when Stanislavsky’s system is not directly practiced, it is usually replaced either by conscious derivation (for example, Method acting), or explicit rejection (for example, Brechtian acting), and as James Naremore notes, nearly all forms of contemporary actor training are ‘approximately Stanislavskian’ whether or not the source is acknowledged. Stanislavskian principles, standing alongside the aesthetics of psychological realism, are so pervasive in modern acting that they have become normalized as the basic assumptions underlying the criteria for evaluating most conventional dramatic performances.
Even though Stanislavsky’s theories were focused on the theatre, the boundaries between the worlds of theatre and film have always been porous, and the profound influence that Stanislavsky has had on theatre actors, directors and teachers has been replicated to a considerable degree in the practice of screen acting and filmmaking.\textsuperscript{10} Quite apart from the inevitable flow of ideas, practices and personnel from the theatre into film, Stanislavsky’s ideas on acting have always seemed particularly suited to the cinematic medium. Stanislavsky insisted on stripping away all ostensive theatricality in a performance, and it has often been suggested that this ideal finds its fullest realization on the screen. Naremore writes that cinema is able ‘to render intimate, low-key behaviour in ways that would have dazzled Stanislavsky’,\textsuperscript{11} also noting that the close-up in particular has the ability to contribute to the sublime “gestureless moments” of performance to which Stanislavsky aspired.\textsuperscript{12}

**Searching for the Truthful Performance**

The main thrust of Stanislavsky’s work, and his lasting legacy in terms of screen acting, has emanated from his approach to realism.\textsuperscript{13} The primary aim of Stanislavsky’s system was to enable the actor to produce a “realistic” and “truthful” performance based on a fusion of the interiorities of actor and character. The authenticity that Stanislavsky sought not only demanded a rejection of theatricality, but also an avoidance of any form of acting that merely reproduced surface details of behaviour in a manner that was disconnected from truthfully felt emotion. Stanislavsky strove to find a systematic way to access the internal core of truth that he believed was common to all of humanity; a truth that was essential and eternal.\textsuperscript{14}
For Stanislavsky, the actor was the conduit to the truth. Only by the creative leap of faith required to fully believe in the imaginary circumstances of the play could the actor potentially bring to light the essential truths that lay within the text. Stanislavsky put it this way:

The actor must first of all believe in everything that takes place on the stage, and most of all he must believe in what he himself is doing. And one can believe only in the truth. Therefore it is necessary to feel this truth at all times, to know how to find it, and for this it is unescapable to develop one's artistic sensitivity to truth. … I speak of the truth of emotions, of the truth of inner creative urges which strain forward to find expression, of the truth of the memories of bodily and physical perceptions. I am not interested in a truth that is without myself; I am interested in the truth that is within myself…

“Spiritual realism” was the term that Stanislavsky used to describe his system, signifying quite clearly that his ideas implied a connection between the external behaviour of a performance and the interior “soul” of the actor. Colin Counsell provides a succinct account of the somewhat numinous humanism that informs many of Stanislavsky’s ideas. Counsell argues that, for Stanislavsky, the purpose of acting, like all humanist art, was the revelation of essential truths about humanity. As a consequence, the fundamental assumption of Stanislavsky’s system is that by sourcing the truthfulness of the “inner self” of the actor, one can be confident that such truths would then be applicable across humanity regardless of time or culture.
Coherence and Structure in Stanislavskian Realism

Stanislavsky’s ideas and techniques were based on a view of the world that assumed a coherent, unified and rational subject operating in a similarly logical and intelligible universe. In this respect, Stanislavsky’s system was deeply embedded with an essentially Aristotelian allegiance to unified, coherent and circumstantially/psychologically motivated cause-and-effect dramatic construction.\(^{18}\)

A crucial component of this fundamental respect for coherence and unity in Stanislavsky’s thinking was the notion of *continuity* which was exemplified in what he termed the “through-line of action”. For Stanislavsky, it was essential that the actor aimed for ‘one whole unbroken line’ of character ‘that flows from the past, through the present, and into the future…’\(^{19}\) Stanislavsky’s technique of creating units and objectives formed the basis for performing this continuous character trajectory. All creative decisions regarding the performance were subsumed under the character’s “super-objective” — or overall objective — which was decided upon on the basis of the narrative and dramatic circumstances of the text.\(^{20}\) In turn, the character’s moment-by-moment objectives were established in a way that was in accord with his or her super-objective. As Stanislavsky put it:

> In a play the whole stream of individual, minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings and actions of an actor, should converge to carry out the super-objective of the plot. The common bond must be so strong that even the most insignificant detail, if it is not related to the super-objective, will stand out as superfluous or wrong.\(^{21}\)

In this way, the character could be understood as having a continuous, internally logical and dramatically unified through-line of action that cohered perfectly in terms of her or his own actions and objectives, the actions and objectives of the other
characters and, most importantly for Stanislavsky, the author’s intentions for the text.

The insistence on these developing and interlocking interior motivations was not arbitrary or capricious. Stanislavsky’s through-line of action fitted perfectly with the linear cause-and-effect development of most realist plays and, indeed, can be traced back to Aristotle’s dictum that the narrative of a play ‘must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole’. The overall aim of this Aristotelian ideal is to lock the production into an inexorable progression of causal justifications existing within a hermetically sealed diegesis. This aim represents the fundamental conception of realist dramatic representation. The performers act as if the diegetic world of the play or film is an actual and self-contained one in which events are occurring for the first and only time. This, in turn, necessitates an imaginary “fourth wall” that denies both the artifice of the production and the existence of an audience. This “closed circuit” of realism, in which all elements are neatly put into place, reveals Stanislavsky’s fundamental view of a single and universal reality that can be effectively modeled by dramatic mimesis in such a way that it has the potential to convey essential truths to a receptive (but essentially passive) audience.

“Psycho Technique” and the Self of the Actor

Stanislavsky’s system was not only concerned with formal unity and coherence. At the heart of his approach to achieving realistic performance was a focus on the interior mental processes – the psychologies – of both actor and character. In a way
that is consistent with the fundamental assumptions of Stanislavsky’s work, however, this focus on internal psychological processes did not merely have the aim of creating a “reality effect”, but was put to service attempting to reveal universal and transcendent truths.

Stanislavskian-based realist acting is sometimes summed up by the term “acting from the inside-out”. In this context, the process of determining a character’s objectives in relation to the text of the play or script is only part of the equation in terms of creating a fully-fledged character and delivering a “truthful” performance. According to Stanislavsky, these objectives must not only be ‘analogous to those of the character you are portraying’ but also ‘personal’. In order to fully realize the process of “acting from the inside-out”, the actor is expected to undergo a process of accessing her or his own inner core of subjectivity as a means of locating the truthfulness of the character being portrayed. The “self” of the Stanislavskian actor becomes an integral aspect of the creative process, and a way must be found to connect the interiority of the character with the actor’s own interiority. As Stanislavsky tells the actor:

Always and forever, when you are on the stage, you must play yourself. But it will be in an infinite variety of combinations of objectives, and given circumstances which you will have prepared for your part, and which have been smelted in the furnace of your emotion memory.

Stanislavsky’s concept of “emotion memory” was an amalgamated adaptation of the works of the psychologist Ribot (who proposed that individuals retain a subconscious, physically referenced inventory of the emotions and sensations experienced throughout their lives), and the behaviourist conception of conditioned
reflexes proposed by Pavlov. In using the technique of emotion memory, the actor sources their own memory-storehouse of emotions and physical sensations to infuse the character with believable responses. Emotion memory, along with the “imaginary if” whereby actors are expected to situate themselves within fictional circumstances as the basis for performing roles that may be in some way alien to them, are both part of Stanislavsky’s “Psycho Technique.” For Stanislavsky, the subconscious is the source of the actor’s creative inspiration: that is to say, the Psycho Technique is intended to be used as a ‘bait’ to lure the elements of the subconscious to the surface of consciousness in such a way that they retain their inspirational and spontaneous qualities. As Counsell observes, an important implication of this is that the psyche of the fictional/performed character will always necessarily be based on the psyche of the Stanislavskian actor, since it is the actor’s own memories that are being summoned.

It is once again the humanist assumption of a common core of universal truth underpinning Stanislavsky’s system that is used to justify this “one size fits all” coincidence of actor’s and character’s psyches: if the actor finds an internal response that seems personally truthful, it is then assumed that it will also truthfully represent the character. According to the logic of the Stanislavskian system, once the internal emotions have been accessed, the process by which they are manifested into a truthful performance is virtually autonomic. This humanist assumption of “universal transferability” is also reflected in Stanislavsky’s understandings of the relations between a performance and its reception: if a performance is inherently truthful, it will possess an unproblematic transparency for the audience. As Counsell puts it:
The raw signifying material of the performance is provided by thoughts, emotions and imaginary “facts”, none of which will require codification but will surface on the physical body (as intonation, gesture, facial expression and so on) in a form which is, Stanislavsky assumes, innately understandable.\(^{30}\) To encapsulate the Stanislavskian approach then: When a character’s moment-by-moment objectives (along with the physical and psychological actions that accompany them) are derived from a super-objective that is internally logical in terms of the fictional character’s psyche, and when that character has been created by drawing upon the actor’s own psychic memories, a performance will be constituted by dense psychological motivation and highly specific thoughts, feelings, and desires.

**The Persistent Legacy of Stanislavskian Realism**

Stanislavsky’s respect for Aristotelian unity and coherence in the structuring of a performance and, more broadly, his faith in the presumptions of humanism and romantic individualism, have close affinities to approaches that are generally taken to mainstream film drama.\(^{31}\) Given the dominance of realism in the cinema and the key role that acting plays in narrative film, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Stanislavskian-based insistence that a truthful performance can only be achieved if the actor accesses such truth from within themselves still prevails as the *sine qua non* of good screen acting.

We can get a sense of how entrenched such views are by examining a sample of the assumptions contained in the various practical textbooks and instruction manuals about screen acting and the directing of screen actors. In Judith Weston’s highly regarded textbook, *Directing Actors*, for example, aspiring directors are told that a
believable screen performance requires ‘the actor to perform on himself a stripping of the social veneer’ and that ‘[t]he actor must start with himself’ because ‘acting is not pretending or faking. Actors in their work must be more deeply truthful than what passes for honest behavior in the regular world’. And in a similar vein, Michael Rabiger advises directors that their primary task, in terms of their creative relationship with the cast, is to help the actors ‘in casting off layers of human insecurity so they can be rather than perform’. Humanist assumptions such as these are so firmly entrenched in the discourse of realist acting that they delimit all thinking on the subject. The questions become not ones of if the self of the actor should be the source of inspiration for a performance, or whether criteria such as truthfulness and authenticity are valid when judging a performance. Rather, the only questions that are thinkable within this realist/humanist discourse are the degree to which the actor has been willing and able to call upon his or her “self” in the creation of a performance, and the degree to which such work has yielded truth and authenticity.

Stanislavsky’s influential ideas and practices have unquestionably formed the foundation for the work of generations of actors who have produced densely rich and layered performances on both screen and stage. In some important respects, though, Stanislavsky’s view of a more or less transparent realism was based in the romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and, as a consequence, came to seem increasingly at odds with the more complex and schismatic view of the relationship between reality and appearances that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. Before exploring this issue in more detail, however, we will first turn to a brief examination of the issue of realism in the specific context of cinema and cinematic performances.
The Turn to Narrative and Realism in Cinema

At a fundamental level, the attraction of cinema has always been based on its perceived relation to reality. Film theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer insisted that the cinema was ‘uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality,’ while for Andre Bazin the photographic properties of cinema enabled it to almost literally capture traces of the real. This indexical nature of the cinematic image doubtless accounted in large part for the earliest film audiences’ fascination with apparently banal scenes of actuality such as employees leaving their workplace, or, more vividly (although perhaps apocryphally), the audience reaction of ducking for cover when they saw the image of a train hurtling towards the camera. While a focus on actuality has persisted to this day in the form of the documentary (and other related genres), it is important to note that early cinema quite quickly abandoned this emphasis in favour of narrative fiction. At the same time, it moved away from its initial status as an often rambunctious “cinema of attractions”, and towards an engagement with a predominantly realist mode of storytelling and acting. These changes involved a greater focus on the role of the actor, a gradual trend towards a psychologically-based form of realism, and stronger ties to the “legitimate” theatre.

One of the most significant effects of early cinema’s narrative turn was the creation of the star system. Stardom – and its concomitant phenomenon of fandom – creates intense feelings of enthrallment and yearning on the part of fans for their screen idols. While the theatre (especially in its pre-cinema heyday) was certainly not without its stars or its fans, it is often argued that the fascination and desire felt by the fans of film stars creates a particular type of psychic intensity. The exact nature
of this relationship has been the subject of considerable theorizing. One notion, for example, is that the photographic/cinematographic image has the potential to create a sense of longing and lack due to its ontology of “present-absence”, while other theories have stressed the voyeuristic, fetishistic and narcissistic qualities of cinematic spectatorship that lead the viewer to identify with the images that appear on-screen, including most especially the highly desirable images of stars. In any event, it is apparent that the experience of cinema spectating can (and often does) have the effect of drawing spectators into an extremely close psychic alignment with the actors/characters that they observe on screen.

We can summarize cinema’s turn to psychological realism by highlighting three main aspects. First, the potential for an intimate sense of connection between spectator and screen performer/character was enhanced as the cinema developed a subjectivized screen grammar revolving around close-ups, point-of-view shooting, eye-line matches, shot/reverse-shot and other “suturing” continuity devices. According to Jean-Louis Commoli, this trend can best be characterized as a transition from an “optical realism” that primarily relied on the indexical relationship between the images and the object or person photographed, to a “psychological realism” designed to create a series of alignments between each of the characters, and between character and spectator. Second, as the cinema turned towards the production of fictional feature films, it tended to explore action through the behaviour of psychologically motivated characters. Third, screen performance styles soon turned from their pantomimic and histrionic origins to a more naturalistic/verisimilar mode in concert with the developments of cinematic textuality and narrativity outlined above.
Taken together, the factors that we have referred to so far – the attractions of the star system, the subjectivization of cinema’s “grammar”, the development of psychologically-driven narrative, and the move to naturalistic acting – created a complex triangulation in the alignment between actor, character and viewer which firmly entrenched a form of psychological realism as the status quo of mainstream cinema.

As the cinema turned to narrative drama, it looked to the theatre both for its material and its personnel – a tendency that reached a high-point with the introduction of synchronous sound to the cinema in the late 1920s. The introduction of sound was a traumatic event for many of Hollywood’s creative artists. It is part of the folklore of film history that the bulky technical encumbrances and fetishization of dialogue which characterized the early “talkies” put a halt to the fluid, expressive use of the camera evident in the best examples of silent cinema. Arthur Knight epitomized this view when he wrote that ‘the techniques, the artistry that directors had acquired through years of silent films were cast aside and forgotten in the shadow of the microphone’.

However, this was not the only view. Another perspective on the introduction of sound (and therefore dialogue) was that it enabled richer and more meaningful communication than was possible in the silent era. In a 1956 article for the Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television, Kenneth MacGowan wrote that one of the main benefits of synchronous sound was that it allowed ‘the power of dialogue to characterize people’, asserting that:
For centuries, good plays had demonstrated this. In silent films, a man or a woman tended to be a stereotype unless a subtitle provided an essay on his (sic) character. Working only with the camera, a director had to fall back on visual clichés. A man who stroked a cat was a good man; a man who kicked a dog was a bad man. Through spoken dialogue, on the other hand, a film could present well-rounded characters. Its men and women could have the breadth and depth of true humanity.

Out of this and out of much of the talk in a film, the screen at its best could give us content ranging from emotion to ideas. The moving picture was able at last to take on the high values that lie in the dialogue of a good play.  

This perspective clearly suggests the degree to which the theatre was regarded by many as a reference point for judging the worth of any particular film. The commitment towards the humanistic ideal of representing “the breadth and depth of true humanity” can also be thought of as a commitment to the psychological realism that sought to reveal such verities. MacGowan’s comments can be contextualized by noting that the period in which he wrote them – the 1950s – was also the zenith of psychological realism on the American stage, epitomized by the psychologically dense, neurotically angst-ridden plays of writers such as Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and William Inge. It is hardly surprising that well-written dialogue was often thought to be the crucial element of cinematic integrity, given that theatre works such as these, which relied on the penetrating use of language for their dramatic and emotional effect, were not only the source for many “quality” films of the period but also the benchmark against which they were compared. And the performances by actors, to a large degree, were at the very heart of these psychologically realist representations. On screen as on stage, the actors not only embodied but (more to the point) spoke for their beleaguered characters in a way that was central to the meaning of the film – a meaning that mostly focused on the
psychologies and pathologies of those characters. The conventional perception of
good screen acting – alongside the perception of quality cinema – increasingly
aligned itself with the idea of plumbing the depths of characters’ psyches.
Psychological realism, then, became the yardstick for measuring what was perceived
as significant and worthwhile with respect to both screen acting and screen
storytelling.

As already indicated, a commitment to psychological realism is predicated upon a
host of implicit assumptions, chief amongst them that we are all autonomous agents
of free will, and possess an essential core of authentic identity that on the one hand
individuates us and, on the other, binds us via a universal thread of human nature. In
turn, these assumptions imply that it is possible to create a truthful representation of
reality, and to reflect accurately and poignantly on the “human condition”. In many
respects, however, this view came to be seen as increasingly untenable in the face of
a rapidly changing world – a factor which had considerable implications for screen
performance along with nearly every other form of representation.

**Beyond Simple Realism: The Dualism of the Manifest and the Latent**

The shocks and traumas of modernity which characterized the early decades of the
twentieth century meant that the straightforward way of seeing the world
exemplified by the romantic realism of Stanislavsky tended to be replaced by a
dualistic understanding of reality whereby the outward appearance of things was no
longer automatically taken at face value. Instead, it often seemed necessary to dig
below the surface in order to get to the truth. We will presently chart some of the
fundamental ways in which changing views on the relationship between reality and
its representation have affected how screen performances are conceptualized, practiced and responded to. First, though, it is important to contextualize these changes by noting that, like so much of twentieth century thought and culture, the dominance of this dualistic view of reality can in large part be traced back to the theoretical positions of Marx and Freud.

For Marx, the progress of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism was hindered by the mystifications of dominant bourgeois ideology. These mystifications were, in effect, a false consciousness which contrived to convince individuals that the social world around them was an inevitable and unchanging reality, and that there was no alternative to the status quo. A condition for the timely demise of capitalism, then, was the education of the working classes to a position of true consciousness so that they could correctly understand that their currently oppressed and alienated situation was part of a dynamic historical process, and, therefore, neither natural nor pre-ordained. True consciousness could only be achieved by seeing through distorting institutions such as the church, the state, and the commodity market, in order to perceive reality as it truly exists in its historically determined, dialectical form.

While Marx was concerned with the broad economic and political structure and functioning of society, Freud’s psychoanalysis dealt with the intra-psychic world of the individual. For Freud, human thought and behaviour were determined by latent drives and impulses which resided within the unconscious. Freud saw it as part of the burden of human existence for the individual to be forever subjected to the conflicting agendas of primitive internal desires on the one hand, and the socializing forces of the outside world on the other. For some individuals, however, it became impossible to cope with this routine and unavoidable state of human unhappiness,
and their distress revealed itself through neurotic symptoms. In these circumstances, it became the analyst’s task to lead the patient down into the depths of their own unconscious in order to discover the source of the trauma that lay at the heart of their suffering.

From both Freudian and Marxian perspectives, then, the truth was not necessarily as it appeared on the surface. Indeed, the assumption that reality was a simple and easily observed phenomenon was both misguided and fraught with problems. Richard Lichtman sums this up well when he writes of Marx and Freud that:

The categorical distinction between appearance and reality is absolutely crucial to their views of human existence. What people take themselves to be doing, the reasons they assign for their own activity, is no more than the surface manifestation of underlying forces of which the purported “agents” are almost wholly unaware. Ordinary consciousness is revelatory, but not to the “actors” who are consciously the subjects of their own experience. Human existence can only be grasped from the vantage point of a theory at odds with conceptions that people commonly entertain. This shared comprehension of the illusion of rational consciousness is one of the fundamental propositions that unite the work of Marx and Freud, and is perhaps the basic ground for the view that finds them ultimately compatible.  

The perception of a fundamental tension between reality as it appears to be and reality as it actually is — a tension which underpins both the Marxian and Freudian view — can be identified in numerous aspects of twentieth century culture, thought and behaviour. The theoretical perspectives of both Marx and Freud are also comparable insofar as they were each characterized by a fundamental sense of conflict: in Freud’s model, the battle between the id and the superego at the micro level of the human mind; and for Marx, the conception of class warfare on the macro level of social, political and economic history. In this respect, as in others, we can
say that an inherently schismatic view of reality characterized much of the twentieth century. This divided view of reality (and by extension of the individual) profoundly affected all art-forms in one way or another, and in terms of the particular focus of this thesis, it has had a direct bearing on filmmaking and acting.

**Marxism and Realism/Anti-Realism**

While Marxism was becoming an increasingly influential philosophy in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it wasn’t until the Russian Revolution of 1917 that abstract theory dramatically turned into concrete, material reality. In the new Russia, practitioners in all of the arts were seen as having a crucial part to play in the revolution. In essence, the role of the revolutionary artist was that of smashing through false consciousness in order to force people to see the truth. According to this revolutionary view, the purpose of any work of art was to break the nexus between the world as it appeared to the individual, and the assumption that such an appearance constituted an unalterable and static reality. This process primarily entailed a full-frontal assault on bourgeois representational realism, and therefore on “illusionist” principles which sought to create a unified and impenetrable representation of an implicitly coherent and natural reality – a representation which served only to bind audiences to the false consciousness of dominant (capitalist) ideology.

Both theatre and film were key elements of this revolutionary aesthetic. Theatre practitioners such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Yevgeni Vakhtangov and Nikolai Evreinov pursued anti-realist forms of theatrical presentation, and, to varying degrees, denounced Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theatre for its bourgeois aesthetics and practices. Filmmaking was proclaimed by Lenin to be of primary importance.
to the revolution, and the filmmaker and theorist, Sergei Eisenstein, was in the vanguard of its praxis. Eisenstein developed his theories of montage in accordance with the dialectical principle. One of Eisenstein’s main intentions was to liberate the spectator from what was seen as the mesmerizing and disempowering shackles of invisible realism, and, like many of his contemporaries, a primary target was the dramaturgical practice of Stanislavsky. Eisenstein made this explicit when he wrote:

The Moscow Art Theatre is my deadly enemy. It is the exact antithesis of all I am trying to do. They string their emotions together to give a continuous illusion of reality. I take photographs of reality and then cut them up so as to produce emotions…

As a result of his rejection of representational/realist acting on the basis that it encouraged false consciousness, Eisenstein developed a directorial strategy of “typage” which involved casting non-actors according to their physical appearance. Generally, he utilized these actors in emblematic and symbolic ways rather than individuating them as psychologized characters. While Eisenstein was opposed to the realist aim of encouraging audiences to emotionally identify with individualized characters, he was not against the creation of emotional affect per se — far from it. Peter Wollen quotes Eisenstein in this context:

If we want the spectator to experience a maximum emotional upsurge, to send him into ecstasy, we must offer him up a suitable “formula” which will eventually excite the desirable emotions in him.

Wollen adds that Eisenstein’s objective for the spectator was to ‘either strengthen his political and social consciousness or jolt him out of his ideological preconceptions to look at the world anew’. In fact, this objective centrally informed the practices of nearly all of the avant-garde Soviet filmmakers and theatre practitioners, and while
the relative emphasis on the actor varied according to the theoretical and aesthetic interests of the particular practitioner, neither the actor nor the character were accorded the position of centrality they enjoyed in the psychologically realist work of Stanislavsky and his like-minded contemporaries.\(^{58}\)

In terms of acting, the most enduringly influential manifestation of Marxist-inspired views about the purpose of art comes to us via the German playwright, theatre director and theorist, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s overall objective for the theatre was to alienate spectators from their narcotized and essentially passive attachment to the Aristotelian unities that characterize realist drama.\(^{59}\) Brecht specifically and intentionally subverted this Aristotelian tradition by creating formal disunities and dissonances between the various theatrical elements (e.g. scenic design, music, performance). He dispensed with the so-called fourth wall of realism in order to create an awareness on the part of the audience of the constructed nature of the production, and, consequently, to offer the audience a more active and creative role. Both Brecht and Eisenstein were similar in their desire to lift spectators out of their complacency. However, in contrast to Eisenstein’s aim of producing an almost palpable emotional reaction in the spectator, Brecht wanted audiences to disengage emotionally so that they could engage intellectually with the work.\(^{60}\)

One of Brecht’s most crucial strategies in this regard was the creation of a distinct separation between the actor and the character being portrayed. This strategy is generally considered to be the very opposite of the Stanislavskian “fusion” of the actor and their part. In “A Short Organum for the Theatre”, Brecht wrote:

> At no moment must [the actor] go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: “He
didn’t act Lear, he was Lear” would be an annihilating blow to him. … his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience’s may not at bottom be those of the character either.  

Brecht’s aim of breaking the nexus between actor and character manifested itself in a “quotational” style of performance, whereby the actor ‘narrates the story of his character’ with a clearly conveyed stance of always knowing more than the character does.  

In an implicit sense – and sometimes quite explicitly – this style of performance acknowledges not only theatrical artifice, but also the existence of an audience. Brecht’s strategy of alienation was based on the formalist techniques of defamiliarization, or ostranenie, which aimed to foreground the art object by emphasizing its distinct contrast to ordinary reality, thus breaking down our habitual perceptions and responses. While the formalist approach was sometimes a non-political one of emphasizing “art for art’s sake”—a charge that was eventually leveled at nearly all of the Russian avant-garde by the Stalinist regime—practitioners such as Brecht were emphatically committed to the political/educative potential of the creative work. Brecht’s project was antithetical to the humanist tendency of assuming (and attempting to represent) a generalized “human condition.” As Douglas Kellner puts it:

Unlike dramatists who focused on the universal elements of the human situation and fate, Brecht was interested in the attitudes and behavior people adopted toward each other in specific historical situations.

Brecht’s approach to acting was a direct challenge to the paradigm of realism. To this day, a binary conceptualization of, on the one hand, anti-realist, presentational acting under the banner of Brecht, and on the other, representational acting under the rubric of Stanislavsky’s realism endures. Brecht’s ideas would strongly influence a
vigorous critique of realism (including film realism) well into the 1970s, championed by theorists such as the editors of *Screen* magazine, and filmmakers such as Jean Luc Godard who regularly used non-realist and self-reflexive performance styles as part of his strategy of distancing the spectator. It is revealing to note, however, that although Brecht was steadfastly opposed to the hallucinatory and misleading properties of Aristotelian forms of representation, he asserted that his own theatre should be properly described as “Critical Realism”. As Colin Counsell comments, in terms of Brecht’s approach to his “Epic theatre”: ‘If realism proper attempts to show the world as it appears, Epic theatre was to depict it as, according to Brecht, it really was.” Or, in a similar vein, as Eisenstein said of his own work: ‘I get away from realism by going to reality.”

It is also important to make clear that although the approach taken by Brecht, Eisenstein, and others of their ilk may have asserted that the oppressed subject’s conventional view on reality was neither reliable nor accurate, their approaches to representation never fundamentally questioned the centrality of the subject nor the existence of a true reality, no matter how obfuscated that reality may have become as a result of the distortions of ideology. There can be no doubting that such Marxist-inspired forms of dramatic (re)presentation made a significant contribution to increasing skepticism about the transparency of reality. However, as we shall discuss in the following chapter, other historical factors and theoretical viewpoints would eventually lead to a distinctly ambivalent view on the nature of objective reality *per se*. Before examining this position in more detail, though, we need to step back once again in order to consider the crucial relationship between Freud’s ideas and the changing views on reality that were manifested in both representational performances and our everyday perceptions throughout the twentieth century.
Freud and the Unconscious Truth

The First World War (1914-1918) was an extraordinarily significant catalyst for change, both materially and in terms of how people thought about their world. The traumas and horrors of the war shocked humanity into new perspectives which often involved questioning its basic assumptions about the existence of rationality and logic. For example, the Dadaist movement established in Zurich in 1916 by refugees from the war wanted to obliterate all pretence that there was logic or meaning in the world. They focused only on the sounds of words, or turned them into an incoherent jumble in order to deny that there was any value in trying to create meaningful signification.68

The Dadaists’ anti-art/anti-representational stance manifested itself in an approach to performance that was the very opposite of the “fourth wall realism” practiced by Stanislavsky and like-minded realists. Performances at the famous Cabaret Voltaire privileged spontaneity, with the performers simply playing themselves rather than representing characters or presenting a narrative of any sort. The Dadaists sought to disturb the usually comfortable relationship between performers and audience. According to Annabelle Mezler, a Dadaist performance generally aimed to ensure that ‘the passive consenting spectator must give way to a hostile participant, provoked, attacked and beaten by author and actors’.69 While performance did not play a very significant part in Dadaist films,70 Dadaist theatrical performances at the Cabaret Voltaire and elsewhere71 became the inspirational precursors to much of the performance art that developed in the second half of the twentieth century, continuing to problematize conventional relationships between spectator and performer.
Perhaps due to its desire to negate everything, the flame of Dadaism extinguished itself relatively quickly after the war. Its successor, Surrealism, however, was not opposed to meaning *per se*; and Freudian psychoanalysis became the express vehicle by which the Surrealists sought truths that lay deeply embedded below conscious awareness. For the Surrealists, the rationality of the conscious mind was equated with the suppression of creativity, whilst dreams, automatic writing, and other conduits to the unconscious allowed for the possibility of truly imaginative and creative work. Daniel Meyer-Dinkgrafe summarizes the description of the Surrealist movement’s fundamentals given by its founder, Andre Breton:

*Surrealism is a pure psychic automatism which is intended to express, verbally, in writing or by other means, the real process of thought. For this automatic process, the subconscious mind in a dream-like state counts as the basis for artistic truth. An artist creating in Surrealistic mode does not mimic nature, and does not allow himself to be restricted by logic or rationality. The true purpose of such creation is to expand our definition of reality until it includes the marvelous.*

According to Meyer-Dinkgrafe, Breton was not favourably disposed towards theatre, and although plays and films were both produced from within the Surrealist movement, there is no specific style of acting that could be termed surrealistic. However, the idea of sourcing an alternative version of reality from deep within the unconscious, along with an emphasis on the primitive forces of the id, have inspired a rich and varied vein of filmmaking and screen performances from the 1920s to the present day. The Freudian-inspired cosmology of an unruly and irrational energy existing below the surface of consciousness constituting a “true reality” hidden beneath a false social veneer not only inspired the Surrealists, but also had a significant effect upon the stylistics of much German Expressionist cinema, as well as on the dramaturgical prescriptions of Antonin Artaud. In the
case of German Expressionist cinema, the narrative focus on insanity (and psychiatry) – for example in films such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)\textsuperscript{78} and Secrets of a Soul (1926)\textsuperscript{79} – was mirrored in the exaggerated performances of madness on the part of the actors, who utilized strategies such as the ‘intense stare and absorbed stillness’ inherited from the theatrical traditions of Expressionism.\textsuperscript{80}

Antonin Artaud is worthy of particular consideration for the manner in which his Dada-like desire to assault the sensibilities of the audience was not only inspired by a fascination with the dark and primordial aspects of the psyche, but also by a disdain for the humanist values enshrined in psychological realism and conventional approaches to performance. Like the Surrealists (with whom he had a tumultuous relationship),\textsuperscript{81} Artaud was drawn to excavating meaning from the unconscious by returning to a more primitive creative state, as well as attacking the reliance on rationality and the conscious mind inherent in conventional forms of representation, including the theatre.

In an influential series of essays contained in The Theatre and its Double,\textsuperscript{82} Artaud critiqued the dominant mode of realist theatre and argued for a revolutionary “Theatre of Cruelty” aimed primarily at the senses rather than the intellect. Such a theatre would implicate the audience in the performance, and provide it with an avenue for experiencing a distilled version of its dreams. Indeed, the influence of Surrealism (and the influence of psychoanalysis on Surrealism) clearly reveals itself in much of Artaud's writing. For example, Artaud aspired to a theatre which would allow transgression of the ‘ordinary limits’ of art and language so that man could ‘reassume his position between dreams and events’\textsuperscript{83} He insisted that in his theatre ‘the reality of the imagination and dreams will appear on a par with life’.\textsuperscript{84} Artaud
based many of his prescriptions on his (partial and idiosyncratic) understanding of Balinese Theatre. He strove for a ‘magical’ and ritualized theatre which utilized trance and enchantment, and he saw in Balinese performances a ‘deep intoxication’ which restored ‘the very elements of rapture’ and gave rise to ‘spatial poetry’. Artaud’s declared enemy was the naturalism of Western theatre, and, in particular, its dependence on language and psychologization. By contrast, according to Artaud, Balinese theatre dealt with concepts of ‘sublimity’ whereby the Balinese actors underwent a ‘systematic depersonalisation’ in their obedience to ‘tried and tested rituals’ and so became a ‘neutral, pliant factor’ in the mise en scene. All of these descriptions (and prescriptions) were, of course, the very antithesis of the tenets of Stanislavskian realism.

Aspects of Surrealism, and perhaps to an even greater extent the life/work of Artaud, would influence a number of theorists in the latter decades of the twentieth century – theorists who influentially foregrounded an epistemological skepticism about ideas such as truth, rationality, and even the nature of reality. However, for the Surrealists and others of their kind, an emphasis on the Freudian notion of the driving force of the unconscious as a true reality meant that their thinking remained within the dualistic paradigm that we have been examining: that is to say, the belief that a more profound truth lay waiting to be uncovered beneath a banal and often misleading exteriority.

**Freud, America and Method Acting**

Freud’s influence was not confined to Europe; nor, in terms of artistic and representational practices, was it restricted to radical and experimental artists such as
the Surrealists who attempted to redefine reality via the unconscious. In 1909, Freud visited the United States on a lecture tour, and by the 1920s his fame had spread throughout the world. In his authoritative study of Freud’s influence on America, Nathan Hale identifies World War I as a major turning point. In Hale’s view, the newly-emerged phenomenon of “shell shock”, and its apparently successful treatment by Freudian-based psychiatrists, not only secured the influence of psychoanalysis in the American medical community but also made a significant impact on popular consciousness by way of an acceptance of general Freudian principles, and the establishment of clinics and training programs which laid the foundations for a proliferation of psychoanalysis in the United States in the postwar period.

Hale further argues that while the influence of Freud — especially in terms of the modern attack on Victorianism against received standards of sexual behaviour — steadily grew and consolidated itself during the interwar period, by 1942 the United States had become the centre of psychoanalysis. Hale describes the period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s as the “golden age” of psychoanalysis, in which the influence of Freud was ubiquitous and had become ingrained into the imaginations of middle class Americans.

It is unsurprising in this context, then, to find that Method acting – or at least the version of the Method practiced by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio – was strongly influenced by a Freudian view of the world. The proponents of the Method have often stated that its techniques were not directly influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis. While this may be the case in a literal sense, the connections between the underlying beliefs and specific practices of Strasberg’s version of the
Method on the one hand, and the Freudian cosmology of repressed internal impulses on the other, are plainly apparent. As Sharon Carnicke puts it, ‘by the 1950s, the Method mirrored America’s obsession with the Freudian model of the mind by employing therapeutic techniques meant to free the inhibited actor from long-lived repressions’. Method acting is fundamentally underpinned by a belief that the modern individual is a victim of the conflict between an internal self and an exterior social realm which conditions, suppresses, and distorts his or her essentially authentic interiority. As a consequence of this belief, the Method employed training and rehearsal techniques designed to allow the actor to pierce these distorting and debilitating layers of conditioning in order to be able to give a performance that was raw, honest and psychologically truthful.

The conception of a fundamental split between what drives individuals from within and what represses them from the outside was clearly influenced by modern dualisms, especially Freudian ones. According to Counsell, however, this aspect of the Method not only had little in common with the Stanislavskian system that it claimed to emulate, but was also representative of a peculiarly American view which mixed notions of individualism with its own idiosyncratic take on neurotic repression. In this view, the individual’s essential inner self is repressed by social structures that represent obstacles to the liberation of an authentic individuality. Counsell argues, in effect, that the Method was primarily based on utilizing this model of neurotic repression as a means for actors to achieve optimal performances of truthfulness and authenticity. He writes that:

Strasberg sought to free the actor from the distortions and repressions of society and culture. Once liberated, actors will, he argued, be able to express their emotions and meanings in
their “authentic” form, and present audiences with their own individual and genuine “truth”. The Method’s aim was therefore to eradicate cultural blocks, permitting inner experiences to manifest themselves naturally in the actor’s outer, physical actions.  

As James Naremore writes, the Method’s focus on the interiority of the actor is exemplified by the “private moment”, whereby Strasberg would often exhort actors to ‘imagine or relive an experience for themselves alone, ignoring their audience’. And as Bruce McConachie observes, all of Strasberg’s exercises can be seen to assume (and valorize) the existence of an essential self. For example, Strasberg’s emotional memory exercises assumed that past memories held essential truths about a person’s identity, while the private moment exercises were designed to ensure that an actor’s responses and impulses emanated from an authentic centre. According to the mythos of the Method, actors who learned (through the Method) to open up to the essential truths held deeply within themselves could give an honest and spontaneous performance, whilst those who merely operated on the surface, because they were unable or unprepared to access their inner selves, risked being exposed for their lack of genuineness during a performance.

In contrast to the smooth and continuously developed character arc emphasized by the Stanislavskian system, the Method highlighted the jagged and disjunctive struggle to express one’s true self. According to Counsell, this struggle becomes, in itself, one of the primary iconic signs of a Method performance and is characterized by what he terms a ‘spectacular failure of communication’. The emphasis that Strasberg placed on the actor’s inner life meets the inevitable impossibility of its full articulation via the artificial means of the performance of a fictional character which,
in turn, produces a conflict between actor and role that functions as a signifier of an inexpressibly profound interiority.

This model of repression, however, was arguably not the only similarity between the Method and Freudian psychoanalysis. The all-powerful Lee Strasberg, while at the helm of the Actors Studio, often asserted that his teaching constituted neither ‘amateur analysis’ nor ‘cheap psychiatry’. This, perhaps, is a moot point. Clearly, though, Strasberg situated himself in a position of omniscient authority, taking on the role of the one person uniquely equipped to get his actors to break through the external layers that were hindering the expression of genuine emotion. Regardless of whether or not he considered himself to be the equivalent of a psychoanalyst, it seems from all accounts that the time-honoured model of the masterful and knowledgeable expert (be it an analyst, a director or a teacher) on the one hand, and the subservient and dependent “performing” subject (be it a patient, an actor or a student) on the other, was being replicated by Strasberg and his acolytes.

In summary, we can say that although the interior, unconscious self of the Method actor may have been portrayed by Strasberg in a more positive light than Freud’s characterization of the dark and unruly forces of the id, their respective models of the repression/revelation of a true reality have clear parallels. In terms of Method acting, this model manifested itself in a number of ways such as: the Method’s own rhetoric about its aims and principles, including its privileging of individualism and self-expression over social conformity; Strasberg’s techniques of working with/on actors in a quasi-therapeutic manner, and the neurotically-inflected performances that were often given by Method actors themselves. Beyond this, in the first half of the twentieth century America was fascinated with the inner working of the human
psyche and the truths that it seemed to reveal – a fascination that included both an obsession with psychoanalysis and the increasing popularity of psychologically realist-based forms of dramatization in both the theatre and cinema.

In all of the examples we have discussed — ranging from the anti-realist formalism of Brecht and Eisenstein to the psychological realism of Strasberg’s Method — the dualistic cosmology of a “real truth” that lay deeply buried and that was accessible only via specific techniques and specialized forms of mastery remained more or less unquestioned, as did the idea of an authentic, central self (no matter how obscured or distorted such authenticity might have been). However, while this belief in an objective reality and a unified (Cartesian) ego is an undoubtedly persistent one, there were significant respects in which it started to dissipate in the latter decades of the twentieth century — a factor which, in turn, had significant implications for our engagement with screen performances and for how we, ourselves, increasingly seem to have become the performers of our own identities. In essence, the trajectory of these changing perspectives can be summarized as a movement away from a focus on the interiorized “self” and towards a view of the individual as an exteriorized and abstracted entity. As we will see in the next chapter, these changes have had the effect of altering the dynamic between self and other — a dynamic that goes to the heart of performance — in ways that constitute a radical departure from realism.

1 Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, Realism and Popular Cinema (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), xii.


3 See: Colin Counsel, Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Theatre (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 45-7; Alison Lee, Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction
One of the principal advocates of nineteenth century naturalism, Emile Zola, used the metaphor of three representational screens: - As distinct from the “classic screen” (of, say, the epic style) which magnifies, and the “romantic screen” which distorts (for example in Expressionism), Zola wrote that ‘the realist screen is plain glass, very thin, very clear, which aspires to be so perfectly transparent that images may pass through it and remake themselves in all their reality.’ Quoted in Alan Casty, Development of the Film: An Interpretive History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 99. For a succinct discussion of theatrical naturalism and the influence of Zola, see J.L. Styan, Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 1: Realism and Naturalism (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-10.

George Levine argues that realism is inherently paradoxical: On the one hand it is underpinned by a positivist commitment to recording a concrete exteriority, while, on the other hand, it ‘always depends, more or less surreptitiously, on the mind as much as on “external nature.”’ George Levine, “Literary Realism Reconsidered: ‘The World in its Length and Breadth”, in Adventures in Realism, ed.Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 15. Levine adds: “‘Experience’ it turns out, is always of one’s sensations, not of things out there that supposedly trigger them. The external is really internal, and realism’s increasing turn to interiority, to throwing the drama inside, as Henry James puts it, is almost an epistemological inevitability.’ (Ibid.)


Although the various American-based disciples of Stanislavsky generally thought of theatre as superior to cinema as an art-form, there are nevertheless many instances of actors “defecting” to the more lucrative world of Hollywood. The Moscow Art Theatre émigrés, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, who first brought Stanislavskian training to America, both worked in Hollywood. Similarly, one of the founding members of the Group Theatre, Franchot Tone, left the group under quite acrimonious circumstances to become a Hollywood leading man. And although the various versions of “Method acting” taught in America also tended to privilege theatre acting, they are now mostly remembered for those actors (and directors such as Elia Kazan) who worked in Hollywood.


Naremore, 39.

Ibid.

In this context, Naremore quotes V.I. Pudovkin from Film Acting:

Stanislavski felt that an actor striving towards truth should be able to avoid the element of portraying his feelings to the audience, and should be able to transmit to it the whole fullness of the content of the acted image in some moment of half-mystic communion. Of course, he came
up against a brick wall in his endeavors to find a solution to this problem in the theater. It is amazing that the solution to this very problem is not only not impracticable in the cinema, but the extreme paucity of gesture, often literal immobility, is absolutely indispensable in it. For example, in the close-up, in which gesture is completely dispensed with, inasmuch as the body of the actor is simply not seen. (Quoted in Naremore, 39-40.)

13 It’s true that, taken in its entirety, Stanislavsky’s theorizing encompassed broad parameters. As Sharon M. Carnicke notes, at various stages of Stanislavsky’s career ‘he experimented with symbolism, verse, opera, Western behaviourist psychology, Eastern ideas on the mind/body continuum, and trends in criticism of art and literature.’ Sharon M. Carnicke, “Stanislavsky’s System: Pathways for the Actor” in Twentieth Century Actor Training, ed. Alison Hodge, 11-36 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 13. Indeed, it has often been noted that despite the emphasis on the mental processes of the actor that characterized Stanislavsky’s earlier work — and formed the basis for most of what was adopted in America — the later Stanislavsky moved more towards the body in his “method of physical actions.” Meyer-Dinkgrafe notes that while Stanislavsky’s followers tended to adopt either one aspect or the other (i.e. an emphasis on the mind or the body) of his work, Stanislavsky himself increasingly strove to see these two as part of an integrated whole. Meyer-Dinkgrafe writes that ‘[i]t is only late in the twentieth century that the notion of bodymind began to take hold in approaches to acting, mainly influenced by non-Western acting paradigms.’ (Meyer-Dinkgrafe, 47.) However, it also seems fair to say that such “bodymind” approaches are, at most, quite marginal with respect to screen acting, and that Stanislavsky’s realist aesthetics are unquestionably predominant in the screen medium.

Carnicke’s succinct book, Stanislavsky in Focus, is an excellent resource for this and other aspects of Stanislavsky’s work. See Sharon M. Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus (Los Angeles: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998).

14 In his autobiography, My Life in Art, for example, Stanislavsky writes that the “inner truth” of Chekhov’s plays served as the foundation for his own system. When Stanislavsky defends the realism of Chekhov against the ‘fashionable influence of symbolism’ by informing the reader that his plays will ‘outlast the generations of men, notwithstanding that the subject treated in them are old and no longer fashionable’ because they are ‘permeated by the eternal’ and ‘written for all time’, he neatly encapsulates the extent to which the humanist conception of a universal truth that exists as the foundation of all human behaviour is an inherent feature of his own work. Constantin Stanislavski, My Life in Art, trans. J.J. Robbins (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1980) (Originally published, 1924), 347-51.

15 Ibid., 465-6.


17 Counsell, 25.

18 It does not seem necessary to summarize the elements of Aristotle’s Poetics here, as this has been done countless times. However, it may be worth emphasizing the centrality of the ethos of unity contained with The Poetics by quoting Stephen Halliwell that Aristotle does not merely regard unity as a “basis or prerequisite for poetic achievement; he values it as the highest virtue of the most important genre of poetry, tragedy. This fact affords an insight into his understanding of mimesis not as a mirroring of ordinary reality (which often precisely lacks unity) but as artistically designed images of possible reality whose intelligibility depends on their unity.” Stephen Halliwell, “Aristotle’s Poetics” in, The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism Volume I, ed. George A. Kennedy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 157.

It should also be noted that while Stanislavsky’s ideas are clearly Aristotelian in this respect, he rarely referred directly to Aristotle in his writings. Carnicke points out that one of the few occasions that Stanislavsky did directly cite Aristotle was in relation to the notion of drama as action (in the Russian


20 There is some ambiguity as to whether Stanislavsky’s conceptualization of the super-objective resides substantively with the character or with the play as a whole. See Bella Merlin’s summary of this issue in Bella Merlin, *Konstantin Stanislavsky* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 75-6.


23 Although elements of the Stanislavskian system can, and have, been used in the context of more stylized (i.e. “unrealistic”) performances, it can be argued that key aspects of Stanislavsky’s approach tend to lose their efficacy if these fundamental realist conventions are violated.


26 See Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 131-5. Also see Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 28-9, and Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988), 111-12. (Emotion memory was one of the key elements of Stanislavsky’s system which was taken up by Strasberg in his version of Method acting.) For Stanislavsky’s own discussion and explanation of emotion memory, see *An Actor Prepares*, 163-93.

27 For Stanislavsky’s discussion of the imaginary if, see *An Actor Prepares*, 46-52.

28 See Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 126-7. Also see Counsell, 26-8.


30 Ibid., 29.

31 These Aristotelian influences are evident in a number of ways. For example, neo-formalist theorists such as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have demonstrated how the Aristotelian constructs of motivation, progression, causality and conflict virtually became templates for classical Hollywood film. See, for example, David Bordwell, “Story Causality and Motivation,” in David Bordwell, et. al, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 12-17. Also, many of the so-called “screenwriting manuals” that have proliferated over the past few decades adapt Aristotelian elements of dramatic structure in the concoction of their “recipes” for successful mainstream scripts. At least one such manual even refers explicitly to Aristotle in its title: Michael Tierno, *Aristotle’s Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization* (New York: Hyperion, 2002). Formulae and received wisdoms such as these not only serve a pedagogical function but also become solidified into the film industry. Studio executives and script readers in Hollywood also read (and sometimes write) these same books and, in turn, use their formulae as the criteria for determining the likely success of prospective film projects. For example, Michael Tierno is not only a writer and screenwriting teacher but, according to his resume, has also worked as a story analyst for IDT Entertainment and a story analyst and consultant for Miramax and Dimension Films.

For more direct access to Aristotle’s ideas, one could refer to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and to useful commentaries on Aristotle such as those David Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen, 1923), 270-91, and D.J.Allan, *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, 2nd ed. (UK: Oxford University Press, 1970), 149-59.


34 There are, of course, many other criteria for judging performances such as the actor’s physicality, their ability to mimic accents, their ability to take on a (Brechtian) distance from the role, etc. However, these are generally seen as secondary to the ability to access inner truthfulness which is usually seen as being at the “heart” of great screen performances.

35 For a discussion of the influence of Romanticism on Stanislavsky, see William B. Worthen, “Stanislavsky and the Ethos of Acting”, Theatre Journal 35, no. 1 (March, 1983): 32-40. According to Worthen, Stanislavsky’s system was ‘an attempt to accommodate the theatre to the prevailing attitudes of Romantic art, mainly through a redefinition of the actor as a Romantic artist’ (38). Also see Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 116-7.


37 See Andre Bazin, What is Cinema?, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) especially, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”, 9-16. Bazin wrote that the photograph (and, by extension, the cinematographic image) ‘share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint’ (15) and that photography and cinema are ‘discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism’(12). An English translation (by Hugh Gray) of “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” was first published in Film Quarterly, 13, No. 4. (Summer, 1960): 4-9.

38 The term “indexical” refers to one part of the semiotic trichotomy of C.S. Peirce: i.e. icon, index and symbol. Peter Wollen is the film theorist best known for engaging with Peirce’s version of semiotics. Wollen made the point that cinema operates at all three levels, and that the photographic/cinematographic sign can be considered indexical because of ‘an existential bond between itself and the object.’ Peter Wollen, Signs and Meanings in the Cinema (London: Secker and Warburg and BFI, 1969), 122.

The reference to employers leaving their workplace is to one of the Lumière’s first films, Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory (also known as La Sortie des usines Lumière) (1895). The film that the story of the “train shot” is generally thought to refer is the Lumière’s 1895 L’arrivée d’un train en gare de la Ciotat. However, there is considerable doubt as to the factual correctness of this so-called “train effect” on audiences at the Lumière’s Grand Café screening, or on any other early cinema audiences. For an interesting discussion of this topic, see Stephen Bottomore, “The Panicking Audience?: Early Cinema and the ‘Train Effect’”, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 19, No. 2 (1999), located on-line at: http://www.iamhist.org/journal/bottomore.pdf (accessed June 22, 2008).

39 In a short but influential article, Tom Gunning refers to the majority of the films that were made in the first decade or so of cinema’s existence as constituting a “cinema of attractions” which was characterized by a presentational and exhibitionist urge towards displaying of its own visibility rather than by ‘the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium’. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde”, in Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (UK: BFI, 1990), 56-7. It is also worth noting that Brian Winston takes exception with Gunning’s thesis, claiming that in nearly every example that Gunning provides, some kind of narrative can be identified. Brian Winston, Technologies of Seeing: Photography, Cinematography and Television (London: BFI, 1996), 123 (n68).

As has often been noted, early (i.e. “primitive”) cinema had close ties to vaudeville and other populist forms of theatrical entertainment. According to Richard deCordova, prior to 1907 the cinema was completely disassociated from the ‘legitimate stage’ (17), however by 1908 ‘a number of films had begun to appear which were used as proof that the art of acting could be translated to screen’ (22). Richard deCordova, “The Emergence of the Star System in America.”

A considerable amount of theoretical debate has taken place over the years regarding comparisons with, and contrasts between, theatre and film. Susan Sontag wrote in 1966 that: ‘The history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models’ (24). While in some respects cinema was able to quite quickly and decisively individuate itself from the theatre, in other respects (especially in terms of the tradition of theatrical realism) the theatre exerted a highly significant influence on cinema for at least the first half of the twentieth century. See Susan Sontag, “Film and Theatre”, The Tulane Drama Review, 11, No. 1 (Autumn, 1966), 24.

A number of scholars have contributed to this discussion, including: Richard deCordova, “The Emergence of the Star System in America”, in Stardom: Industry of Desire, ed. Christine Gledhill (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); and Roberta Pearson who has influentially investigated early cinema’s changing performance styles (from the “histrionic” to the “verisimilar”) whereby gestures and expressions became tailored to individual characters and so ‘contributed to the creation of credible psychologized individuals, in the process helping to forge the inextricable link between character and narrative of the classical style.’ Roberta E. Pearson, Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 55.

In fact, John Ellis brings both of these ideas together. John Ellis, Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) Ellis writes that: ‘The star is at once ordinary and extraordinary, available for desire and unattainable. This paradox is repeated and intensified by the regime of presence-yet-absence that is the filmic image’ (91). Ellis bases this argument partly on Roland Barthes’ notion of the “photo effect” whereby the undeniable sense of presence which clings to the photographic image due to its indexicality combines with the sense of longing that the images evokes due to the equally undeniable actual absence of the photographed person.* According to Ellis, because photographic/cinematographic images (and therefore star images) are incomplete – ‘composed of clues rather than complete meanings’ (93) – they call upon the viewer/spectator to complete this absence or lack which, therefore, requires a degree of psychic/emotional investment. He writes that ‘the photo effect awakens a series of psychic mechanisms’ which ‘participate in the construction of the polyvalent desires of both male and female viewers’ (97) thereby functioning to create ‘a complicated games of desires that plays around the figure of the star … making explicit the relationship between the photographic and the realm of desire’(98). Ellis’ argument also invokes the Lacanian concept of the narcissistic identification with images that is manifested in the “mirror stage” of psychic development – a concept which became central to much post-1968 film theory and which we will address in some detail in the next chapter.


The concept of suture emerged as part of the leftist/anti-realist discourse of post-68 film theory. Once again aligned to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, it essentially argued that the conventional techniques of so-called “invisible realism” such as point-of-view editing had the effect of “stitching” the film together (in relation to the spectator) in such a way as to render its ideological workings invisible. This aspect of the notion of suture was particularly proffered by Daniel Dayan. See Daniel Dayan, “The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema,” in, Film Theory and Criticism, eds. Gerald Mast et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) (Originally published in Film Quarterly, 28, No. 1 [Fall, 1974]).


Film historian, Arthur Knight, sums this up when he writes that:

Script writers who had trained themselves to think in terms of pictures gave way to playwrights who thought in terms of stage dialogue. Established directors were either replaced by directors from the New York stage or supplemented by special dialogue directors. Many a popular star – especially the European importees – suddenly found himself unemployed; while the Broadway stage was again swept clean to replace those actors whose foreign accents, faulty diction or bad voices the temperamental microphone rejected. To fill the need for dialogue at all costs, plays – good, bad and indifferent – were bought up and rushed before the cameras.


However, it should also be noted that Knight goes on to explain that within just a few years filmmakers such as Lubitsch, Mamoulian and Vidor once again, albeit against considerable opposition, found opportunities to liberate the camera from its sound studio imprisonment.


For a useful summary of the Russian avant-garde theatre both before and after the 1917 revolution, as well as its fate under the Stalinist regime, see James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre: From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook* (London: Routledge, 1970), 21-39.

Also, Sharon Carnicke notes that at various times, Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre were accused of idealism and even of being class enemies. However, she also notes that Lenin retained support for the Moscow Art Theatre throughout his reign. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 31-32.

Thompson and Bordwell quote Lenin as proclaiming that: ‘Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important.’ Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History An Introduction*, 132.


See Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectical Approach to Film Form”, in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast et al., 138-54. (Originally published in Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949). For Eisenstein, montage is ‘the nerve of cinema’ (140), and ‘the fundamental principle for the existence of every artwork …. is always conflict’ (138). Therefore, whereas for his contemporary, Pudovkin, montage was simply ‘a means of unrolling an idea with the help of single shots’ (140), for Eisenstein ‘montage is an idea that
arises from the collision of independent shots’ (140); and it was this collision that was fundamentally in accord with the dialectical principle. As many commentators have noted, Eisenstein was influenced by a variety of sources, however as Peter Wollen writes, he ‘constantly stresses that montage is a dialectical principle.’ Wollen, Signs and Meanings, 46.

55 Quoted in Wollen, Signs and Meanings, 65.

It is also relevant to note that Eisenstein was a theatre director before becoming a filmmaker. He was a protégé of Meyerhold who’s constructivist Biomechanics privileged the physical movements of the actors ahead of their psychological motivations. Meyerhold’s actors – like, in due course, Eisenstein’s shots - were treated as formal elements of the artwork’s construction that could be deployed for the most striking (and revolutionary) effect without being tied to the unifying aesthetics of realism.

56 Wollen, Signs and Meanings, p49.

57 Ibid, 49.

58 It is worth noting that the only Soviet filmmaker to write extensively on film acting was V.I. Pudovkin whose thinking closely followed that of Stanislavsky in terms of stressing the need to maintain “organic wholeness” in performances in spite of the fragmentary process of film production. According to Pudovkin: ‘The aim and object of the technique of the actor is his struggle for unity, for an organic wholeness in the lifelike image he creates.’ Excerpt of V.I. Pudovkin’s Film Acting, in Jeremy M. Butler, ed., Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 37.

59 For Brecht, the Aristotelian play treats the audience ‘not as a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob, which must be and can be reached only through its emotions’ whereas Brecht’s theatre ‘holds that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded.’ Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964),79.

60 While this is true in a general sense, it does deserve some qualification. Augusto Boal, for example, writes the following:

At no time does Brecht speak against emotion, though he always speaks against the emotional orgy. ….. (For example): How can one fail to be moved when Mother Courage loses her sons, one by one, in the war? Inevitably, the spectator is moved to tears. But the emotion caused by ignorance must be avoided: let no one weep over the “fate” that took Mother Courage’s sons from her! Let one cry rather with anger against war and against the commerce of war, because it is this commerce that takes away the sons of Mother Courage.


61 Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, 193-4.

62 Ibid., 194.

63 Defamiliarization/ostranenie – sometimes also known as “making strange” - is a central formalist concept. The term was initiated by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay, “Art as Technique.” For a succinct explanation of ostranenie in the wider context of formalism, see Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (London: Metheun, 1977), 62-3.

64 Helen Rappaport writes, for example, that the flourishing artistic climate of the avant-garde (especially Constructivism) started to change in the 1920s when demands for Soviet realism began to dominate: ‘Increasing accusations of formalism and decadence’ meant that ‘[i]ndividualists and experimenters were now marginalized in favour of the bland, traditional forms of realist art…’ and by 1932, ‘Stalin imposed his will across the Soviet arts with the party decree putting an end to all independent and fringe groups in favor of a single, all-embracing union that would ensure the
impression of all forms of purely subjective art.’ Helen Rappaport, *Joseph Stalin: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 1999), 7. Although Eisenstein did not suffer the ultimate fate of many of his avant-garde contemporaries – such as Meyerhold and Babel for example – he nevertheless ‘found that his former avant-garde style of montage was no longer acceptable in the rigorous new artistic climate of socialist realism’ (p9) and the rest of his life was characterized by artistic and creative compromises and frustrations. Rappaport, 78-81.


66 Counsell, 85.


68 For a useful and concise summary of the history and “essence” of Dadaism, see C.W.E. Bigsby, *Dada and Surrealism* (London: Methuen, 1972), 8-34.

69 Quoted in Meyer-Dinkgrafe, 60.

For a description of a typical performance at the Cabaret Voltaire, Bigsby quotes the recollections of the poet, Georges Hugnet:

On the stage keys and boxes were pounded to provide music, until the infuriated public protested. Sterner instead of reciting poems, set a bunch of flowers at the foot of a dressmaker’s dummy. A voice, under a huge hat in the shape of a sugar loaf recited poems by Arp. Huelsenbeck screamed his poems louder and louder, while Tzara beat out the same rhythm crescendo on a big drum. Huelsenbeck and Tzara danced around grunting like bear cubs, or in sacks with top hats waddled around in an exercise called noir cacadou”. (Quoted in Bigsby, 16)

70 And when performances were included they tended to function as little more than just one more abstract element of the overall *mise en scene*. Filmmakers normally considered to have produced Dadaist works include: Hans Richter (e.g. *Rhythmus 21* [1921], *Rhythmus 23* [1923], *Filmstudie* [1926]); Man Ray (*Le Retour a la Raison* [1923]); Viking Eggeling (*Symphonie Diagonale* [1921]); Fernand Leger (*Ballet Mecanique* [1924]); Rene Clair (*Entr’acte* [1924]); and Marcel Duchamp (*Anemic Cinema*, [1926]). Many of these filmmakers we also painters and, indeed, there are strong links between their films and art movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, as well as, of course, Dadaist painting itself. Dadaist filmmaking, along with such artistic movements referred to above, had an enduring influence on the development of avant-garde cinema throughout the twentieth century. For a comprehensive discussion of Dada (and Surrealist) film, see Rudolph E. Kuenzli, ed., *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York: Willis, Locker & Owens, 1987).

71 Like its Swiss counterpart, the theatrical performances given by the Berlin Dada movement also energetically opposed bourgeois notions of dramatic representation. According to Mel Gordon, the Berlin Dadas ‘introduced the use of pure – onomatopoetic or vowel – sound and abstract movement, improvisation, simultaneous and illogical actions, verbal and physical assault on the spectator, anti-illusionist scenic design, and the incorporation of popular entertainments, such as cabaret acts and cinema …. [and as a consequence] …. laid the foundations for many of the anti-illusionist movements of the post-World War One era.’ Mel Gordon, “Berlin Dada: A History of Performance (1918-1920)”, *The Drama Review*, Vol 18, No. 2 (June 1974):114.

72 Bigsby writes that by 1923 the spirit Dadaism had virtually died:

… although as a state of mind it could not die, as an organized assault on the public consciousness and as a resolute enemy of perverted social and artistic values it had outlived its usefulness. The edge had gone from its rhetoric and the public, as ever, had adjusted to its idiom and now expected provocation and absurdity as standard fare. What has once
shocked and stimulated now merely amused, while internecine struggles provided evidence of a growing introversion. (Bigsby, 22)

73 Meyer-Dinkgrafe, 62. Online versions of Breton’s “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924) are readily available. On such on-line source at the time of writing was: http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm

74 Meyer-Dinkgrafe, 63.

75 Examples of Surrealist theatre from the 1920s include the works of Jean Cocteau (most especially Orphee in 1926) and Roger Vitrac (who along with along Antonin Artaud was the co-founder of Theatre Alfred Jarry and whose plays included the highly influential Les Mystères de l’amour produced in 1927).

Like Dadaist cinema, there is conjecture about whether or not a number of films should be included in the category of Surrealist cinema. The Bunuel-Dali collaboration, Un Chien Andalou (1929) is clearly the most celebrated surrealist film. Other films generally categorized as surrealist include La Coquille et le Clergyman (directed by Germaine Dulac in 1928 and based on a screenplay by Artaud), and L’Étoile de Mer (by Man Ray, also in 1928).

Beyond the specific links to filmmaking, there are countless links that can be drawn in terms of the influences of Surrealism on twentieth century thought and aesthetic practice. Jacques Lacan, for one, had strong links to the Surrealist movement and it has been argued that the philosophies of surrealism were particularly influential on the development of his own theories – theories that, in turn, would become central to the development of film theory in the 1970s. We will touch upon some of these links in the next chapter. For a discussion of the connections between Lacan and Surrealism, see, David Macey, “Fragments of an Analysis: Lacan in Context”, Radical Philosophy 35 (Autumn, 1983): 1-9.


80 Quoted in Meyer-Dinkgrafe, 57. For a more detailed account of the acting style of Expressionist Theatre, see Michael Patterson, The Revolution in German Theatre, 1900-1933 (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.),78-87.

81 For one account of the relationship between Artaud and Andre Breton, see J.H. Matthews, André Breton: Sketch for an Early Portrait (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1986), 105-22.


83 Ibid., 71.

84 Ibid., 82.

85 Artaud’s knowledge of Balinese Theatre came primarily from seeing performances at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris, and there have been many commentaries on his (“orientalist”) mis/understandings. For one such analysis, see Evan Winet, “Great Reckonings in a Simulated City: Artaud’s Misunderstanding of Balinese Theatre”, in Theatre Symposium: A Journal of the Southeastern Theatre Conference (Tuscaloosa: Southeastern Theatre Conference and the University of Alabama Press, 1993), 98-107.

86 Artaud, The Theatre and its Double, 47.
Ibid., 54.

Ibid., 47.

Ibid., 76.


According to Hale, for both the psychiatric fraternity outside of the psychoanalytic circle and, to a large extent, the general public, the apparent solution to the mystery of shell shock began to legitimize a number of key Freudian conceptions such as: ‘the role of environmental stress and trauma in creating symptoms; the specific mechanisms of symptom creation such as the conversion of unconscious instinctual conflict; the diagnostic importance of dreams; (and) the usefulness of catharsis in exorcising repressed traumatic memories.’ Hale, 24.

Ibid., 381.

This was particularly the case after Freud’s death in 1939 and was also due to the influx into America of Austrian and German psychoanalysts fleeing the Nazi regime. See Hale, 115.

See Hale, 276-99.

Although Lee Strasberg (and his Actors Studio) has become virtually synonymous with “Method acting”, there were in fact a number of American teachers who adopted (aspects) of Stanislavsky’s system (combined with the ideas of one of Stanislavsky’s protégés, Eugene Vakhtangov). Along with Strasberg, the other two most renowned teachers were Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner. According to David Krasner, all three can be considered “Method instructors”, even though they each emphasised different aspects: Strasberg emphasised the psychological; Adler focused on the sociological; while Meisner’s primary interest was on the behavioural. See David Krasner, “Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting”, in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Hodge, 129.

Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, 57-8.

For an informative journalistic account of Strasberg’s training and rehearsal methods, see Hirsch, *A Method to their Madness*, especially 125-49.

Counsell, 62.

Ibid., 66.

Naremore, 202.


Counsell, 67.

Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion*, 103.

The issue of whether Strasberg saw himself as a kind of therapist has been debated often. Certainly, however, there can be little doubt that his was a masterful and authoritarian presence at the Actors Studio which inspired awe and subservience on the part of many of the actors. Marilyn Monroe has often been cited in this context, although one could argue that she was a particularly troubled soul who was looking for a father/messiah figure. The following passage from Foster Hirsch provides a good sense of Strasberg’s status and image: ‘In the course of many interviews, with members of the Group Theatre as well as the Studio, I was told that Lee Strasberg, in addition to being “like Jesus”, was Buddha, Moses, Oedipus, Rasputin, God, the Pope, Pontius Pilate, Hitler, Jim Jones, a sectarian, a cult leader, a doctor, a lawyer, a scientist, a guru, a Zen master, Job, a rabbi, a
high priest, a saint, a fakir, a badger, a Jewish papa, the Great Sphinx, a talmudic scholar, a Hassidic scholar, and a human being.’ Hirsch, 151.

Many such screen performances are inscribed into popular consciousness. In terms of the “classic Method era” from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, films such as the following could be included as examples: Body and Soul (with John Garfield, 1948); Red River (with Montgomery Clift, 1948); A Streetcar Named Desire (with Marlon Brando, Kim Hunter and Karl Malden, 1951); A Place in the Sun (with Montgomery Clift and Shelley Winters, 1951); On the Waterfront (with Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint, 1954); East of Eden, (with James Dean and Julie Harris, 1955); Bus Stop (with Marilyn Monroe, 1956); Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (with Paul Newman, 1958); The Goddess (with Kim Stanley, 1958); Sweet Bird of Youth (with Paul Newman and Geraldine Page, 1962); and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (with Sandy Dennis, 1966).
Chapter Two — Dislodging the Self: From Authentic Individual to Postmodern Performing Subject

The actor is not just a subject in a performance, but also an “object” that can be variously viewed, investigated, manipulated, judged, desired and/or consumed by others – or by the “other” as this is so often put. All performances are fundamentally structured by the (implicit or actual) presence of the other. This is true even in realism, which pretends (via the imaginary “fourth wall”) that the actor is not being scrutinized by any presence external to the diegesis of the narrative, and therefore that no such other exists. A vivid example of how this fantasy of self-enclosure can be easily dismantled is when an actor becomes gripped by stage-fright. The debilitating condition of stage-fright can be described as the actor freezing into a state of inaction through fear of losing control of the self under the harsh and judgmental gaze of the other in the form of the audience. The ever-present sense of otherness that hovers over all performance contributes a significantly paranoid dimension to its phenomenology; and, in our example, the fear of stage-fright reminds each actor that performance is never safe and natural, but always has the potential to become pathological.

If the presence of the other is inherent in performance, so, too, are implications about relations of power. In this context, the idea of the actor who surrenders, puppet-like, to the desire of the omnipotent/masterful director is a particularly enduring one that has particular resonance in the arena of screen acting. As we turn our attention more specifically to screen media, we also need to take account of the presence of the camera when considering the significance of the other in relation to performers and performances. One of the defining features of the theatre is the co-presence of
performer and audience which, according to more romantic views, offers the potential for “communion” between the two parties. However, when a performance is given in front of the camera, connections between performer and audience are decisively split: the actor performs in isolation from the audience while, on the other side of the performative equation, the viewer enjoys the sense of being in possession of a mastering gaze by being able to anonymously view the performance in the physical absence of the performer. For this and other reasons, it is sometimes argued that the lens of the camera represents one of the most objectifying intrusions of otherness imaginable, with many examples of the invasive — in some cases even predatory — influence of the camera existing throughout the history of both cinema and photography.

Arguably the most poignant historical example, that brings together pathology, performance, and an otherness that includes both a masterful (male) figure and the intrusive gaze of the camera, predates the cinema and resides with what has been described as the “invention of hysteria” at a time that coincides with the beginnings of photography and the threshold of psychoanalysis. In his Tuesday lectures at the Salpetriere Hospital, Jean-Martin Charcot created a theatre of pathology, in which female hysterics would perform both for Charcot himself (who was, in effect, their master, doctor, and “director”) and for the appreciative audiences who came to see his increasingly famous dramaturgical spectacle. In addition to this, Charcot’s hysterics were also made to submit to the gaze of the camera in order to become the “content” for his three-volume photographic documentation of hysteria, the Iconographie Photographique de la Salpetriere. In effect, his female patients constituted a virtual ensemble of performers who were “immortalized” by the photographs of their dramatically frozen tableaux of hysterical contractures.
Within this arrangement, the subject surrenders all power (and “self-hood”) to the other and becomes a symptom to the camera, to a doctor, and we could say to a “director” of the procedure. The fact that Charcot used hypnosis in his apparent manipulation of the hysterics only adds to this notion of control and disempowerment. The performance of Charcot’s hysterics represented an extreme example of the idea that a performance can “possess” a subject – an idea which sees the self of the subject becoming almost entirely vacated as the performer is taken over by the influence of the other. Complete abandonment to otherness in a performance is quite rare in the necessarily controlled representational environments of narrative cinema and theatre. It is, however, a dimension of performance which seems to be perpetually alluring and intriguing. It is a dynamic which was often simulated, for example, in the trance-like performances of German Expressionism,\textsuperscript{6} while in many Dadaist/Surrealist performances “normal” human behaviour often seemed to be taken over by atavistic impulse, by a desire to evacuate a sense of self in favour of madness, or by the urge to yield to a state of primeval/pre-linguistic meaninglessness.

The power of the gaze was all too evident to the early filmmakers, and their enthusiasm for the new medium was often mixed with a certain paranoid apprehension of how the presence of the other is invested in vision. In this context, the famous opening scene of an eye being slit open in Bunuel’s and Dali’s Surrealistic masterpiece, \textit{Un Chien Andalou},\textsuperscript{7} provides one of the most memorable images in the whole of cinematic history regarding the dread that is evoked by the eye, the image, and the gaze. In his authoritative survey of the ‘profound suspicion of vision’\textsuperscript{8} in much twentieth century French thought, Martin Jay writes that this
scene from *Un Chien Andalou* ‘mocks the seductive lure of the cinema’ and – along with the paintings of Ernst, Ray, Margritte and Dali, as well as the notoriously transgressive novella, *Story of the Eye*, written by Georges Bataille – typifies ‘the violent denigration of the visual’ that can be found in a range of Surrealist work.

The paranoia at the heart of vision evoked so vividly in the work of Dali, Bataille, and a number of their contemporaries, brings us to the important link between Surrealism and the highly influential theories of the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. Lacan’s conception of the subject as dialectically split between the self and the perceived other had profound implications for theorizations about cinema, but is also strongly suggestive of the dynamic at play in many performances (including, most especially, screen performances). The connections between the Surrealists and Lacan have been well documented. According to David Macey, elements of Surrealism – such as an obsession with the “convulsive beauty” of female psychosis, or Dali’s fascination with paranoia and narcissism – were crucial influences on Lacan’s early theorizing on the psychotic structure of the human psyche. In an intricate web of associations that we can only touch upon here, the Surrealist’s ‘positive celebration of madness’, which included not only an enthrallment with Charcot’s hysterics but also with a range of psychotic female criminals such as the notorious Papin sisters, had a profound effect upon Lacan; just as the young Lacan’s doctoral thesis about a paranoid psychotic called Aimee became ‘a cause celebre for the surrealists’. Aimee, whose persecution fantasies led her to a savage attack on a famous French actress, marked an important early point in Lacan’s development of his theories of how the ego, or sense of self, is formed and maintained via a narcissistically mimetic and paranoiacally conflicted dialectic with idealized images that we see outside of ourselves. As Martin Jay writes, ‘Lacan’s analysis of paranoid psychosis led him to
posit a universal stage through which all humans pass, a stage displaying marked similarities to the pathological crimes of specular violence committed by the Papin sisters and Aimee’. This Imaginary stage of development has important implications for our understanding of performances, and needs to be considered in some detail.

Lacan and the Imaginary Ego: The Confusion of Image and Self

As early as 1936, at a time when he was most closely associated with the Surrealists, Lacan began to formulate what would become his highly influential theory of the “mirror stage” of psychic development. According to this theory, sometime between the ages of six and eighteen months the infant begins to form a sense of self that is based on the way it perceives images in exteriority. When the infant sees its reflection in a mirror, it responds jubilantly to the sight of an apparently coordinated entity which it identifies as itself. While the infant feels anxious about its own uncoordinated bodily helplessness, it sees in its reflected image a simulacra of the whole and complete version of itself that it has been anticipating (due to the fact that it has seen other “properly-formed” individuals such as its mother or other adults). By choosing to identify an external image as itself, however, the subject will be forever alienated due to its dependence on an external “otherness” to complete its sense of self. Lacan summarizes this process in the following passage:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation — and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality — and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.
According to Lacan’s rather tragic prognosis, from this moment forward the individual will be forever haunted by the presence (and/or absence) of an imagined other. While this otherness may be represented to us in various guises throughout our lives, it is essentially a presence that resides within our own heads — or, cast in performance terms, we could say that from the outset there is an audience in our thoughts to all of our actions. In the mirror stage, the infant subject’s alienation is further compounded by the fact that even though it has identified with its reflection, it experiences a sense of rivalry and aggression due to the fact that it remains aware of the stark contrast between the apparently whole and coordinated specular image and its own fragmented and vulnerable body. The subject is thus condemned to a lifetime of perpetually comparing itself to an impossibly idealized other — an “Ideal-Ego” — while at the same time entering into a state of willing self-delusion by suppressing an acknowledgment of difference in favour of the narcissistic benefits of identification. Consequently, the individual experiences a chronic (and schizophrenic) sense of emptiness, due to the fact that he or she is continually aware of the presence of the other within the self — but also of the absence of the other within the self — whilst at the same time always longing for relief from this alienating situation by returning to a state of primary narcissism where the difference between self and other is dissolved.18

In Lacan’s schema, then, the individual begins life as an incoherent and shapeless entity which relies upon the image of the other to provide it with a sense of cohesion and completeness. Lacan’s early theorizations were based in large part on our ocular relationship to the images and objects that exist outside of ourselves. At this point in the development of his ideas, Lacan was strongly influenced by another member of
the surrealist group, Roger Caillois, whose conception of “legendary psychasthenia” proposed that organisms have a primordial tendency to mimic their environment in a way that virtually dissolves the distinction between the one and the other. Lacan similarly theorized that, in the nascent process of ego formation, we both identify with, and mimic, certain key images that psychically captivate us. In fact, according to the Lacanian view of this process, we are not only captivated by such images but are also captured by them, in that we are impelled to internalize them as a constituting part of ourselves. Lacan’s theory was instrumental in casting doubt upon the very notion of a central and unified self. According to Lacan, the self or ego — the sense we have of an “I” — is a mythical construct that is built upon the foundation of an illusory process of identification, the logical extension of which is that there can be no self, only the mirage of a self.

In a number of respects, Lacan’s conception of how a sense of self is formed out of its relationship with exteriority and otherness is particularly relevant to the central concerns of this thesis. First, the fact that his conceptual framework rejected the notion of the self as a unified and coherent perceptual entity was a significant step in the turn away from the humanist assumptions which underpin realism and realist performances. Second, his emphasis on the ever-present role of the other in the construction of the self resonates strongly with the idea that all performances rely upon the presence of otherness. Third, his notion that the self is created out of its mimetic identifications can be thought of as an important precursor to what would eventually become the postmodern idea that we can form our identities in exteriority and based on abstract media performances. Finally, his focus on visuality and image has an ongoing relevance to cinema and other screen media, and is implicitly
suggestive of the crucial role that images and performances have on the way we establish, maintain and express our identities.

While Lacan focused specifically on the biological basis of mimicry via his references to ethology, the principle of mimicry clearly has an equally strong performative dimension. Most performances are constituted by a fundamental mimicry as the actor attempts to “be like” a fictional character based on the text of a play or a script. Also, an actor’s skill is often judged on the ability to keenly observe and then reinterpret aspects of human behavior. One well-known exercise in actor training, for example, is the so-called "mirror exercise", in which an actor mimes the actions of the person positioned opposite with the aim of achieving an almost perfect unison between the two. At one level, the purpose of such an exercise is to sharpen the actor’s ability at observation, while, at another level, we could say that the actor is expected to dissolve the "self" into the "other" of the person being mirrored. Indeed, it could even be said, if only in a figurative sense, that acting per se involves the process of dissolving the boundaries between self and other. If, as the Lacanian model asserts, we are all driven by a desire to collapse such boundaries within our own psyches, it can reasonably be argued that one of the reasons we are attracted to performances is because they “rehearse” this psychic process for us, making it seem somehow more palpable and more possible to achieve. In a similar vein, it seems likely that, as audiences, we also rehearse this dissolution of the self into the other via a process of identifying with actors/characters as we watch their performances. This is particularly pertinent in terms of cinema, where the screen seems to take on the properties of the Lacanian mirror and we are free (in the anonymous security that the cinema affords) to fantasize the dissolving of ourselves into the otherness of the actors that we see performing on screen.
According to Lacan, the process of identity formation continues as the child passes from the Imaginary order of the mirror stage to the Symbolic order of language and culture. At the same time, though, Lacan also insisted that the Imaginary order of human reality remains as an important constituting part of the human psyche throughout one’s life. In the realm of the Imaginary, then, the individual is continually driven to find in the other a reflection of the self. However, in the context of Lacan’s view that, as Jerry Aline Flieger paraphrases, ‘a certain paranoid knowledge informs the cognition of every subject’, it is important to stress that we are not simply satisfied by finding equivalences between the self and the image of the other, but also remain constantly enthralled and anxious about the (unanswerable) question of how we are viewed by the other. This is a crucial aspect of how the logic of the Lacanian Imaginary can be considered to be a logic of performance — not only in terms of how and why we are attracted to performers and performances, but also in terms of how we self-reflexively view ourselves as performers. In Lacan’s later theorizing of Imaginary relations, he increasingly focused on the ongoing relationship between self and other that is implied through the concept of the gaze. As Todd McGowan summarizes:

Although in his essay on the mirror stage Lacan conceives of the gaze as a mastering gaze, he thought of it in precisely the opposite way later on — as the point at which mastery fails. In Lacan’s later work, the gaze becomes something that the subject encounters in the object; it becomes an objective, rather than a subjective, gaze. … The gaze is not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back.26

The gaze offers the subject a vantage point from which to have a self-reflexive perspective – in effect, to glimpse the split between self and other. Or, as Lacan put it, ‘the experience of seeing himself, on reflecting on himself as other than he is –
is] an essential dimension of the human, which entirely structures his fantasy life.\footnote{27} Patrick Fuery writes that the self-reflexive positioning of the subject in relation to the other is constituted by ‘an interaction of the gaze from the subject, and the subject being positioned by the gaze of the Other… [because]…. to be recognised by the gaze of the Other is to have a sense of presence’.\footnote{28} However, as Fuery also notes, this represents an impossible desire ‘both to be recognized by that gaze and, ultimately, to possess it’,\footnote{29} thereby fuelling a continual search to locate the gaze of the other.

The quest to locate the gaze of the other – to see the self as viewed by the other – resonates on a number of levels in terms of our relationship to screen performance and the notion of performance more generally. An important aspect of the lure of the actor, for example, is almost certainly the actor’s apparent ability to put herself or himself in the position of the other in order to be able to see with the other’s eyes. In a sense, the actor actualizes the Lacanian notion of “paranoid knowledge” in the continual oscillation of subject positions that constitute most performances: in the Lacanian Imaginary, the individual identifies with an image that is outside of the self, imagining a process of dissolving into that exterior entity as well as imagining how he or she is viewed from the place of the other. Similarly, an actor must find a way to merge their own subjectivity with that of an external character while putting themselves into a position of simultaneously remaining inside their own bodies, inside the character they are performing, and outside of themselves to the extent that they can imagine seeing themselves giving a performance from the perspective of an audience. We could say that this is a further instance of how the actor seems to offer to the audience a ritualized performance of the drama of self and other which, as already mentioned, Lacan believed to be the foundation of all subjectivity.
Connections to the Lacanian notion of the gaze are even more specifically relevant to performance in the context of screen acting. This is not just because screen acting occurs in a predominantly image-based medium, but also because the eyes, and the act of looking, are so instrumental to the process. It is often said that screen acting is substantively "played out in the eyes". That is to say, we relate to a performance not only on the basis of the appearance of an actor (i.e. what they look like), but also in terms of how they use their own eyes to look at other characters and objects.

Generally speaking, narrative cinema is constructed via this articulation of looks: characters look at each other, they look at objects and we, the spectators, feel that we have access to the perspectives of both “those that see” and “those who are seen” via techniques such as shot/reverse-shot and point-of-view. Arguably, it is this sense of having intimate access to the perspective of the other that gives the experience of viewing a film its particular frisson. Cinema provides us with the hope/fantasy that, as we gaze at the face of an actor (who is usually also gazing at a person or an object, often in some kind of desiring way), we will obtain special insight into the mysterious world of otherness.30

The notion of the gaze, then, has implications for screen media and screen performances in terms of how, via a process of identification and projection, the spectating subject views the image-as-self and the self-as-image. Given the notion that we always desire the apparently impossible vantage point of seeing ourselves as the other sees us, it seems hardly surprising that the capture of a person's image and performance via a camera, and its projection or transmission onto a screen, provides intense fascination for many people. This seems to explain why cameras, screens and screen performances have been such an important part of our culture since the
invention of cinema. The idea that we are so existentially concerned with how we are seen by the other also suggests that, to some degree at least, we all see ourselves as performers and always feel that we are on show. Or, to put this in another way: everything we say and do, we say and do for the other (which is often cast in psychoanalytic terms as the implicit observer represented in the notion of the Ego Ideal). On this basis, it seems likely that our increasing access to cameras, screens and the means of transmitting images and performances seems to provide a promise (if only an illusory one) of seeing the self from the perspective of the gaze of the other. As our culture has become so thoroughly penetrated with screen media, and so many individuals are now "armed" with cameras and the means to transmit the images and performances that these cameras have recorded, it seems that the psychical apprehension that we are always performing for the other is now becoming actualised into practice with the implicit observer of our actions increasingly becoming both explicit and literal.

A significant aspect of the alienation felt by the narcissistic subjects of the Lacanian Imaginary who create and maintain a sense of self by internalizing images from exteriority is that they are left with the sense that the ideas and emotions they experience are somehow not their own. The implication of this (fundamentally schizoid/paranoid) feeling, which according to Lacan is a condition of all human knowledge, is that while we may convincingly act as if our thoughts and feelings authentically belong to us, we never actually believe “deep down” that this is the case. A perspective such as this represents the very antithesis of a humanist/realist position in which our authenticity is guaranteed by the fact of our humanness. In the Lacanian scheme, there is no “deep down” truth or humanity to be uncovered because we are purely the products of perceptual, psychical and socializing
processes. To employ a performance metaphor to describe our behavior according to this Lacanian view, we could say that we are not Stanislavskian or Method realists who operate from the belief in an authentic interiority that we are able to tap into. Instead, we are the victims of the omnipresent otherness inside our heads, and consequently we can only give a performance of ourselves that is necessarily “once-removed” from itself — a performance that we could perhaps describe in some respects as being more “Brechtian” than realist in nature.

One of the defining features of Lacan’s cosmology is the “psychotic twist” that he gives to all human behaviour. For Lacan, the very structure of the human ego is founded upon the psychopathology of paranoia. While Lacan defined psychoses such as schizophrenia as an inability to transcend the realm of the Imaginary so as to become a subject-proper in the Symbolic order of language and culture, it is clear that the fundamental division in the Imaginary between the sense of self that exists in one’s own interiority, and the sense of self that exists in the exteriority of an image, marks the beginning of a fundamentally schizophrenic position. Lacan was fascinated by various forms of madness — a fascination which unites him not only with the Surrealists, but also with a number of key theorists of contemporary subjectivity. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the connections between psychopathology, a subjectivity that becomes more and more fragmented as it moves further away from a humanist/realist position of interiority, and the tendency for subjects to take a distanced and self-reflexive stance towards their own identity become increasingly intertwined. As we will see, these tendencies and interconnections impact both on the media/screen performances that engage us, and on how we increasingly tend to perform ourselves as subjects. Alternatively, to put this in the context of the dialectic of self and other, we could say that, as our sense of
a coherent and unified self diminishes, we find ourselves increasingly moving
towards the position of the other.

**From Interiority to Exteriority: The Psychopathology and Performances of the
Split Subject**

The condition of schizophrenia is a particularly good example of a state that invokes
a move from the interiority of the self to the exteriority of the other, and it is
important to the development of this thesis for two reasons. First, it is a condition
which has been prominent in the discourse of post-Cartesian subjectivity due to its
tendency to attenuate the idea of a stable and unified self. Second, its
phenomenology can be said to have a performative dimension which takes us away
from a conventional (neurotically-inflected) “psychologically realist” model of
human behavior whereby one operates from an authentic interiority, and towards a
more self-reflexive and distanced paradigm of performing one’s subjectivity as an
exteriority, or mask of otherness. Schizophrenia is often seen as the terminus, or
outer limit, of a range of personality disorders in which the individual is thought to
create an external persona that is perceived as being separate from his or her sense of
an inner self.

Lacan’s conceptions of intra-psychic formations were highly significant in terms of a
general shift in emphasis away from a focus on the Cartesian self and towards an
emphasis on externalized notions of identity. However, it was R.D. Laing who
explicitly characterized schizophrenia as a split between inner and outer selves
(based on which he famously titled his best-selling book *The Divided Self*). Laing
explained this split in the following way:
The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself “together with” others or “at home in” the world, but on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as “split” in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on.  

In some respects, we could say that Laing’s investigations into the split subjectivity of schizophrenia is a natural extension of Lacan, dealing as it does with an excessive division which leaves the individual stranded in the sphere of the other rather than being securely grounded in the notion of a central and “true” self. As a phenomenologist and founding member of the so-called anti-psychiatry movement, Laing sought to understand how and why the schizophrenic subject tended to create these “false selves”, concluding that:

If the individual cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways to be real, of keeping himself or others alive, or of preserving his identity, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself losing his self.

Working from the assumption that the schizophrenic was attempting to overcome the unsolvable contradictions of familial (and especially maternal) double-binds which tended to negate the individual as a subject, Laing came to see the schizophrenic’s experience as the only tenable response to an impossible situation. The schizophrenic was attempting to put a distance between his or her self and the external, threatening world. In this context, according to Laing, the creation of a false-self system was ‘a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation’. Within this perspective, the schizoid individual acts out a version of the self to the
world as a way of protecting her or his inner self from further psychological damage, whilst in the extreme cases of full-blown schizophrenia the sense of an authentic inner self dies off altogether and the individual is left with nothing but their outer projections.

The notion that an individual would deliberately create externalized versions of the self that she or he knew to be a lie would undoubtedly have seemed mystifying and unsettling to a society that had been conditioned to cherish the ideals of authenticity, coherence, and “being to true to oneself”. In many respects, the schizophrenic was a performer: once again, not a realist of the Stanislavskian or Method stripe who would seek to find the authentic self within, but a dissimulator who would intentionally deceive others with a false front and a calculated distance between self and performance.

In fact, the image of the actor surfaces quite a few times in Laing’s descriptions of schizoid and schizophrenic individuals. One of Laing’s case studies, “David”, provides us with a sense of how the schizoid, depersonalized individual almost literally becomes an actor. Indeed, Laing says that David was ‘quite a practiced actor’ who, until his mother’s death, had spent his life being what she wanted him to be. Laing tells us that even after his mother died, David found it no easier to be himself. David had grown up believing that what he called his “self” and his “personality” were two entirely separate things. According to Laing, David believed this to be the case not just for himself but for everyone: ‘His view of human nature in general, based on his own experiences of himself, was that everyone was an actor…’.
Laing’s account of David demonstrates the complex and abstract nature by which the schizoid person can interpret the notion of the self as a performing entity. Laing writes:

… he was always playing a part. Usually, in his mind, he was playing the part of himself (his own self): that is, he was not simply and spontaneously himself, but he played at being himself. His idea was never to give himself away to others. Consequently, he practiced the most tortuous equivocation towards others in the parts he played. Towards himself, however, his ideal was to be as utterly frank and honest as possible.  

The whole structure of David’s being was, according to Laing, based on this disjuncture between his inner “self” and his external “personality”, or mask. And the idea that David was an actor performing a version of himself to the outside world was, it seems, totally self-conscious and intentional. As already suggested, if an individual such as David was an actor, he certainly didn’t fit the profile of the Method actor who was such an emblematic figure of the time: that is, he was not convinced of an inner authenticity that was available to him if only he knew how to access it; he was not committed to the truth of the part that he was playing, and he was not relying on the spontaneity of his own intuitive impulses. Laing tells us that:

As an actor he always wished to be detached from the part he was playing. Thereby he felt himself to be master of the situation, in entire conscious control of his expressions and actions, calculating with precision their effects on others. To be spontaneous was merely stupid. It was simply putting oneself at other people’s mercy.

With Laing’s characterization of the schizophrenic subject, we see another facet of the dissolution of the tenacious view of the self as a unitary and coherent whole. In fact, as we have explored, there are some senses in which the self of the schizophrenic seems to disintegrate altogether. For Laing, though, schizophrenia was
still, first and foremost, a psychopathology that required understanding and
treatment, even if it also became a potential journey of transformation in his later
thinking. For all that Laing’s approach was a radical one reflecting the “counter-
cultural” times in which he lived, it was nevertheless one which maintained the
essentially dualistic model of a core, authentic self that resides beneath false layers
which were either imposed by social conditions, or created by the individual as a
response to those conditions. Despite the fact that Laing’s phenomenology of
schizophrenia remained within such a dualism, however, his focus upon the
projection of an external self is a significant example of the move towards an
exteriorization of subjectivity that we have been discussing so far in this chapter. In
this respect, the once seemingly irrefutable notion of an essential self that perceives
an objective world outside of itself, starts to lose substantial purchase through a
focus on ideas such as the formation of an illusory ego constituted by its relationship
to a specular exteriority (as per the early Lacan) or the creation of exterior selves (as
per Laing).

From Self to Subject: The Influence of Structuralism and Poststructuralism

In significant respects, it was the shift from phenomenological endeavours such as
those of Laing and the early Lacan to the language-based scientism of structuralism which definitively propelled the trajectory from the notion of a humanist/interiorized
self to the more abstract/exteriorized conception of the subject, and as a result, also
dealt a profound theoretical blow to the assumptions and conditions of realism. In
essence, structuralism constituted a profound re-thinking of the individual whereby
the fixed, unified and coherent self gave way to a subject constituted by external
forces which were either specifically language-based, or based on the model of
structural linguistics. This linguistic emphasis contributed significantly to an abstraction of the subject by way of a fundamental shift from thinking of language as an essentially neutral and descriptive tool, to conceptualizing it as an actively structuring force in the construction of subjectivity. Language-based structuralism was preoccupied with the notion that all meaning – including what it means to be a subject – is an effect of language. In this view, the words that we utter are not our own creation but, rather, they are part of a language that arises from society: culture speaks me through language, and as a consequence, I cannot be an “authentic performer” operating from an “inner self”, because I am possessed by language.

Structuralism, in turn, was then attacked (and eventually reformulated) by postructuralism on the basis of the former’s scientistic approach, and because its critique of the autonomous subject did not constitute a sufficiently radical break with humanism. Poststructuralism focused instead on how human subjectivity is produced by (and is contingent upon) factors such as history, power and discourse, and (by privileging the signifier over the signified) on how meaning is always unstable and indeterminate.

The pervasive influence of structuralism, and the equally influential development of postructuralism, forms an often-recounted and multi-faceted narrative which it is not within the scope of this thesis to reiterate. What is crucial to emphasize, however, is the fact that this radical change to the way an individual subject is conceptualized has significant implications for both social and representational/mediated performance, and in some ways changes the notion of performance itself. As a consequence of these conceptualizations of the subject, any notion of performance which places a unified (and “authentic”) individual at its centre becomes necessarily
problematic, if not untenable. Also, in terms of the subject’s trajectory towards an increasing reliance on exteriority, significant philosophical currents within poststructuralism further dissolved the notion of the subject from one who is split between self and other, into a subjectivity characterized by a multiplicity of discursive fragments, while at the same time extending the paradigm of madness into a dimension beyond pathology.

The poststructuralist philosopher, Michel Foucault, for example, was concerned not so much with the other that exists inside our heads, or with the other of intersubjective relations, but instead focused on the power of the other in its wider social/discursive dimensions. The gaze of the other in Foucault’s sphere of interest manifested itself in the surveillance and control of the subject in a range of institutions such as medicine, psychiatry, and the penal and education systems. Foucault was certainly alive to the oppressive forces which are marshaled against any individual subject who behaves in a manner outside of officially sanctioned norms. However, he also identified certain subversive, destabilizing and even revolutionary behaviours which had the potential to re-define what it meant to be a subject; and it is in this context that the notion that one can perform (and therefore reformulate) one’s subjectivity starts to emerge.

**Madness and Transgression: Limit Experiences and Limit Performances as the Other of Reason**

The attack on the transcendent humanist subject by a range of structuralist and poststructuralist philosophers was, in large part, aligned with an attack on the enlightenment values of rationality and reason. In this respect, Foucault and others devoted significant attention to the phenomena of madness and transgression.
Madness has often been connected – in both literal and metaphoric ways – to conceptualizations of our changing status as social subjects. In a number of different contexts, various forms of madness have been portrayed as lenses through which we might glimpse alternative modes of subjectivity. In addition, the intertwined tendencies to pathologize performances on the one hand, and aestheticize and theatricalize psychopathologies on the other, have long and enduring histories. These interrelationships are complex, and the reasons that we seem to find them compelling are not easily accounted for. At one level, it would seem that the mysteriously transformative processes of performance (which invoke notions of possession, trance and shape-shifting) and the uncanny and troubling phenomena of madness, both offer potential insights into the otherness of a hidden reality that includes the underworld of our own psyches.

Similarly, the intentional transgression of limits has also been seen as a way to access particular kinds of raw truthfulness, as well as to evade the coercive aspects of discourse. It is also a practice imbued with a strongly performative dimension. In cinema, for example, transgression is a way to subvert the norms that are enforced by the conservative forces of taste, propriety, etcetera, and these transgressions are not only manifested in narrative action, but are often also embodied in the performance styles of actors. More broadly, the urge to transgress — in both representational/mediated and social performances — can be thought of as a (dramatized/theatricalized) means of opposing the status quo.

It is in this context that Foucault’s attention was often directed toward those behaviours and performances which were excluded, marginalized and policed by the forces of rationality, order and reason. For Foucault (especially in his early works
such as *Madness and Civilization*\textsuperscript{47} and *The Birth of the Clinic*\textsuperscript{48}, the truth lay precisely in the “limit-experiences” of madness, crime and sexual transgression — experiences which the forces of rationality and reason attempt to control by turning into objects of knowledge. However, for all that hegemonic forces try to regulate and negate these limit-experiences, they nevertheless always remain present on the fringes and at the margins of society as a reminder that sanctioned and normalized forms of the truth are neither universal nor natural. As Clare O’Farrell puts it, Foucault believed that ‘[a] culture forms its identity in relation to what it rejects’,\textsuperscript{49} and it was in this context that the early Foucault saw madness, transgression and excess as, if not transcendent truths, then at least the *other of reason* that allowed the possibility of an escape route from complete domination by regulation, control and conformity. For all these reasons, Foucault considered that the manifestations of such limit performances should not be hidden away, but exhibited for us all to see.

Foucault claimed that while the insane were segregated and confined away from everyday society, they nonetheless retained their spectacle value — a perspective which once again foregrounds the connection between madness and performance that we have already touched upon in a number of different contexts. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault refers to theatrical performances that were staged at the Charenton asylum in the early nineteenth century, in which inmates performed roles in plays as a ‘pure spectacle’ of madness for an enthralled public.\textsuperscript{50} The fact that some of these plays were directed by one of the asylum’s more notorious inmates, the Marquis de Sade, was one of the inspirations for the influential Peter Weis play *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, or otherwise simply referred to as *Marat/Sade*. First performed in 1964, *Marat/Sade*
debuted in London in 1965 under the direction of Peter Brooks, who subsequently directed it as a film in 1967. In its cinematic incarnation, it becomes a film of a play within a play, thereby providing a particularly Brechtian experience for the viewer that further problematizes distinctions between sanity and insanity, pathology and performance.

The performative dimension of madness recurs continually and in many forms in the cinema, fascinating present-day audiences just as it fascinated spectators in the past. As already noted, in some contexts one is thought to be able to gain access to a particular kind of truthfulness via representations of madness, while the idea that a performer can, under certain circumstances, surrender themselves to the forces of madness in the exploration of their art also persists. In this context, some film directors are renowned for exploiting and encouraging the madness of their actors. A case in point is much of the work of director Werner Herzog, and, in particular, his relationship to the actor Klaus Kinski. Many of Herzog’s films explore the psychosis of characters via the performances of Kinski. Herzog’s documentary, *My Best Fiend*, explores the tumultuous nature of his creative and personal relationship with Kinski including references to the way that he would incite, and then harness, Kinski’s psychotic behaviour in order to achieve the performances that he required on screen. In another example of Herzog’s desire to exploit aspects of madness for performance, he also claims to have hypnotized his cast before each day of shooting for the film, *Heart of Glass*, in order to achieve performances of authentically hysterical and trance-like behaviour.

There are many memorable screen performances which could be described as performances of madness. Richard DeCordova observes that states of hysteria and
madness were not only popular subject matter for many Hollywood melodramas, but that these states of mental disturbance also became ‘showcases for performance’ via which the genre’s ‘performative dimension comes to the fore’. Screen performances of madness tend to be the antithesis of controlled and nuanced naturalism, characterized instead by a performative excess which foregrounds the spectacle of the actor who often seems to have accessed a kind of psychotic otherness in order to give such a performance. While some performances of madness are intended to elicit a sympathetic response from audiences, it is more often the case that psychotic characters are represented as criminally insane in a way that allows performers to intermix the transgressive aspects of violence and cruelty into their portrayals. Celebrated examples of such performances of criminal psychosis include Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* and *Cape Fear*, Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, and Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs*, to name just a few.

One of the most notable screen performances of recent times in the context of portraying transgressive psychopathology is Heath Ledger’s performance of The Joker in *The Dark Knight*. In an interview conducted with Ledger while the film was still in production, he described the character of The Joker as a ‘psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy’. This description clearly suggests that Ledger would have been unable to orchestrate his performance as the sort of psychologically and emotionally complex character journey that is normally associated with “Oscar winning” acting. Rather, Ledger’s performance is largely constructed as a carnivalesque play of chaos, clowning and sadism. In Ledger’s portrayal, The Joker is ironic and self-mocking, and it is the virtuosity of Ledger’s acting which is mesmerizing, rather than any realist notion of being drawn into the fiction and forgetting that we are watching a performance. Ledger’s performance of
The Joker has attracted considerable attention, not only due to the spectacular nature of his portrayal of madness, but also as a result of the possible connections that have been drawn to the actor’s own psychological state (underpinned, more generally, by a popular fascination with the process of acting). Fuelled as always by media speculation, it has been suggested, for example, that Ledger became so disturbed in his attempts to “get inside the head” of the psychopathic Joker in his preparation for the role, that his agitation and sleeplessness may have contributed to his death from an overdose of sleeping pills. It seems evident from such speculation that the performance of madness and transgression — mixed with a contemporary cultural interest in performance per se — tends to stimulate our curiosity about the mysterious psychic dialectic with otherness that the actor experiences in the preparation and performance of particularly troubling or challenging roles.

Although it is unlikely to receive the degree of mainstream attention afforded to Ledger’s performance in a Hollywood blockbuster, Tom Hardy’s performance in the postmodern bio-pic, *Bronson*, is another example of a highly-stylized and theatricalized performance of transgressive madness and violence. Hardy plays the notoriously ultra-violent British criminal Michael Peterson (aka “Charles Bronson”) in a way that is Brechtian in its form of address and highly confronting in its viscerality. The (hi)story of Peterson is told in a variety of performance registers by Hardy, including, at times, as a vaudeville/music hall performer complete with clownish stage make-up in front of an audience, and, at other times, through a defiantly direct address to the camera (and therefore to the screen audience). Critical reaction to Hardy’s performance once again displays a popular fascination for the creative process by which the actor is assumed to engage in an almost occult intermingling of his or her own psyche with that of the psychotic character being
portrayed. For example, in her review of the film for *The Times*, Wendy Ide writes: ‘Tom Hardy attacks the role like a psychopath with a claw hammer. It’s hard to tell whether he inhabits the character or it inhabits him’.  

Hardy’s performance takes violence and aggression to the limit, with a particular focus on his character’s brutal and brutalizing body. Peterson is portrayed as a character who revels in the theatricality of his extreme acts of violence — so much so that the violence becomes a kind of performance art. This aestheticization and theatricalization of violence and transgression in Hardy’s performance is in some ways reminiscent of Malcolm McDowell’s portrayal of Alex in Stanley Kubrick’s equally stylized and Brechtian *A Clockwork Orange*, and also shares similarities with Ledger’s portrayal of The Joker. The celebratory performances of cruelty in these portrayals also resonate with Sade’s aestheticization of transgression, and in turn, with the way that Sade has been aestheticized by a variety of contemporary thinkers.

For Foucault, figures such as Sade, Artaud, Nietzsche, and Bataille were exemplary representatives and advocates of “limit-performances”. It was the struggle between madness and creativity — the way that creative work would ‘explode out of madness’ — that was of crucial importance in terms of allowing society to reflexively question itself by entering into a dialogue with madness and transgression. Ultimately, Foucault maintained that extreme, non-sanctioned performances were the (albeit risky) antidote to society’s tendency towards repressively subjectifying the individual. The limit-performance, according to Foucault, ‘has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that
the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation. ¹⁷²

Performance and the Dionysian Spirit
Like many of his contemporaries, Foucault was strongly influenced by Nietzsche. And in the context of the dynamic interplay between the social forces which function to position the subject on the one hand, and the possibilities for opposing, balancing or neutralizing such positioning forces on the other, Foucault was particularly influenced by the Nietzschean conception of the twin drives of Apollo and Dionysus, articulated most extensively in The Birth of Tragedy. ¹⁷³ The Apollonian drive can be said to fix the individual as a subject in culture, while the Dionysian drive represents a return to a kind of non-subjectified state which evokes not only notions of an originary realm, but also of intoxication, chaos, madness and death. That is to say, while the Dionysian drive can be seen as a force that potentially liberates individuals from forms and structures that are imposed upon them, it can also be the path to a complete disintegration of the self. ¹⁷⁴ The celebrations of Dionysus in Ancient Greece and the rites that accompanied those celebrations are also considered to be the foundation of western theatre, and the underpinning for all ritualized performances. ¹⁷⁵ In this respect, we can say that the connections between ritual, excess, transgression, and performance are inextricably bound. ¹⁷⁶

For Foucault — as for many other poststructuralist thinkers — humanism, with its attendant notions of a coherent subject, or ego, was the insidious enemy of our freedom from subjectification. That is to say, believing that we are rational, stable and unified individuals, we accept and embrace “sensible” limits and boundaries for our own benefit and for the sake of the common good. In Foucault’s view, however,
the only means by which we can truly understand, and potentially free ourselves from, the humanism that guarantees our disempowerment is by the deliberate transgression of these very limits. The transgression of limits implies a movement from rationality to irrationality, from order to chaos, from Apollo to Dionysus (that is, Apollo setting limits and Dionysus exceeding them). According to Foucault, we can only really see the limits placed on us as subjects when we cross their boundaries; theoretically, we can then be liberated from our subjecthood through the destabilizing forces of transgression. In this context, we can clearly see how transgression has regularly been promoted as a form of cultural and political resistance to the status quo, ranging, for example, from the experimental and liberationist 1960s and 70s, through to the punk/post-punk 80s, and on to the queer 90s.

There are a multiplicity of links and connections that one can make between cinema, performance and the spirit of transgression. In the context of the latter part of the twentieth century, perhaps the most literal and obvious association that comes to mind is the late 1970s/early 1980s New York-based, post-punk movement dubbed by its founder, Nick Zedd, as the “Cinema of Transgression”. Practitioners of the so-called Cinema of Transgression movement included Zedd himself, Richard Kern, Richard Klenman, Tommy Turner and David Wojnarowicz. The notion of what constitutes transgression is, of course, subjective and subject to changing social mores. While there appears to have been something of a trend by a range of filmmakers in recent years towards transgression seen as the realistic or hyperrealistic portrayal of violence, aberrant sexuality, and other behaviours, the earlier proponents of the Cinema of Transgression were generally more inclined towards a rejection of any form of realism in favour of the camp, the trashy, and the
outrageous, in a manner that places them closer to the practices of earlier underground filmmakers such Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Kenneth Anger. In general terms, the style of this type of filmmaking places considerable emphasis on performance, theatricality, and ostentation, and therefore represents the polar opposite of internally-driven psychological realism and its attendant ethos of authenticity.

There can be little doubt that Warhol is as influential in any discussion of transgressive cinema as he is in so many other aspects of postmodern (“pop”) art and culture. While Warhol’s early films could be described as “structural” or minimalist,86 his filmmaking progressively incorporated elements of camp theatricality, mixed with the stylistics and iconography of porn.87 Warhol’s films displayed a fascination for representing the lives and lifestyles of people who existed at the margins of society.88 This focus on those who are outside the mainstream — on those whose behaviours do not confirm to bourgeois notions of good taste and propriety and who are consequently vilified, feared or simply ignored — is one of the essential features that has given so-called “underground” film its transgressive quality. This was certainly true not just of Warhol, but also of his contemporaries such as Smith 89 and Anger,90 as well as those they inspired in turn, such as John Waters. 91

The films of John Waters share much of the transgression-as-camp aesthetics of Warhol. Waters, like Warhol, worked with an ensemble of theatrically outrageous characters, and his films are all imbued with extremes of parodic posturing, over-the-top histrionics, and what often seemed like deliberately bad acting. Also like Warhol, Waters’ ensemble cast continually re-appeared in many of his films, and was drawn
largely from a pool of eccentric friends and associates rather than from the ranks of professional actors. Just as Warhol’s ensemble included such larger-than-life transgressive parodies of Hollywood superstardom such Edie Sedgwick, Pope Ondine, Baby Jane Holzer, Paul America, Candy Darling, Ultra Violet and Ingrid Superstar, amongst the most celebrated of Waters’ ubiquitous cast of eccentrics were Edith Massey, Mink Stole and, of course, the grotesquely Guignol queen of drag, Divine. For both Waters and Warhol, the conception of celebrity and stardom became the playfully camp vehicle for transgressing all notions of mainstream conventionality and subjectivity.

In nearly all of the examples referred to above, performances are crucial components in the creation of transgressive film texts. The performances of excess and transgression in films such as these create a kind of other which can be set against standards of realism, taste, skillfulness, and so on. Acting becomes acting out, professionalism is eschewed, and the whole notion of screen performance becomes imbued with a high degree of self-referential and intertextual irony. That is to say, the performers in such films stand well outside of their characters — as distinct from realist actors who attempt to integrate characters into their own psyches — and we, the spectators, are invited to enjoy a spectacle of theatricality and the carnivalesque, rather than putatively “communing” with the actor and the text so that we might absorb ourselves in some kind of reflected reality.

Filmmakers such as Warhol, Waters, Anger, and Smith, were the forerunners of a tradition of queer cinema which, like queer theory itself, became prominent in the 1990s. Queer theory aimed to break the nexus between sexuality, gender, and identity, proposing instead, in the manner of Foucault and other poststructuralists, a
perspective which brought the very notion of stable identity into question. As Annamarie Jagose explains: ‘The discursive proliferation of queer has been enabled in part by the knowledge that identities are fictitious — that is, produced by and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated’. For queer theorists, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, David Halperin, and perhaps most notably, Judith Butler, although notions of gender and sexual type are powerful social constructions, their constructed nature can be brought into consciousness and even undermined by transgressively queer performances such as drag. It was in this context, that B. Ruby Rich coined the term “New Queer Cinema” in 1992. Amongst the most prominent of filmmakers considered to be a part of this movement were Gregg Akari, Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant, Tom Kalin and — perhaps most in the spirit of porn-inspired transgressiveness — Bruce La Bruce.

**From Subject to Schizo-Subject**

The exploration into subjectivity and its relationship to performance undertaken so far in this chapter take us a great distance from the notion of a coherent, rational and unified subject — a notion that is central both to conventional views of how individuals relate to the world and to the principles of realism and realist acting. Rather, we can say that in the latter decades of the twentieth century the contemporary subject came to be seen as a fragmented, provisional, and fluid abstraction, able to be re-conceptualized and de-subjectified in myriad ways. In most cases, any such process is figured as an intentional decision to transgress and subvert, though sometimes certain types of (pathological) madness have been characterized as best capturing the spirit of such a process. Generally speaking,
however, the idea that forms of transgression can be considered productive, creative, subversive, or revolutionary, necessarily implies agency on the part of the individual. In this respect, any intentional movements towards new forms of subjectivity — including the desire to be liberated from subjectivity altogether — can be thought of as types of performance: that is, the performance of subjectivity.

The notion of performing subjectivities is, of course, clearly at odds with the humanist idea that we have a particular, authentic “self”, which we reveal to, or conceal from, the world. If, as it seems, we have substantially lost faith in the idea of an essential, authentic self that can be revealed/concealed, then this fundamentally changes the way we think of notions such as the “performance of self”,103 as well as changing the way we understand and engage with mediated performances. In this respect, it can be argued that media/screen performances which are now so prominent in contemporary consciousness function as both “role model” templates for our performance of subjectivity, and, increasingly, as examples of how the contemporary subject is fragmented and incoherent rather than unified and explicable comprehensible. As we can see in our discussion to this point, new ways of thinking about the nature of the individual subject, and of the reality of the external world in relation to the subject, have aimed to denaturalize many of the assumptions which had become concretized over the centuries around the idea of the individual as a pure, subjective consciousness that is able to perceive a “real”, phenomenal world outside of itself. The effect of all this theorizing has been to continually question what is meant by the notion of “self”, and to make the concept of the “I” a problematic rather than straightforward one.
Perhaps the most radical of these theorizations came from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, especially in their book *Anti-Oedipus* — the first of a two-volume project entitled *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* — which was published in 1972. Deleuze and Guattari sought to dispense with static notions of identity in favour of the idea that we exist in a state of constant flux. Their central philosophical aim was to replace the static notion of “being” with the dynamic concept of continual *becoming*. Deleuze and Guattari, like Foucault, were deeply influenced by the anti-humanist, anti-realist, and anti-dialectical philosophies of Nietzsche. In short, Deleuze and Guattari were highly significant contributors to a sustained attack on the very fundamentals of the Cartesian cogito, emphasizing multiplicity and flux instead of stasis and unity, proposing that a subjectivity split into multiple fragments should be seen as a condition of self rather than as pathology, and characterizing desire not as a lack but as a positivity.

In the hands of Deleuze and Guattari, desire became a productive, dynamic, and potentially revolutionary force, rather than one that was negatively founded on the principle of a void which cannot be filled (as it is in the cosmology of psychoanalysis). And while the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari shares close affinities with Foucault in many respects, Foucault’s conceptualization of how the individual is constituted as an effect of discourse and power differs significantly from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of desire as the central force in the constitution of, and relations between, the individual and society.

Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the subject and desire is always transposed over a critique of capitalism. According to Deleuze and Guattari, as capitalism dissolved the rigid barriers that existed in previous (feudal) systems, it consequently appeared
to allow and encourage the free flow of desire. However, this *de-territorialization* of feudal traditions, conventions, and prohibitions, is in fact replaced by a *re-territorialization* of desire via institutions and practices such as the nuclear family, the psychoanalytic subject, the market economy, and consumerism. Put simply, while consumer capitalism constantly enjoins us to connect our own flow of desire to the flow of markets and commodities, it also regulates and controls us through its institutions and discourses. For Deleuze and Guattari, it was a specific kind of fragmented subject performance that was required to effect a deterritorialization from the grip of capitalism and its institutions.

Here, Deleuze and Guattari return us once again to the theme of madness as a model of liberation. The revolutionary model of liberated desire that Deleuze and Guattari propose is based on the schizophrenic who is, in a sense, immune to capitalism’s attempts to reterritorialize the flow of desire. The schizophrenic, according to Deleuze and Guattari:

… plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization … [and] … deliberately seeks out the very limit of capitalism: he is its inherent tendency brought to fulfillment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel. He scrambles all the codes and is the transmitter of the decoded flows of desire.

For Deleuze and Guattari, then, the approach to capitalism is not one of revolutionary Marxist overthrow — a notion that, by the early 1970s, seemed entirely problematic on a number of grounds. Rather, their strategy — the strategy of the schizo-subject performer — was that of joining in with the flows of capitalism, but subverting the capitalist system by going beyond its own in-built constraints. In the end, Deleuze and Guattari’s project, like that of Foucault, is one of radically
de-subjectifying how we perform ourselves in the world, of doing away with the subject. Their model of the schizophrenic, and their productive program of “schizoanalysis” (as opposed to the repressive regime of psychoanalysis), are charged with the task of ‘tirelessly taking apart egos and their suppositions’ in order to connect to a flow of desire in a subject-less state ‘well below the conditions of identity’. The Deleuze-Guattari schizo-subject is a Dionysian construct, if ever there was one.

The publication of Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus in 1972 can be set against the backdrop of the counter-culture movement of the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. This counter-cultural sensibility was represented in numerous films that intermixed notions of political opposition (for example, to the Vietnam War), with “personal revolution” in the form of experimentation with eastern mysticism, psychedelic drugs, sexual liberation, and so on. Ironically, though, it may not have been until the eve of the new millennium, 1999, that cinema would provide a truly detailed incarnation of the “schizo-subject” who takes capitalism beyond its own limits, but, in doing so, who also shows how the “fascism inside all of us” remains present even in the context of an apparently revolutionary “schizo-solution”. While it may be the very opposite of what Deleuze and Guattari had in mind for the revolutionary schizo-subject, we could say that the “hero” of David Fincher’s Fight Club, Tyler Durden (and/or his double, “Jack”), represents the epitome of the schizophrenic who destabilizes (or “scrambles”) the codes of capitalism by his transgressive performances, in order to bring it undone. However, as we also see in this representation, the end result is that the revolutionary molecular cells of the fight clubs end up agglomerating into a molar formation of mindless obedience to a new fascist messiah.
Generally speaking, Deleuze and Guattari aim to do away with any humanist or phenomenological notion of the subject — a decisive break with any representation of the subject as a coherent (or even potentially coherent) ego. Such radical theorizations seem as far from the notion of realism as possible, including the realism that is the basis of conventional approaches to performance and narrative in cinema and other screen media. In this context, we could hypothesize that the neurotic subject of psychological realism and Method acting becomes transformed into a different kind of desiring subject-performer, not necessarily governed by the requirements of unity, or of desire constituted as a structural lack, that characterizes most conventional performances.

We began this chapter by considering how the presence of the other functions in a performance, and in broader terms, how a sense of otherness implies that our sense of self is constructed out of our relations with exteriority in a way which conditions both our performances as social subjects, and the media performances which we seem to increasingly embrace. With Deleuze and Guattari, however, we are no longer dealing with the dialectic of a singular identity in relation to otherness. The subject is now exploded into a multiplicity of fragments — a condition which in some ways could be said to reflect the multiplicity of fragmented performances of otherness that we encounter in our hyper-mediated universe. If the notion of contemporary subjectivity is re-conceptualized within this framework, it begins to seem as if our conventional ways of thinking about how we relate to exteriority and otherness in the form of media performances and narratives may also need to be reconfigured.
In one sense, the remainder of this thesis explores the following question: If the tenets of psychologically realist screen performance and narrative are primarily based on the assumption of the humanist subject, in what ways are we beginning to see the emergence of different types of performances and narratives that reflect a new form of de-centred subjectivity? Such a question clearly presupposes that a new subject is indeed emerging in contemporary society. Although this notion has been discussed at length in many fields, this thesis is concerned with the issue primarily in the context of screen-based representations, practices, and performances. In fact, the argument presented here is that it is precisely in the context of our increasing engagements with (screen-based) mediated experience that we can see growing evidence of a new type of subject emerging, and that this new/mediated subjectivity is intimately tied to notions of screen performance and screen representation.

The Trajectory of the Performing “I” in the Late Twentieth Century

To reiterate, the latter decades of the twentieth century were characterized by a sustained questioning and critique of what was once considered to be the self-evident existence of the unitary, perceiving subject — the “I” within our minds and our performances which had been taken for granted over centuries of Western thought and culture. While this desire to oppose the categorical assumption of the existence of the ego as the centre of all experience was not entirely new, it reached something of a critical mass in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the counter-cultural impulses of Western society meant that it was primed to embrace the search for, and experimentation with, new modes of experience and representation. Clearly, one obvious direction in which one could look for ways to dissolve the ego of the
subject-performer was towards the East. Many of the theorists referred to thus far (and many more besides) joined in the West’s growing fascination with those Eastern performances, mythologies, philosophies, cosmologies, and spiritual practices that deemed both the ego and the external world to be mere illusion. In this context, for example, there was a considerable revival of interest in the ideas of Artaud and Brecht, both of whom opposed the Western representational paradigm of psychological realism and for whom Balinese and Chinese theatre respectively were seen as exemplars of alternative performance practice.\textsuperscript{113}

Another direction in which one could look for alternatives to the strictures of Western thinking was towards those things that were normally feared, repressed or otherwise turned away from in our own society. Chief amongst these were the various manifestations of ritualized and performed madness which, as discussed, have been a subject of fascination for numerous thinkers. While Deleuze and Guattari were at pains to distinguish ‘the schizophrenic as an entity from schizophrenia as a process’\textsuperscript{114} — or as Best and Kellner put it, ‘the vibrant schizo-subject’ from the ‘dysfunctional schizophrenic’\textsuperscript{115} — it is clear that, like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari tended to valorize psychotic performances, if only as a model.\textsuperscript{116} In the end, however, the image of the madman Artaud casting his eyes eastward in the search for a Theatre of Cruelty, or of Foucault directing himself to performances of madness and transgression, can both be seen as means towards understanding the issue of who we were (or could be), as subjects of the late twentieth century world.

Debates about whether we currently live in a period of “late” or “post” modernity — not to mention other versions of the attempt to name and periodize the contemporary
era — have filled countless pages of print, and it is not necessary to reiterate such discussions here. As a rough working summary, though, we could say that the more radical theorists of culture and subjectivity who have suggested some kind of dramatic break with the past could be considered postmodernist, while theorists who see the contemporary moment as an acceleration and extension of previous trends often suggest that we are living in an era of late, or high, modernity. Certainly, proclamations regarding either the ends or the beginnings of things — the end of meaning, the end of the humanist individual, the beginning of a new “episteme,” or the emergence of a new type of subject, for example — suggest that we are living in a radically changed world. In this respect, we can say — if only in a qualified way — that the final decades of the twentieth century saw the theoretical emergence of a “postmodern subject”: a subject that was constituted by multiplicity rather than unity, and a subject that was not unchanging and universal but, rather, characterized by flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to creatively perform notions of self and identity in new and surprising ways. These tendencies can be seen nowhere more vividly than in our relationship to mediation and screen/media performance. In fact, contemporary forms of mediated performance can be said to provide both a model for postmodern subjectivity, and a medium through which contemporary individuals can increasingly experiment with/perform multiple identities and new modes of subjectivity. The next chapter explores some facets and examples of the increasingly central connection between screen performance and the performance of contemporary subjectivity.

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1 The notion of communion between actors and between actor and audience was an important concept for Stanislavsky. See An Actor Prepares, 193-222.

For a detailed account of the extensive photographic representation of hysteria at the Salpetriere Hospital under the auspices of Charcot, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpetriere*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). (Originally published, 1982.) Didi-Huberman’s account argues that photography was instrumentally used by Charcot to convince the medical world of the reality of hysteria. As there was no organic basis for the disease, the recording of the external behaviours associated with hysteria was seen as a crucial task for the clinician. Charcot was determined to prove that hysteria was ‘not something out of a novel’, that it was subject to rules and that it had the ‘regularity of a mechanism.’ (Quoted in Didi-Huberman, 76.) Hysteria was seen as particularly conducive to being photographed. Indeed, Freud referred to hysteria as behaving like an image of memory. (Didi-Huberman, 159.) However, Didi-Huberman also argues that Charcot did not merely and “objectively” document symptoms but, rather, solicited *performances* of hysteria from his patients for the gaze of the camera, or for audiences at his public lectures.

The first of three volumes of *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpetriere* was published in 1876-77, less than forty years after the birth of photography in 1939 and at a time when medical photography was still in its infancy. See Christopher Goetz, Michel Bonduelle and Toby Gelfand, *Charcot: Constructing Neurology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 184.

The connections between Charcot and Freud in terms of Freud’s development of psychoanalysis are well known and have been documented and discussed at length. For one such account, see Toby Gelfand, “Sigmund-sur-Seine: Fathers and Brothers in Charcot’s Paris”, *Freud and the History of Psychoanalysis*, eds. Toby Gelfand and John Kerr (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Analytic Press, 1992), 29-51. Gelfand writes that for virtually all commentators, ‘Freud’s contact with Charcot was absolutely crucial to the genesis of psychoanalysis’(29).

Amongst other luminaries such as Henri Bergson, Guy de Maupassant, and Emile Durkheim, the famous actress, Sarah Bernhardt, was known to have attended Charcot’s Tuesday lectures. See Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 182.

The three volumes were published between 1876 and 1880. Didi-Huberman, 44.

Perhaps most notably and literally in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* in which the “somnambulist”, Cesare, is portrayed as a virtual puppet who performs monstrous acts for the hypnotist/psychiatrist Caligari.


Ibid., 258.

Ibid, 259.

14 Jay, 341.


18 Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage suggested not just how the sense of self is formed but also how it is maintained throughout the subject’s lifetime in an ongoing search for an otherness that completes the self in what he termed the Imaginary order of human reality. Malcolm Bowie sums up the implications of Lacan’s model, in the following way:

The Imaginary is the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities. It is the dimension of experience in which the individual seeks not simply to placate the Other but to dissolve his otherness by becoming his counterpart. By way of the Imaginary, the original identificatory procedures which brought the ego into being are repeated and reinforced by the individual in his relationship with the external world of people and things. The Imaginary is the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain “what one is” by gathering to oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance and self-replication; it is the birthplace of the narcissistic “ideal ego”. (Bowie, 92.)


20 Lacan described this illusory process as a form of misrecognition, or misunderstanding (or, in French, *meconnaisance*). As Dylan Evan explains, the French word also invokes the sense of knowledge, and therefore self-knowledge. Dylan also notes the that the term implies both a neurotic aspect – i.e. ‘ordinary neurotic self-knowledge’ – and a psychotic aspect in the form of paranoid delusion, and therefore: ‘This structural homology between the ordinary constitution of the ego and paranoid delusion is what leads Lacan to describe all knowledge (*connaissance*) in both neurosis and psychosis, as “paranoiac” knowledge.’ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 109.

21 “Mirage” is the term that Lacan uses when describing this process: ‘… the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power is a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority.’ Lacan, “The Mirror Stage”, 4.

22 To a significant extent, Judith Butler’s concept of the performativity of gender is at the heart of this idea. Put simply, Butler contends that if gender appears to be “natural”, it does so as a result of repeated behaviours (i.e. performances) rather than as a result of any pre-existing essence. Butler writes that ‘gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.’ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, eds. Carole Ruth McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 423. (Originally published in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, December, 1988.)

By extension, this way of thinking about gender can arguably apply to other aspects and notions of identity as well. Elizabeth Bell sums this up when she writes that in the context of postmodern skepticism about the idea of an essential self:
With the work of Judith Butler, performativity has come to mean that we perform multiple and shifting identities in history, language and material embodiments. The question is not “Who am I?” but “How am ‘I’ a subject – in history, in language and in material ways?” (174)


22 Roger Caillois based his theory of mimicry on the camouflaging behavior of insects (Grosz, p46), while in Lacan’s “mirror stage” paper, Lacan refers not only to this, but also to how the sexual maturation of pigeons can be triggered by seeing an image of themselves rather than by seeing another pigeon. (Lacan, “The Mirror Stage”, p5).

23 While the term “Imaginary” dates back to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage postulated in 1936, by 1953 Lacan had developed a tripartite system of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. As we have already discussed, the imaginary refers to the relationship between ego and specular image. As Evans puts it ‘the imaginary is the realm of image and imagination, deception and lure. The principal illusions of the imaginary are those of wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and, above all, similarity. The imaginary is thus the order of surface appearances which are deceptive…’ (82). Evans also explains that the Symbolic ‘is essentially a linguistic dimension’ (201) and ‘is also the realm of the Law which regulates desire ….. It is the realm of culture as opposed to the imaginary order of nature’ (202). And the Real, as distinct from the Symbolic, is ‘that which is outside language and inassimilable to symbolization’ (159). The Real is also linked to the notion of impossibility – ‘it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way’ as well as invoking ‘the body and its brute physicality (as opposed to the imaginary and symbolic functions of the body)’ (160).

24 Josiane Paccaud-Huguet aptly describes the function of the image/Imaginary as ‘our first mediator and our perpetual other: we never completely forgo the longing for unity and identification with our beloved reflection (our specular image) which we will constantly look for in adult life, whether in the social or the familial mirror: in the other’s eyes.’ Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, “Psychoanalysis after Freud”, in *Literary Theory and Criticism: an Oxford Guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006 ), 281.


28 Ibid.,27.

29 Ibid, 28.

30 Though, as has often been noted, in the Lacanian visual scheme it is not ultimately possible to see with the look of the other. Or, as Lacan himself put it: "you never look at me from the place at which I see you." (Quoted in Evans, 72.)

31 As McGowan explains:

> We perform our intimate activities in ways that confirm a certain idea we have of ourselves, and this self-image implies an external look – what Freud calls an ego ideal – that apprehends it. The implicit onlooker gives meaning and structure to the private activity. Without the implicit onlooker or ego ideal, we would have no sense of how to act in private, no method for organizing our private lives.

As Bruce Fink notes, in the Lacanian view psychosis develops as a result of the child’s ‘failure to assimilate a “primordial” signifier which would otherwise structure the child’s symbolic universe, that failure leaving the child unanchored in language …… [a] psychotic child may very well assimilate language, but cannot come to be in language in the same way as a neurotic child.’ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 55.


Ibid., 17.

One of the key distinctions that Laing makes is between the normative position of ‘primary ontological security’ whereby the individual possesses a ‘centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity’ and the ‘primary ontological insecurity’ of the schizophrenic whereby the individual’s experiences ‘may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties.’ (Ibid., 39.)

Ibid., 42-3


Laing, *The Divided Self*, 70-1.

Ibid., 71.

Ibid., 72.

Ibid., 72.

This sense of structuralism is encapsulated neatly by François Dosse as a project characterized by the ‘ambition of basing the sciences of man solely on culture, modeled by linguistic rules.’ See François Dosse, *History of Structuralism Volume II: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 312.


As already noted, the patients of Charcot, who performed the symptoms of hysteria into existence for their demanding master and enthralled audiences, is one such celebrated example; the disturbing spectacle of Antonin Artaud as a performer-madman is another. James Miller provides a compelling description of Artaud’s final “performance of madness” in 1947 (soon after leaving a decade of institutionalization in an asylum and not long before his death) in the context of how figures such as Artaud were inspirational to Foucault. See James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 94-6.


Foucault wrote:

> Here is madness elevated to spectacle above the silence of the asylums, and becoming a public scandal for the general delight. …. Early in the nineteenth century, Coulnier, the director of Charenton, had organized those famous performances in which madmen sometime played the roles of actors, sometimes those of watched spectators. “The insane who attended these theatricals were the object of the attention and curiosity of a frivolous, irresponsible, and often vicious public. The bizarre attitude of these unfortunates and their condition provoked the mocking laughter and the insulting pity of the public.” Madness became pure spectacle, in a world over which Sade extended his sovereignty and which was offered as a diversion to the good conscience of a reason sure of itself.


\[51\] *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, feature film. Directed by Peter Brook, script by Adrian Mitchell based on the play by Peter Weiss. 1967.

52 Such feature films, all directed and written by Werner Herzog and starring Klaus Kinski, include: *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972); *Woyzeck* (1979); *Fitzcarraldo* (1982); and *Cobra Verde* (1987)


62 Ledger won an Academy award in 2009 for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role for his portrayal of The Joker.

63 Originally theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, the notion of the “carnivalesque” has come to include a focus on transgression, viscerality and the grotesque. Generally speaking, the notion of carnivalesque implies a type of transgressive behavior which “expends itself” in a way that is ultimately pro-social, enabling a sense of balance to be restored to society. Nevertheless, the resolutely anti-social Joker performed by Ledger can be said to display the kinds of qualities which fit with Chris Jenks’ description of the carnivalesque as ‘a riot of pleasure, excess, misbehavior and misrule’ (162). See Chris Jenks, Transgression (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) especially, 161-74.


69 Foucault never used the term “limit-performance”. Clearly, though, the interconnections between Foucault’s theorizations of power, transgression and the body and notions of the performativity of gender as identity enacted (transgressively) through the body (especially in Judith Butler’s theorization) suggests strong links between the experience of transgressive limits and the performance of such transgressions.

70 Foucault, Madness and Civilization, 272.

71 Foucault wrote that the work of figures such as Nietzsche, Van Gogh and Artaud seems to ‘drown in the world, to reveal there is non-sense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone’ and in so doing such work ‘opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.’ (Foucault, Madness and Civilization, 273-4.)


74 Due to this tendency of the Dionysian towards disintegration, it is often argued that the balancing force of the Apollonian drive is required to guard against complete annihilation. As John Walker
The Apollonian, in contrast to the timeless, immanent realm of the Dionysian, is a "historical" force, embedded within our culture ... it actively de-limits the chaotic flux of the Dionysian and produces both society, on the macrocosmic level, and personality, or "the subject", on the level of the individual.' Foucault, after Nietzsche, believed that the forces of Apollo have come to dominate (and therefore distort) our lives in the post-Enlightenment era. However, Foucault also argued that while it was necessary to rectify this distortion, it was also necessary to retain some balance between Dionysus and Apollo – that is to say, between nature and culture, passion and control, chaos and order. As Walker puts it: 'Foucault, unlike Nietzsche, does not end in a full embrace of Dionysus, but instead comes to regard the manipulation of Apollo by the subject as a key concept.'


75 See (amongst many other accounts), Erika Fischer-Lichte, History of European Drama and Theatre (London: Routledge, 2002), 8-10.

76 For a brief account of the connections between Dionysion ritual and the theorization of transgression by Georges Bataille and others, see Mark C. Taylor, Altarity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 140-1.

77 In this context, Foucault was strongly influenced by Bataille (who, like Foucault, was himself influenced by Sade and Nietzsche). In Foucault's essay, "A Preface to Transgression", which first appeared as the introduction to a 1963 book paying homage to Bataille, he invokes the notion of transgression as the necessary result of living in a world in which the categories of sacred and profane no longer apply. According to Foucault, we now live in a world that is 'emptied of objects, beings and spaces to desecrate' and which therefore leads to 'a profanation without object, a profanation that is empty and turned inward upon itself'. Transgression, then, can be thought of as 'profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred' and, therefore, transgression 'prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating.' See "A Preface to Transgression" in Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 30.

78 James Miller provides an interesting exploration of Foucault’s attitude to limit experiences – including, somewhat contentiously, the ways in which Foucault sought limit experiences in his own life – in the opening chapter of The Passion of Michel Foucault, titled “The Death of the Author”. Miller, The Passion of Michel Foucault, 13-36.

79 In a 1971 interview-based article entitled, “Revolutionary Action: Until Now”, Foucault sets out his views on this matter in unambiguous fashion:

In short, humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts the desire for power: it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized. The theory of the subject (in the double sense of the word) is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us. But it can be attacked in two ways: either by a "desubjectification" of the will to power (that is, through political struggle in the context of class warfare) or by the destruction of the subject as a pseudosovereign (that is, through an attack on "culture": the suppression of taboos and the limitations and divisions imposed upon the sexes; the setting up of communes; the loosening of inhibitions with regard to drugs; the breaking of all the prohibitions that form and guide the development of a normal individual). I am referring to all those experiences which have been rejected by our civilization or which it accepts only within literature.'

Zedd coined the term Cinema of Transgression in the mid-80s while editing the Underground Film Bulletin in New York in which he published his “Cinema of Transgression Manifesto”. Evoking the spirit of Artaud and Bataille – and fashioned with his own hyperbolic bellicosity - Zedd tells us in his manifesto that:

There will be blood, shame, pain and ecstasy, the likes of which no one has yet imagined. None shall emerge unscathed. Since there is no afterlife, the only hell is the hell of praying, obeying laws, and debasing yourself before authority figures, the only heaven is the heaven of sin, being rebellious, having fun, fucking, learning new things and breaking as many rules as you can. This act of courage is known as transgression. We propose transformation through transgression - to convert, transfigure and transmute into a higher plane of existence in order to approach freedom in a world full of unknowing slaves.


Zedd’s directorial credits include *They Eat Scum* (1979) and *Geek Maggot Bingo* (1983).


Tommy Turner and David Wojnarowicz co-directed *Where Evil Dwells* (1985)

For a sample of some these films and other example of the Cinema of Transgression, see the Ubuweb site: [http://www.ubu.com/film/transgression.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/transgression.html).

Such filmmakers include Michael Haneke, Gaspar Noe, Larry Clark, Harmony Korine and Takashi Miike.

For a succinct discussion of the trajectory of “transgressive” filmmaking in terms of violence and sexuality and, more generally, the issue of our changing ideas as to what constitutes the transgressive in cinema, see Kaleem Aftab and Ian Stewart, “Film: Transgressive Cinema”, [http://www.contemporary-magazines.com/film51.htm](http://www.contemporary-magazines.com/film51.htm) (accessed February 2nd, 2008).

For example, *Sleep* (1963), *Kiss* (1963) and *Empire* (1964).

These latter films include, for example, *The Chelsea Girls* (1965), *Lonseome Cowboys* (1968) and *Fuck* (1969), along with those films made by his close collaborator, Paul Morrissey, such as *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1969) and *Heat* (1972).

As Sam Ishii-Gonzalès notes, Warhol’s films are characterized by the ‘use of character types who were typically elided from mainstream cinema: homosexuals, transvestites, hustlers, drug addicts, and other have-nots.’ Sam Ishii-Gonzalès, “Blow Job”, *Senses of Cinema* (May, 2001), [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/01/14/blow_job.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/01/14/blow_job.html)

Smith’s most famous film was *Flaming Creatures* (1963). For a documentary look at the life and works of Jack Smith, see *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis*, directed and written by Mary Jordan. 2006.


The notion of “theatricality” has become important to postmodern discourse in recent years, particularly in the areas of performance studies and performativity. Theatricality is a term rich in valences connoting, amongst other things, a celebration of excess and self-referentiality, a collapse of the distinction between the representational and the everyday, and the opposite of realism and authenticity. For a useful introduction to the topic of theatricality, see Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, introduction to *Theatricality*, eds. Postlewait and Davis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-39.

For a discussion of the carnivalesque in relation to film comedy, including the films of John Waters, see Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower press, 2002), 63-92. King notes, for example, that an important aspect of the carnivalesque is ‘the representation of the human body as a source of the grotesque’ and that the ‘essential principle of carnival is degradation’ (65). He then applies this to Waters’ ‘truly carnivalesque world’ as represented in films such as *Pink Flamingoes* and *Female Trouble* (69).


Haynes’ earliest films are perhaps the most notable examples of this queer sensibility, including *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) and his first feature film, *Poison* (1991).


The phrase “performance of self” is a reference to sociologist, Erving Goffman’s highly influential 1959 book, *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life*. One of Goffman’s main topics of interest was the degree to which the individual attempts to maintain the image of a coherent self as she or he interacts with other individuals and groups. For Goffman, this was achieved by establishing a “front” which he defined as the ‘expressive equipment’ of ‘setting, appearance and manner’ deployed by the individual in, hopefully, a seamlessly consistent and coherent way (see 22-25). Many of Goffman’s observations were concerned with how individuals were able to conform to social conventions by satisfying the expectations of their audiences with a consistent and credible performance of personality traits and characteristics. However, he was also interested in those instances when a
performance fails to deliver a convincing image of cohesion (e.g. 52). Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

Goffman is one of the “forefathers” of performance studies and in many respects he anticipates theories which question the notion of a foundational or essential self. Goffman wrote:

> A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.’ (Goffman, 252-3)

According to Elizabeth Bell, ‘Goffman’s work marks an important moment between modernism and postmodernism, between self and society, between the social sciences and the humanities, in answering the question “Who am I in relation to others”’ (Bell, 148).


105 Best and Kellner note that Nietzsche’s critique of representation was particularly influential on Deleuze and Guattari insofar as it attacked ‘realist theories that claim subjects can accurately reflect or represent the world in thought without the mediations of culture, language and physiology’ and, in effect, opposed ‘the subject-object distinction of modern epistemology where a neutral and objective world is mirrored in the receptive mind of a passive subject’. (Best and Kellner, 83.)

106 Deleuze and Guattari oppose psychoanalysis for the way that, through the self-fulfilling prophesy of its own discourse and practice, it turns productively desiring subjects into debilitated and domesticated neurotics whose only experience of desire comes in the form of a forlorn yearning for completeness via the (impossible) recovery of “lost objects”. In the terms employed by Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalysis territorializes desire via its invention of the fundamentally disempowered neurotic and “oedipalized” subject. Rajeshwari Vallury sums up this perspective well by writing that, according to Deleuze and Guattari:

> Freud’s genius and modernity lay in his discovery of the sheer materiality of the unconscious drives, of the productive force of the unconscious. What they reject in psychoanalysis is its attempts to enclose the productive power of desire within the abstraction of the Oedipal triangle. By confining desire to the sterile structure of the symbolic, and by subjecting it to the law of the absent phallus as a master signifier, psychoanalysis “territorializes” or codes the unconscious within a structural representation that condemns it to lack and impossibility. Desire is deformed within a signification in which it can only desire what is missing, impossible, or out of reach. Psychoanalysis stumbles upon the positive material forces and drives of the unconscious only to imprison them within the rigid structures of representation and signification. The unconscious becomes a theatre for the playing out the same tiresome family drama, the same Greek tragedy of incest, castration and lack.


107 Eugene Holland explains that, for Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism:

> …..entails both deterritorialization and reterritorialization; and capitalist representation raises the ambivalence of the psychic recording process to a maximum, by sponsoring both decoding and recoding. Capitalism thus
inaugurates the possibility of universal history: it frees labour and libido from illusory objective determinations, revealing the abstract subjective essence of production in both fields, desiring-production and social-production. But, as the same time, capitalism prevents and defers the realization of universal history by re-subjecting free productive energy to the alienations of private property and the privatized family, to capital and the Oedipus.

Eugene W. Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus* (London: Routledge, 1999), 92.


Deleuze and Guattari write that: ‘schizophrenia is the exterior limit of capitalism itself or the conclusion of its deepest tendency’ because ‘capitalism only functions on condition that it inhibit this tendency, or that it push back or displace this limit.’ *Anti-Oedipus*, 246.

Ibid., *Anti-Oedipus*, 362.

This trend could be said to have introduced into a mainstream/Hollywood context by Dennis Hopper’s highly influential feature film, *Easy Rider* (1969) and Michael Wadleigh’s documentary of the famed 1969 music festival, *Woodstock* (1970). Numerous other films which mixed psychedelia with countercultural dissent also emerged during this period, such as *Getting Straight* (1970), *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), and Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970), while a focus upon sexual liberation (along with liberation from all forms of “fascism”) was perhaps encapsulated best by Dušan Makavejev’s films, particularly *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) and, later, *Sweet Movie* (1975). At the same time, pornography virtually became mainstream with films such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (1972). Also around this time, filmmakers such as Robert Altman and John Cassavetes also began to subvert the classic Hollywood narrative form. Altman’s films moved away from singularity and coherence in favor of a sense of multiplicity and chaos, and from psychologically explicable interiority to a far more random exteriority. Like Altman, Cassavetes rejected the conventional screenwriting/filmmaking wisdom that characters must always behave in accordance with a predetermined schema of psychological traits. His films tended to explore character in a way which appeared to approximate real time and which tended to eschew cause and effect linearity, goal-oriented characterization and narrative closure. Instead, Cassavetes favoured showing us characters grappling with the moment-to-moment chaos of existence. While yet another performance-based manifestation of the radical currents of the counter-culture was the practice and theory of avant-garde theatre performance, particularly exemplified in the form of “Happenings” which merged theatrical representation with the everyday thus breaking down distinctions between performers and participants.


Ibid., *Anti-Oedipus*, 379.

Best and Kellner, 92.

Deleuze and Guattari tell us that ‘Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough … to be mad is not necessarily to be ill, notwithstanding that in our culture the two categories have become confused.’ *Anti-Oedipus*, p131

In the 1960s and early 1970s, questions pertaining to the relationship between the individual and society were being raised on many fronts. One such question of particular concern during those times related to the manner in which individuals were categorized, excluded or pathologized using criteria relating to madness. Deleuze and (especially) Guattari, Foucault and R.D. Laing were all loosely identified as being connected to the anti-psychiatry movement. In differing ways, they all tended to
valorize such states as the productive other of the conformist and regulated condition that society generally takes to be “normal”.


Foucault’s reference to “invention” refers to his argument that the concept of man did not properly exist until (what he defines as) the modern “episteme”. For Foucault, the modern episteme emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century when western civilization came to study man as the primary object of history. According to Foucault, the beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed the ascendency of science which operated on the basis of peeling away layers of history to get to the true essence of man – a process that would turn man into the object as well as the subject of knowledge. Foucault argued, however, that the modern episteme was built upon a fundamentally untenable contradiction between empirical and metaphysical conceptions which meant that it was bound to eventually crumble and give way to the dawning of a new, “postmodern” episteme (although Foucault never named it as such) that no longer revolved around a central, phenomenological subject. As Clare O’Farrell summarizes:

…. the idea of a human essence is a metaphysical one – a belief – yet at the same time it has been set up as the object of empirical knowledge – a fact. Foucault argues that because the human sciences rest on this shaky foundation, they are fundamentally flawed in their approach to knowledge. He maintains that another break in knowledge is occurring in the contemporary era and the essence of man as the centre and foundation of all knowledge is dissolving. (O’Farrell, 41.)
Chapter Three — Schizo Performances and Mobius Formations

The Deleuze and Guattari emphasis on flux, multiplicity, transformation, and becoming, rather than stasis, unity, and essentialized being that we discussed in the previous chapter, is highly suggestive of the way that many contemporary media performances tend towards fragmentation as opposed to integration and coherence. While performances in many feature films and television dramas clearly still operate according to the principles of unified and more or less in-depth explorations of character traits and objectives, at least as many — in fact, probably many more — media performances are now presented to us as a series of superficial and fragmentary moments. The performances that we see in a myriad of forms such as music videos, television commercials, sketch-based comedies, variety shows, and “actuality” programming ranging from The Amazing Race and The Jerry Springer Show to nightly news and current affairs broadcasts, tend to be haphazard, chaotic and non-unified in comparison to the strict hierarchies and conventions which regulate performances in conventional realist narratives.

In a realist narrative drama, the performance of a character is generally expected to conform to a scheme of characterization which, in turn, is expected to cohere with the overall narrative “score” of the text within the parameters of the fictional world that has been established. On the other hand, performances that occur, say, in a music video or a sketch comedy program are liberated from such constraints of continuity and unity, and are able to range across limitless possibilities and multiple levels of meaning. Such performances can, for example, utilize all kinds of intertextual reference points, such as the mixing of genres and performance styles,
the use of parody and pastiche, and the ability to move freely between the
performance of a character or characters and the presentation of a performer’s own
“real life” persona. In addition to these mostly television-based performances, there
is now also an ever-expanding multiplicity of media performances that are uploaded
into cyberspace via video-sharing internet sites such as YouTube. Whether these are
the original performances of “DIY media stars”, or snippets of pre-existing media
performances, they circulate in cyberspace as free-floating “bits” that are only
connected to other performances and narratives in loose and contingent ways. It can
be argued that all of these fragmentary performances suggest a way of thinking about
identity that is more in keeping with the Deleuze and Guattari conceptualization of
the deterritorialized body of the postmodern “schizo-subject” as a ‘smooth, slippery,
opaque, taut, surface’¹ of sensations, than it is with the idea of a unified and coherent
“self” existing as a container for an integrated psychological interiority.

While these “schizo tendencies”, including the movement away from the “depth
psychology” of realist narratives and performances, are clearly evident in various
forms of television and internet production, they are also manifest in a range of
feature films.² For example, a substantial proportion of cinematic fare nowadays
tends to be based largely on special effects driven spectacle and/or on self-conscious
appropriations of other forms of popular media culture, rather than on any sustained
notion of exploring the psychological interiorities of realistic and believable
characters within an accurate representation of reality. In this context, one could cite
the many “action blockbusters” which are produced each year, and which are often
based on graphic novels, comic books, animated super-heroes, or, increasingly,
popular computer games. In addition, film producers seem increasingly prone to
trawling other areas of popular culture – most especially television – in order to find
material for films. Consequently, a sizeable proportion of popular American
television sit-coms and series from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have been “adapted”
into feature films, often with scripts that include many knowing and playful
references to their ancestry.³

Beyond this, we can be much more specific about the relationship between the
“schizophrenizing” tendencies of contemporary subjectivity explored by theorists
such as Deleuze and Guattari on the one hand, and, on the other, examples of how
these tendencies have come to be represented in certain examples of contemporary
cinema. In the examples that we will discuss below, we will not only see a tendency
towards the fragmentation and multiplication of identity that is the polar opposite of
the coherence and unity of realism, but we will also see representations of a kind of
postmodern “schizo-sensibility” which tends to collapse a number of “common
sense” binaries, including the distinctions that are usually drawn between reality and
non-reality and between self and (mediated) other.

In the previous chapter, we touched upon an almost timeless fascination with the
relationship between performance and madness, including the fact that there have
been numerous memorable screen representations of madness over the years. In this
context, representations (and misrepresentations) of schizophrenia can be said to
form a virtual sub-genre of such performances. The notoriously inaccurate/simplistic
representation of schizophrenia as a form of “dual personality” instantly brings to
mind screen characters such as Norman Bates in Psycho⁴, while schizophrenia as a
condition has been more or less accurately represented in films ranging from
Bergman’s Through a Glass Darkly,⁵ to more recent films such as Angel Baby,⁶ A
Beautiful Mind,⁷ and Revolution #9.⁸ More significantly in the context of this thesis,
however, schizophrenia has also provided some other films with a vehicle for exploring the confused and confusing lines between reality and non-reality. In such films, schizophrenia becomes a means of representing a world where the slippages between reality and non-reality, and the indeterminacy and impermanency of identity, seem to be an inescapable part of contemporary existence. These films are comprised of performances and narratives that are the very antithesis of coherence — not a unified character being meticulously wrought into being by an actor, nor the creation of a narrative chain of cause and effect worked out to a logical and cathartic climax by director and scriptwriter, but, rather, the creative representation of identities and their realities being splintered into multiple fragments. Narratives and performances such as these tend not to represent a fictional subject in the process of growing along the path of a linear “character arc”, but, instead, portray a process of “de-subjectification” through which we are invited to witness a spectacle of a disintegrating self in a confusing and contradictory world. Arguably, these kinds of screen narratives and performances are a more resonant response to the experience of living in the contemporary world than are many of the more conventionally realist, psychological “character studies” that are so often praised for their insight and depth.

The film, Donnie Darko, is emblematic of this tendency. On one level of the narrative, Donnie, the protagonist, is clearly schizophrenic and his decision to discontinue with his medication is the reason that he begins to have a range of hallucinations, including the presence of a malicious, human-sized talking rabbit who encourages Donnie towards mad, anti-social and destructive behaviours (and who also functions as the harbinger of some kind of apocalypse). But Donnie Darko can also be interpreted as a film that engages with a postmodern perspective in which a “schizo” view of the contemporary world is a sometimes painful, yet necessary,
survival strategy. The narrative of Donnie Darko is indeterminate, and while it seems that Donnie dies at the end of the film, it is impossible to be certain that this is indeed the case, as we can never know which “reality” we are in. What is clearly apparent, though, is that the world that Donnie inhabits is one of contradictions, ambiguities and (adult) hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{10}

In these respects, the film can be said to belong to a “youth angst” genre that stretches back to the films of method-icons such as Dean, Brando, and Clift in the 1950s and which has been present, in one form or another, in every decade since. What differentiates Donnie Darko’s form of teen angst from earlier incarnations, however, is the fact that his schizophrenic perspective not only precipitates feelings of terror and acts of near-terrorism, but also offers up the apparently “sci-fi” narrative solution of time-travel as a way of solving his problems. In a sense, we could metaphorically equate the notion of time travel with the ahistorical nature of contemporary experience — time as a subjective and confused state in which our “here-and-now” reality is equivocal, contingent, and subject to modification.\textsuperscript{11} In this context, we can say that the reality that is represented in the narrative of Donnie Darko is no straightforward thing: the here-and-now reality and, as director Richard Kelly terms it, the reality of a “tangent universe”, constantly fold into each other in what Geoff Klock has described as a Mobius strip formation.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Mobius Formations, Schizo-Subjectivity and the Cinematic Worlds of David Lynch}

The model of the Mobius strip has been used to metaphorically describe the complex relationship between conscious and unconscious mental processes, as well as relations between reality and forms of non-reality generated by our heavily mediated
environment. The Mobius strip can be demonstrated by introducing a single twist to an ordinary strip of paper and then joining its ends so that it becomes impossible to determine whether it has one side or two, or, perhaps, where the “outside” ends and the “inside” begins. One implication that can be drawn from this model is that it is possible to dissolve distinctions between apparently mutually exclusive states such as inside/outside, love/hate, or past/present. For Lacan, the Mobius strip provided a useful model for explaining how such binary oppositions can be dissolved in the human psyche – for example, how we seem able to collapse distinctions between self and other in our formation of an identity. A model such as this has implications in terms of how we understand reality insofar as it seems to defy “common sense” and “sane” understandings and perceptions. (That is to say, one’s sanity is generally gauged by the ability to discern the fundamental differences between self and other, here and there, now and then, reality and fantasy, presence and absence, and so on.) As a consequence, one could say that a kind of “schizo-perception” is required in order to actually accept that such states can operate simultaneously – a situation which, it has often been argued, characterizes many aspects of contemporary, postmodern experience.

The filmmaker who perhaps provides the most sustained focus on this Mobius configuration of merging realities and, indeed, on the schizophrenization of contemporary subjectivity, is David Lynch. In many respects, Lynch’s Lost Highway can be seen as having provided a virtual template for films such as Donnie Darko to follow. In Lost Highway, we are once again dealing with a schizophrenic protagonist. This time however, the protagonist, Fred, is an exceedingly troubled individual who murders his wife in a very violent manner. And just as we can never be sure about the status of reality in Donnie Darko, we cannot
be certain whether the apparent warps in time and space in *Lost Highway* actually occur or are, instead, symptoms of the protagonist’s schizophrenic delusions. *Lost Highway* confounds many viewers by the apparently arbitrary and unmotivated “identity shift” that occurs part-way through the film: suddenly the imprisoned murderer, Fred (played by Bill Pulman), is transformed in his prison cell into a completely different character called Pete (played by Balthazar Getty).\(^{15}\) While one could, yet again, explain this metamorphosis by means of the notion of some kind of “tangent universe”, it seems more likely that Lynch is dealing here with representations of the unconscious/real — an unconscious/real that could be said to belong both to the protagonist and to the film itself.\(^ {16}\) In any event, the world of the film is one in which seemingly impossible twists between one reality and another are always either already present or lurking just over the horizon.\(^ {17}\)

Two of Lynch’s subsequent films — *Mulholland Drive*\(^ {18}\) and *Inland Empire*\(^ {19}\) — bear similarities to, and in a number of respects represent elaborations of, the aspects of *Lost Highway* outlined above. Importantly, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* relate to the universe of mediation, cinema, and performance in much more explicit and direct ways than does *Lost Highway*. In these two later films, a “schizo subjectivity” is conditioned by the desire that is caused — or at least inflamed — by the psychic power of cinematic images, narratives, and performances, as well as by the grim realities behind the thin façade of Hollywood’s image.\(^ {20}\) *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* are both specifically situated in the schizophrenic world of the Hollywood dream/nightmare where various registers of performance are central to all experience.
In *Mulholland Drive*, the Mobius formation of a twisted, doubled reality continues to be explored as the film delves into the darkest recesses of desire and fantasy in a myriad of ways. As in *Lost Highway*, we witness the protagonist shifting identity (in this case, from Betty Elms to Diane Selwyn) at a particularly traumatic moment in the film. In one narrative interpretation of the film, Betty is Diane’s idealized fantasy version of herself. Betty is characterized as a still innocent and open-hearted ingénue with high hopes of becoming a Hollywood star. However, we later (seem to) learn that Betty is actually an ideal ego that has been concocted as part of a fantasy narrative by the embittered, exhausted, and unloved Diane, in the final fleeting moment before she commits suicide by shooting herself. In this interpretation, time stands still as the disempowered, unsuccessful actress is able to invent (or, perhaps, “direct”) a fantasy version of her life during the liminal moment between life and death. As we view the “final act” of the film – which seems to be the more or less “true story” of how Diane has endured failure and rejection – we realize that Diane has “cast” all of the characters from her actual life and deployed them in an idealized fantasy narrative of how life could/should have been for her.

In the story of the film, in the world of Hollywood, and, arguably, in the Hollywood-inspired way that we tend to see ourselves as performing subjects more generally, it can be difficult to separate the various personas that we use as we act out versions of ourselves to the world. At one level, *Mulholland Drive* is all about performance: the milieu of the film is Hollywood with all its superficiality and venality; Diane is an aspiring actress and her sense of her own abjection is in large part due to her lack of success; and, we could say, more generally and thematically, that the film is about how we continually “fake it” in front of others, how we try to fool ourselves with a range of self-performances and, in the end, how there is nothing other than fakery.
Utilizing the metaphor of performance, we could say that *Mulholland Drive* supports the view that the notion of an “authentic performance” is ultimately oxymoronic, as there is no actual core of authentic self from which a performance can be sourced. The contradictory and unsustainable nature of the notion of authenticity is explored in a myriad of ways in the film, including: the use of the generic *noir* convention of amnesia (that is, we invent one persona or another on a virtual blank canvas of subjectivity); the apparently facile mutability of identities (we can “cast” ourselves and others as whatever characters, and in whatever narratives, seem to best suit our purposes), and — perhaps most directly and literally — we see in Betty’s “audition scene” that a stunningly raw and sexual “Method performance” does not need to be sourced from a deep well-spring of authentic experience but, on the contrary, can apparently be manufactured out of thin air.

*Inland Empire* could be said to be a development of many of the themes and formal experiments that Lynch has explored in earlier films. We once again witness mutating identities and alternate realities within the interrelated contexts of madness, violence, and cinema. This time, however, Lynch is no longer satisfied with the kinds of doubling that see one character “morph” into another — Fred becoming Pete, or Diane becoming Betty. Instead, *Inland Empire* explodes into a multiplicity of fragments, with any semblance of unified characterization or linear narrative well and truly shattered.

As in *Mulholland Drive*, Hollywood filmmaking, and the screen acting that is so central to its powerful mystique, are once again crucial components of *Inland Empire*’s multi-layered narrative structure. In a number of respects *Inland Empire*
can be thought of as a self-reflexive film that explicitly considers the connections between filmmaking, screen performances, and social identity in the context of the blurred lines between (cinematic) mediation, fantasy, and reality. *Inland Empire* is – even for a director such as Lynch – a radical departure from feature filmmaking conventions: in some respects the film represents a return to Lynch’s surrealistic and art-world/art-film beginnings while, in others, it explores the possibilities of a digital/non-linear future beyond the parameters of the conventional cinematic experience.25

As with nearly all of Lynch’s films, *Inland Empire* defies definitive description and categorization. However, we can say with some confidence that the film is, in large part, a spectacle of (and about) performance and multiple subjectivity. The film’s main actor, Laura Dern, appears in all but a few scenes of the film. Dern plays the part of a screen actress (Nikki), and as Nikki’s psyche seems to unravel during the production of a film that she has been cast in, we witness a cinematic/performative representation of this process with Dern/Nikki taking on multiple (fragmentary) personas – personas which, in fact, are not discrete but seem to bleed into one another in strangely fluid ways.

Rather than having come into existence along the usual path of conventional feature films — a project initiated by the authorial creation of a linear, narrative/plot-based script and then “transferred” from script to screen in a more or less literal fashion – *Inland Empire* emanated from some key improvisatory monologues created by Dern in front of Lynch’s “pro-sume” digital camera.26 The film has as its source the virtuosity of Dern’s performances, with the end result being a film that is all about
performance. From beginning to end, *Inland Empire* is, at one level at least, constructed through a rhizome of performances that emanate from the actor’s imagination with the result being that the film is the very opposite of a unified narrative dealing with the consistent “psychological arc” of a protagonist. Instead, the film deals with multiplicities – of narrative, of performance, of personae – which combine to form a schizophrenic and chaotically fragmented subjectivity.  

*Inland Empire* can also be considered to be a self-reflexive work in terms of the way it continually looks at itself *as a film*. The diegetic world of the (more or less) “main” narrative shows us an actress and other filmmakers making a film. However, we soon find that this particular narrative about filmmaking vividly collides with, and becomes enmeshed in, other films-within-the-film. We are never sure when we are in Nikki’s world (including her dream world), the world of the film she is making (which is preposterously titled *On High in Blue Tomorrows*), or in other possible films (such as *On High in Blue Tomorrow’s* unfinished Polish predecessor which, according to the framing narrative, was abandoned after its lead actors were murdered).  

Despite the (usual Lynchian) plethora of possible narrative and thematic interpretations, it seems apparent that many of the enigmatic scenes and events that take place in the film remind us of the layers of mediation that now comprise our heavily mediated world of “real virtuality” – layers which, when peeled away, do not reveal any kind of core meaning but, rather, refer to each other in an endless network of mediated references. In nearly every scene in *Inland Empire*, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the “real world” and some form of “film world” that can be watched by someone from some vantage point. *Inland Empire*,
like *Mulholland Drive*, is ultimately as much about performance as it is about anything else. In one respect, Nikki is the perfect (perfectly schizophrenic?) Method actor who confuses her own identity with the character of the part she is playing (Susan). But this neat equation soon fractures into multiples – there seem to be multiple roles in multiple films, and Nikki/Susan is ultimately constituted by a number of persona fragments which do not cohere together except to the degree that they are all performances in one way or another. Indeed, not only are there films-within-films-within-films in *Inland Empire*, but there are also performances-within-performances-within-performances. The film that Nikki has been cast to act in — *On High in Blue Tomorrows* — is only the first layer. In what we might think of as the “framing narrative”, the film being shot is a southern American melodrama about desire and infidelity. Beneath this version, however, there seem to be seamier versions of *On High in Blue Tomorrows* that exist in shabby apartments, in “sub-prime” starter homes in the lower socio-economic suburbs of Eastern California’s Inland Empire (from which the title of Lynch’s film is taken), and on the hooker-inhabited night-time streets of Hollywood. Dern plays a series of indeterminate versions of herself, Nikki, and Susan as she finds herself entering and exiting — falling down the rabbit holes of — these various realities.

David Lynch is perhaps the closest thing to a surrealist filmmaker operating in the (relative) mainstream of American cinema. In many ways, his films increasingly function as representations of the unconscious. As has often been noted, his films tend to follow the logic of dreams, and this is never more the case than in *Inland Empire*. Laura Dern’s characters continually enter, exit, and re-enter spaces that cascade in on top of each other. There is no clear temporal progression, and nearly every aspect of the film’s *mise-en-scene* leaves the viewer with the impression that
what is being seen is, in some way, an emanation of the psyche. The (psychic) world of *Inland Empire* — on one level the title clearly evokes the notion of the “empire” of the unconscious — is chaotic, illogical and contradictory. The question provoked by the film’s continual referencing of performance and the filmmaking process, however, is to what degree this chaotic state is not only a representation of our unconscious, but also a representation of the world of mediated imagery and performance that envelopes us. In this context, we should note that whereas some mainstream films attempt to unsettle us by resorting to occasional moments of non-realism (fantasy, distortions, etcetera), Lynch’s reliance on realism seems to be decreasing with every film that he makes. In *Inland Empire*, realism is an occasional and ephemeral state that only momentarily makes its presence felt in the film — as if brief and passing “moments of lucidity” are all that are now available to us in a world that is becoming increasingly schizophrenic/psychotic.

In this context, one rarely experiences any sense of temporal continuity when watching *Inland Empire*. It quickly becomes evident in the film that distinctions between past, present, and future — “yesterday”, “today”, and “tomorrow” — have collapsed, and while we occasionally know where we are, it is mostly impossible to know “when” we are. The same could be said of the way that Lynch eschews any notion of a linear and unified narrative in the film. There is no discernable overall story arc, and, arguably, no character arc (though some critics have suggested that there is a psychic progression – a working through trauma and coming out the “other side” — for the character of Nikki). There are only fragments upon fragments of narrative that refuse to take either the audience or the character on any clear path or with any clear purpose. In short, we can say that none of the familiar anchors – time,
space, narrative progression, character arc – exist to help us through the maze of the film(s) that comprise the experience of viewing *Inland Empire*.

As already suggested, Lynch’s films increasingly become like a Mobius strip, where reality and fantasy (and/or reality and its representations) twist and turn so that there is no longer a simple distinction to be made between the one and the other. While *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* both can be said to problematize these distinctions, *Inland Empire* makes it almost impossible to distinguish between any such apparently contradictory states. In *Inland Empire* there are many worlds and many realities.\(^{38}\) In some respects, we could also say that the film is a meditation — albeit a rather disturbing one — on the play of otherness that is inherent in all of the mediations and performances that comprise our experience of the contemporary world. Dern’s characters often seem to be looking at themselves, or, perhaps we should say, one version of her “self” is nearly always looking at another. She is often “here” but also, simultaneously, “over there”.\(^{39}\) Dern’s characters — and perhaps specifically the “main” character of Nikki — seem to be forever doubled as both performer and spectator of their own performances. This is a radically different dynamic to that characteristically employed in other Lynch films — *Blue Velvet*, *Mulholland Drive*, for example — where characters generally seem to be putting on a performance for others. We could also say that this dynamic is “psychotic” insofar as it evokes both the “splitting off” of schizoid and dissociative mental formations, along with the uncanny/paranoid sense of the returning (anamorphic) gaze theorized by Lacan as the gaze of the other.\(^{40}\)
Psychopathology, Multiplicity and Disorders of the Postmodern Performing Subject

The concept of the contemporary “schizo-subject”, as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, raises many interesting issues that are particularly pertinent to this thesis vis-à-vis the relationship between performance and psychopathology. As we discussed in Chapter Two, one of the defining characteristics of the schizophrenic experience is a projection of an identity to the world that is at a considerable distance from any sense of, or belief in, a “true self”. Indeed, in severe cases of schizophrenic breakdown, as well as, theoretically at least, in the most radical processes of breakthrough undertaken by the Deleuzoguattarian “schizo-subject”, the notion of an interior self is minimized, if not completely dispensed with. In a sense, Deleuze and Guattari tell us to forget about the unity of a singular identity and to engage a multiplicity (a machinic assemblage) of identity fragments as a way of making ever more productively desiring connections in a social reality that is, itself, far from unified or coherent.

Although Deleuze and Guattari never referred specifically to the condition of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), it could well be thought of as a particularly apt psychopathological metaphor for our (hyper-mediated/hyper-performative) contemporary times. And in some respects, MPD might actually be more in keeping with the notion of productive multiplicity than the model of schizophrenia that Deleuze, Guattari and other theorists have embraced. Rather than a consciousness that is split between an inner self and an outer self (as in Laing’s characterization of schizophrenia), MPD involves the creation of numerous (sometimes hundreds) of different “alters” who have their own distinct personalities, with their own particular personal narratives. The conventional psychological theory
of MPD is that it is a form of splitting off which functions as a defense mechanism against the memories of childhood trauma (usually involving sexual abuse).

According to this conventional model, the psyche is thought to defend a true identity through the creation of various alters, and the therapist’s task becomes one of putting the patient back together again, so to speak, by integrating these alters with the “real” identity of the person.⁴³

This conventional (dualistic) view of true and false identity, however, is far from universally accepted. Another view of MPD is that it is a condition which primarily came into being as a result of the expectations of therapists, and which was further fuelled by the publicity and credibility that it achieved in the media.⁴⁴ MPD became a cause célèbre that appeared to reach epidemic proportions in the 1980s and early 1990s, and a growing number of critics claimed that rather than diagnosing a pre-existing pathology, psychiatrists were in fact encouraging their patients to create symptoms.⁴⁵ Furthermore, it seems highly likely that the exponential proliferation of the condition, especially in Northern America, was causally linked to its widespread media representation.⁴⁶

In terms of our focus on the increasingly intertwined nature of mediated and social experience, and the growing importance of the performative display of one’s own subjectivity in contemporary society, the notion of MPD as a fin-de-siècle psychopathology resonates on a number levels. The symptoms of MPD (and the recovered memories that are often thought to go with the treatment of the condition) are spectacularly performative. That is to say, the intensity of the patient’s illness and past trauma is demonstrated by — and “judged” according to — performative and dramaturgical criteria. These criteria include: the number of alters that a patient
has; the vivid contrasts between those alters (the differences in age, gender and sometimes even species); the strength of the conflicts (or alliances) between those alters, and the dramatic nature of the remembered abuses — all of which tend to act as a barometer of the degree to which the patient should be noticed and taken seriously. In addition, the phenomenon of MPD is closely aligned to its media representation in two respects: first, as already noted, there has been a correlation between the amount of media attention that the condition received and the incidence of cases presenting for treatment, and, second, many MPD sufferers (along with their therapists) became media performers, with the perhaps inevitable result that media interest was only maintained to the extent that the spectacularity of symptoms kept ratcheting up, with ever more fantastic and surprising manifestations of the disease coming to light.

While instances of multiple personality were not unknown in both nineteenth and early twentieth century psychiatry,\textsuperscript{47} the proliferation of MPD can largely be said to be a media-created phenomenon. Although MPD was exploited by Hollywood as early as 1954 in \textit{The Three Faces of Eve},\textsuperscript{48} the condition really only came to full public awareness in the 1970s with the publication of the best-selling book, \textit{Sybil},\textsuperscript{49} followed soon after by the film of the same name.\textsuperscript{50} According to the documentary, \textit{Mistaken Identity}, by the 1980s ‘tens of thousands of Americans were diagnosed with an illness that was previously almost unheard of — an occurrence that was largely triggered by the release of the film version of \textit{Sybil}'.\textsuperscript{51}

There is one more sense in which the phenomenon of MPD can be thought of as a psychopathology of our times. MPD can be said to be a manifestation of our changing sensibilities regarding the notion of identity, personal history, and the
“self”, in ways that embrace multiplicity at the expense of more conventional notions of unity, coherence, and singularity — a changing sensibility which in turn affects our ideas about performance. One of the most common presenting symptoms of MPD — before the sufferers have been made consciously aware of the existence of alter personalities — is the uncanny sensation of discontinuous or lost time. That is to say, the individual is amnesiac about certain periods of time and cannot make sense of any evidence which suggests that s/he has been active during those periods — the fuel tank in the car is unaccountably empty, or there are new clothes in the wardrobe which the person does not recall buying, or, even more radically, the person has resigned from their employment and in some cases has even started a new job. Clearly, these temporal and spatial discontinuities are at odds with our usual perceptions and understandings of real time and space, and our expectations of having a continuous and explicable narrative of personal history. Consequently, when such gaps in perception and memory arise they are treated as evidence of pathology, and therefore of the need to “re-integrate” the self of the patient into a seamless and continuous unity. In effect, we could say that the treatment of these experiences in such a manner is indicative of the conventional social imperative to dispense with the chaos of multiplicity and return to the ordered logic of singularity and linearity.

While this may seem to be a perfectly reasonable and common sense therapeutic aim, it is nevertheless apparent from the manner in which a number of MPD sufferers have opposed such a treatment objective that the sensibility of individuals in our contemporary culture is much more geared towards notions of difference, plurality, and multiplicity than was once the case. Some people who have been diagnosed with MPD believe that it would be wrong to “kill off” their alters,
preferring instead to accept and embrace the fact that they are made up of an assemblage of distinctly different, though partial, personas. In such instances we could say that these individuals no longer accept that the ideal of a single, unified, and coherent self is the only possible model for identity. While it once would have been unthinkable to have viewed such a state as anything other than a mental illness in need of being “fixed”, identity now appears to be understood as a much more complex phenomenon with very fuzzy borders.

It seems evident that, as a result of the many decades of questioning of the once unassailable concept of the Cartesian ego, there now exists quite broad acceptance for the notion that we are not only shaped by external social and environmental factors, but also that we can be thought of as becoming “different people” as we play out our various social roles. In a sense, MPD can be seen as an extension — in some ways the psychopathological limit — of a contemporary perspective that does not restrict itself to notions of a fixed and singular identity but, rather, countenances and even welcomes notions of multiplicity, contingency, and ephemerality.

**Multiplicity and Contemporary Media Performances**

Deleuze and Guattari, along with other theorists of postmodern subjectivity, have important things to say to us about what it means to live in the contemporary world – a world in which simple realities and singular identities no longer seem to apply. In some respects, it may be quite true to say that we are now all postmodern chameleons who must change and adapt our personas to fit with our ever-changing world. This more flexible and protean approach to identity is reflected in many of the mediated performances with which we now engage. Chris Lilley’s bravura
performances of multiplicity in his TV comedies We Can Be Heroes and Summer Heights High are recent Australian examples of our engagement with such representations. In these productions, Lilley performs a number of roles across gender and racial lines in a spectacularly comedic manner. Arguably, though, the popularity of Lilley’s work stems not just from his ability at masquerade and mimicry, but also because his performative project engages with a contemporary fascination with the variability and impermanence of identity.

In another example of the apparently alluring nature of the idea of multiplicity, the phenomenon of MPD — or DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) as it is now often called — is the topic of a recent television comedy-drama series, United States of Tara, featuring Toni Collette. Collette performs the character of Tara Gregson (a woman suffering from DID), as well as portraying Tara’s three alters: a promiscuous teenage girl called “T”, a redneck male named Buck, and a housewife, Alice, who seems to have been lifted out of a 1950s sitcom. Although the series clearly portrays the condition of DID as pathology — Tara’s alters return once she discontinues her medication — it also seems to imply that the very notion of identity is constituted by multiplicity. For example, Tara’s different personalities emerge to deal with different situations and problems in a way which suggests that, together, the totality of her alters form a kind of unified and productive identity. In addition to its thematic concerns, the series is also — and perhaps even primarily — a showcase for Collette’s prowess as a performer. Collette’s performance in the series oscillates between the “psychologically complex” (and therefore “realist”) portrayal of Tara, and the portrayals of T, Buck, and Alice which are caricatured in a way that is presumably designed to characterize them as only “partial” personas.
The performances of Lilley and Collette are, very clearly, spectacular examples of the performance of multiplicity. In a more general sense, however, it can be argued that one of the primary reasons for our engagement with all media performers and performances is that we are responding to performance *per se* as a representation of the mutability of identity. That is to say, we are tantalized by the fact that performance is essentially all about moving from one persona to the next, we are beguiled by the apparent ease with which some performers appear to achieve this feat, and we are often fascinated by the apparently chimeric nature of celebrities/actors who seem to be comprised of a combination of the parts they play, their own psychological self, and their reflexively created media personas.

One film that is highly resonant in terms of all of these areas, and is itself exemplary of certain contemporary feature films which push the boundaries of conventional form, is Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There*.\(^5\) *I’m Not There* is a film that is centrally concerned with the concept of identity and focuses on how Bob Dylan, as an artist and celebrity, has refused to be tied down to a static persona. The film’s meditation on the impermanent and constructed nature of identity — especially in the context of mediation and celebrity — is dense and richly evocative. It explores not the career of Dylan *per se*, but the manner in which Dylan has created and re-created himself in various guises, deliberately confounding (media/popular) expectations in the process. In this way, Dylan exemplifies the idea of a postmodern (“nomadic”) subject who keeps moving, who never remains fixed in one place, and Haynes utilizes specifically performance-based and cinematic means to explore this theme.\(^6\) In particular, Haynes uses a radical approach to casting, along with a visually allusive style and unconventional narrative form, to create a film which is much more than a conventional “biopic”.\(^7\)
Haynes’ uses six separate actors to portray different facets of the Dylan persona, and, significantly, he casts across gender and racial lines by including a young African-American male actor (Carl Franklin) and a female actor (Cate Blanchett) as two of his “Dylans”. Just as Dylan refuses to be tied down to one identity, Haynes refuses to tie “his Dylan” down to a particular race or gender. Haynes’ strategy here resonates strongly with poststructuralist notions of the performativity of identity. At the same time, it also recognizes, utilizes, and appeals to the sophistication of contemporary audiences in terms of their appreciation of performance, along with their awareness of cinematic convention and popular culture. The film could be said to enter into a dialogue with its audience about the nature of performance, celebrity, and identity.

Cate Blanchett’s performance in *I’m Not There* is truly compelling. It is, in various ways, a skilled piece of mimicry, a utilization of Brechtian-style “quotation”, and a play on the near-androgynous nature of Dylan’s persona in the mid to late 1960s. Of course, we never forget that we are watching a female playing a male, nor do we forget that we are watching a star (Cate Blanchett) who is revered not just for her celebrity but also for her virtuoso skills as a performer with the ability to transform herself. Not only does the casting of Blanchett reinforce the theme of the performativity of identity (including gender), but it strongly engages us in the skill of (her) performance. That is to say, performance — and especially Blanchett’s performative display — is foregrounded in the film. Or, to put the obverse of this, it certainly cannot be said that Blanchett “disappears into the role” in the way that is expected in a conventionally realist performance. Rather, we are continually aware of the self-reflexive nature of the film via, amongst other things, the spectacle and signifying value of Blanchett’s performance.
In terms of the film’s formal organization, we can also say that its deliberately and ostensively enigmatic, surreal approach to meaning and narrative is closely keyed into the lyric-images of Dylan’s songs, and also to non-linear and non-unified notions of contemporary identity. A *New York Times* article about the film includes a paragraph from a one-page pitch for the film that Haynes wrote in the hope of getting Dylan’s approval for the proposed project. This paragraph succinctly summarizes how Haynes planned to make particular use of cinematic form to explore the concept of Dylan’s identity (and of identity more generally). Haynes wrote:

> If a film were to exist in which the breadth and flux of a creative life could be experienced, a film that could open up as opposed to consolidating what we think we already know walking in, it could never be within the tidy arc of a master narrative. The structure of such a film would have to be a fractured one, with numerous openings and a multitude of voices, with its prime strategy being one of refraction, not condensation.⁶⁴

While *I’m Not There* manifestly refers to identity in the context of celebrity and the particular sensibility of a (media-savvy) creative artist, it can also be said to refer in a more general way to changing perceptions about identity, the centrality of performance, and the role of media in the fashioning of personas. *I’m Not There* also forms a useful bridge to help us consider the way that postmodern notions of identity and performance have developed from the 1960s (in the form of Bob Dylan as a “performative nomad”), to the beginning of the new century (in the form of the radical and highly self-reflexive/allusive filmmaking practice of Todd Haynes).

This thesis argues that, as highly media-engaged social subjects, the reason we increasingly take on the form of performers ourselves is that the phenomenology of
performance provides a way to make sense of (and comply with) the contemporary social imperative to have a dynamic and changeable approach to our identities. The reasons that underlie our apparent desire for new ways of thinking about identity are complex, as are the implications of such desires. Undoubtedly, though, one crucial and ubiquitous factor that feeds into how we now see ourselves as subjects, how we perform our social roles, and how we view social reality, is the increasingly pervasive presence of media representation. In the next chapter, we will look more closely at how, through our acutely reflexive intimacy with media performances, images, and narratives, we can be said to have become thoroughly mediated subjects.

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2 Though one should add here that many of the once clear distinctions – for example, between cinema on the one hand, and television programming on the other – seem to be rapidly crumbling in our currently “converging” media landscape. For a range of interesting discussions about this topic, see Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann, eds., *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1998).

3 For a detailed exploration of this issue, see Constantine Verevis, *Film Remakes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), especially 44-8.


10 This adult hypocrisy is most forcefully represented in the characters of Jim Cunningham and his acolytes who transform Donnie’s school into a receptacle of absurd, 1980’s-style, New Age self-help psycho-babble. (That is until Cunningham is finally exposed as a peddler of child pornography).

11 According to Frederic Jameson, we now live in a society which is ‘bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles. In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as “referent” finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.’ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991; reprint, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 18.
As Klock explains, with reference to the crashing jet engine (which exists as the film narrative’s central catalyst for change):

*Donnie Darko* give us a Mobius strip: Take a strip of paper, give it a half twist, and connect the ends together in a loop and you will have a figure which at a given point appears to have two sides; follow a side long enough and you will cross over without being able to tell at what point you crossed, because it is a one-sided figure. *Donnie Darko* “flips” to the reality of dying, the jet engine making a complete circle in time, going all the way round the strip until it ends where it began, and ends in the postponed death.

For a succinct explanation of Lacan’s use of the model of the Mobius strip, see Evans, 116-117.

The model of the Mobius strip was also often employed by Jean Baudrillard. We will discuss Baudrillard’s ideas in some more detail in the next chapter. In essence, though, Baudrillard’s theorization focused upon the “implosion of meaning” which has occurred due to the collapse of the real into the virtual (or hyperreal as he termed it) caused primarily by the excessive influence of media in our lives. For Baudrillard, the Mobius strip was the perfect model for explaining the ‘hyperrealization of the real’ or, as he also liked to describe the excessive presence of virtualization, the ‘murder of the real.’ See Jean Baudrillard, “The Murder of the Real” in *The Vital Illusion*, ed. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 59-84, especially p.64.


Most of the rest of the film follows Pete’s story until, at the end, there is an apparent merging of characters or, perhaps, a return to Fred’s identity.

By its nature, the Lacanian register of the Real is the most difficult to pin down of Lacan’s three registers of human reality: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. In some respects, it can be thought of as the (unrepresentable) centre of unconscious desire. Caroline New points out that was particularly the case as Lacan moved beyond a straightforward structuralist position (i.e. “the unconscious is structured like a language”): ‘By the 1960s the real had become identified with the unconscious and the world a pale fantasy of thought.’ Caroline New, *Agency, Health and Social Survival* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996), 100. Or, as Fabio Vighi notes: ‘… in the final years of his teaching Lacan abandons his early idea of the linguistic basis of the unconscious to propose the latter’s substantial coincidence with the Real, which in turn is firmly associated with the notion of jouissance, the obscure realm of enjoyment.’ Fabio Vighi, *Traumatic Encounters in Italian Film: Locating the Cinematic Unconscious* (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2006), 17.

The films of David Lynch seem particularly attractive to those wishing to make psychoanalytic (and especially) Lacanian interpretations. Some of the most insightful and penetrating of such analyses have been made by Todd McGowan. See especially, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.) According to McGowan, Lynch’s films are generally characterized by the separation of fantasy and desire so that, in the example of *Lost Highway*, the impossibility of Fred’s desire gives over (for a time) to the fantasmic world embodied by Pete. On one level, of course, we can think of this simply in terms of how a subject (i.e. the protagonist) fantasizes, displaces characters, times, events, etc. On another level, however, McGowan argues that Lynch’s films implicate the viewer insofar as the film itself becomes part of the fantasmic realm. McGowan writes of Lynch that:

The great achievement of his films lies in their ability to break down the distance between spectator and screen. Rather than permitting the imaginary proximity that dominates in the mainstream cinema, Lynch’s film implicate the spectator in their very structure. The structure of a
Lynch film alters the cinematic viewing situation itself and deprives the spectator of the underlying sense of remaining at a safe distance from what takes place on the screen. Lynch includes cinematic moments that force the spectator to become aware of how the film takes into account the spectator’s desire. His films confront one with sequences that reveal one’s own investment in what one sees. (The Impossible David Lynch, 4.)

In this sense, Lynch offers up (for parts of his films at least) total worlds of fantasy which can envelop the spectator. More to the point, though, the structure of Lynch’s films suggest the fantasy realm as an alternative reality, not simply as a supplement to reality.

17 There a numerous examples of this in the film: secretly surveilling videotapes which have been recorded from seemingly impossible angles and with seemingly impossible access to the sleeping couple (Fred and Renee); the Mystery Man (who is present at nearly every moment of traumatic change in the film) proving that it is possible to be simultaneously “here” and “there” – i.e. in the scene in which the Mystery Man seems to be simultaneously in front of Fred at a party and also at another location (Fred’s house) answering Fred’s phone call, and, in a similar vein, Fred showing us that one can simultaneously be the sender and receiver of a message when he both hears (at the beginning of the film) and announces (at the end of the film) that “Dick Laurent is Dead”.


20 Lost Highway’s relationship to the cinema and to screen acting is relatively indirect - the film is set in Los Angeles, with the seedy elements of Hollywood’s “tinseltown” such as the porn industry, crime, violence, and drugs pervading its diegesis; and, as with many of Lynch’s films, Lost Highway also plays on performative elements of Hollywood genres such as the noir thriller.

21 It is interesting to note that a similar interpretation is sometimes made for Donnie Darko – i.e. that the narrative we see is one constructed by him at the moment of his death when the jet engine crashes into his bedroom.

22 This point seems to be underscored by the master of ceremonies of Club Silencio when he insists that everything that surrounds us is an illusion.

23 Andrew Dickos refers to a number of postwar American films which use the convention of amnesia (often in conjunction with Freudian psychology). The films he cites are: Phantom Lady, My Name is Julia Ross, Somewhere in the Night, and Dark Past. Andrew Dickos, Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 7.

24 The audition scene is one element of the film’s performative spectacle that sees Naomi Watts provide a tour de force acting demonstration of playing two different characters. In fact, Watts plays a number of different versions of Betty throughout the film – including, most blatantly, her steamy audition – which can be interpreted as representing various iterations of Diane’s fantasy. That is to say, there often seem to be times when the character is neither Betty, nor Diane, but some intermediary identity that resides between fantasy and desire.

25 In some respects, we could think of Inland Empire as a type of non-linear narrative and one could imagine the various narrative strands, situations and characters having their own expanded existence in other forms of internet-based online formats. In fact, one would not be surprised to see a filmmaker such as Lynch gravitate in the future towards such modes of production. His site DavidLynch.com already points towards this with online series such as Dumbland (2002) and Rabbits (2002).
originating on the site. (Indeed *Rabbits* was the prototype for the “rabbit sitcom” scenes that appear in *Inland Empire*.)

It is also worth noting that another fiercely independent filmmaker, Peter Greenaway, has tended to eschew cinema in favour of the non-linearity and interactivity that is available in cyberspace. See http://www.tulselupernetwork.com for examples of his recent work.

26 Martha Nochimson reports that during a press conference at the 2006 New York Film Festival, and in a personal interview with her, Lynch revealed that *Inland Empire* had begun as a 14 page monologue for a woman which he shot with Laura Dern on a digital camera some years prior to the actual production of the film. This process was repeated with a series of fragments until, according to Lynch, a larger sense of what the film might be about began to reveal itself to him. See Martha P Nochimson, “*Inland Empire*”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol 60, Issue 4 (Summer, 2007): 10-14. This, of course, is an improvisatory and non-linear approach to developing a film that is the very antithesis of the script-based industry model.

27 When we watch *Inland Empire* we naturally think of Nikki – the first of Dern’s characters to whom we are introduced in the film – as the main protagonist-subject. Nikki certainly seems to be an integral part of a “framing narrative”. However, it soon becomes apparent that this frame of reference provides little by way of a reliable anchor of meaning for the rest of the film. In the end, there may be no framing/anchoring subject/character/narrative which, indeed, is what makes *Inland Empire* an exemplary “schizoid”/postmodern film.

28 *Inland Empire* is not only a highly self-reflexive film but is also typical of Lynch’s intertextual approach to filmmaking. Many of Lynch’s films reference other films and genres. And increasingly, his films seem to have strong intertextual ties to his other works. *Inland Empire* clearly bears a close relationship to *Mulholland Drive* in a number of respects: it is about Hollywood, acting and (especially female) actors, and it explores the connections between performance and (fragmentary) identity. In addition, Lynch’s use of an ensemble of actors adds to this sense of intertextuality in his films. (With respect to the two films presently under discussion, it could even be said that casting Justin Theroux as a director [in *Mulholland Drive*] and as an actor [in *Inland Empire*] seems to provide a kind of warped continuity between the two films.)

29 Nevertheless, we sometimes seem to find ourselves in the world of this unfinished Polish film which, in one sense, could be said to “haunt” the making of the new Hollywood version. And there are many other possible, equally head-spinning, interpretations. It could be, for example, that what we are seeing is the unfinished Polish film “play itself out” in a number of “tangent universes” (to once again employ Richard Kelly’s phrase). In the end, though, it is doubtful that any such interpretation is likely to yield a satisfying “explanation” to the myriad enigmas of the film.

30 The term “real virtuality” has been employed by Manuel Castells to describe the effects of our heavily mediated world whereby ‘reality itself (that is people’s material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience’. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 404. (This is a theme to which we will return in the next chapter.)

31 There are a number of examples that once could cite of the “layers of mediation” that seem to exist in the film. It would be difficult, for instance, to provide a cogent and credible rationalization for the scenes in the film of an absurdist sit-com (complete with canned laughter) which is performed by giant rabbits, other than to note its surrealist dimensions and, perhaps more to the point, to acknowledge its effect of suggesting yet one more level of mediated representation. (Everything we see is part of an “uber sit-com”? No matter how apparently absurd it may seem, any representation of reality is as im/possible as any other?) And, as another example, it also seems that a young woman — the star of the unfinished Polish film? — is deeply engaged in watching all that we see on a television set, providing yet another layer of mediation to the cinematic storytelling.

Also contributing to the sense of the film’s self-reflexivity, *Inland Empire* begins and (almost) ends in a somewhat similar manner to Ingmar Bergman’s famously modernist/self-reflexive meditation on performance and cinema, *Persona* (1966). *Inland Empire* begins with a brief acknowledgement of the
mediated nature of the world that is about to be represented with what seems to be a single beam of light emanating from a projector, followed by a shot of an old phonograph needle illuminated by the flickering light from the projector (in a manner which to some degree evokes the much more elaborately reflexive montage at the beginning of Persona); and at the end of (one version of) “On High in Blue Tomorrows” — as Nikki’s character dies on Hollywood Boulevard — the scene is “contextualized” by a shot of the camera on a crane which has been filming the performance (in a way that is reminiscent of the end of Persona as Elizabet/Liv Ulmann leaves the island “retreat” on which her psychic encounter with Alma has been played out). And as some reviewers have also pointed out, the end credit musical sequence of Inland Empire is also reminiscent of the end of Fellini’s highly self-reflexive film, 8½ (1963).

Perhaps one of the most complexly and intriguingly self-reflexive of these moments occurs towards the end of the film. After Nikki has performed her climactic death scene on Hollywood Boulevard, she ends up in a cinema that seems at first to be showing rushes of her earlier performances/hallucinations and then seems to become a complete simulacra of (what we assume to be) “present reality”.

It could be said that Laura Dern’s tour de force performance of a multiplicity of characters in Inland Empire even outshines that of Naomi Watts in Mulholland Drive. There are two performance showpieces which are particularly worthy of note: In the first rehearsal read-through of “On High in Blue Tomorrows” — in which the actors are told by the director (Jeremy Irons) that a performance is not required — we see Nikki become engaged with the emotion of the character and situation, an engagement that is signified by the tears which spontaneously well up and fall from her eyes. Such “autonomic” responses are generally seen as the “classic” signifiers of a superior realist performance — i.e. signifiers of authentically being able to feel. (Lee Strasberg, for example, wrote with great enthusiasm about the effect of seeing the face of the famed actress, Elanora Duse, involuntarily flush during an emotional scene). The other performance “set-piece” that we might note here is Dern’s monologue as the abused “trailer trash” woman. The monologue — usually a theatrical tradition — has often been seen as signifier of truly impressive acting and can become a particularly memorable spectacle when used in cinema. (To cite just a few examples of famous cinematic monologues: Marlon Brando’s famous “I could’a been a contender” and “I’ve seen the horror” speeches in On the Waterfront and Apocalypse Now respectively, Robert De Niro’s “you talking to me?” speech in Taxi Driver, Peter Finch’s “mad as hell” speech in Network, Harry Dean Stanton’s “I knew these people” monologue in Paris Texas, or Bibi Anderson’s lengthy and erotic monologue in Persona).

The metaphor of the rabbit holes has been appropriately identified by many reviewers and critics as integral to the film. Indeed, Dern’s character(s) can be said to be taken (and to take us) through a maze of subterranean paths. But more than this, spaces seem to fold in on each other and suddenly transform — the most striking (and perhaps strikingly metaphoric) being the half completed movie set for “On High in Blue Tomorrows” whose flats and doorways lead on to other spaces which, while physically impossible in a material sense, become comprehensible if we think of them as “psychic spaces”.

The obvious exception to this is The Straight Story (1999) which could indeed be considered to be a “straight story” and which was released in between Lost Highway and Mulholland Drive. The Straight Story was written by John Roach and Mark Sweeney, not by Lynch himself.

This theme is articulated early on in the film by Nikki’s strange “new neighbour” who says that she ‘can’t seem to remember if it is today, two days from now, or yesterday’ and who seems to uncannily “project” Nikki into the future when she hypothesizes “if today was tomorrow”, and we cut via a shot of Nikki looking across the room, to another shot of Nikki and her two friends sitting on a sofa about to receive a phone call to tell her that she has been cast in a movie.

According to Martha Nochimson, for example, we are witnessing ‘an exploration of identity that takes place as a part of Nikki’s creative struggles to find her character.’ Nochimson, “Inland Empire”, Film Quarterly Vol 60, Issue 4 (Summer, 2007), 10-14.

Nikki’s identity crisis – which is, in effect, an inability to distinguish between film reality (of which there are several) and actuality – is manifest constantly in the film, but perhaps most vividly when she
is making love to her male co-lead (played by Justin Theroux) and pulls back in shock declaring, “It’s me Nikki”. It is not clear whether the passionate embrace is taking place as part of the shooting of the film or whether it is actually taking place between the two actors outside of the film. In any event, the declaration carries with it the sense of self-recognition – i.e. she (thinks that she) has just remembered who she is.

39 One vivid example of this occurs, as mentioned above, when Nikki’s neighbour draws Nikki’s attention to her “future self” sitting on the sofa across the room. Another striking example is when we realize that the presence Nikki has sensed off in the shadows of the soundstage at the rehearsal is another version of herself who has been watching her.

40 I have discussed this idea of the reciprocality of the gaze in relation to performance, and screen performance in particular, in Chapter Two. Much has been written about this aspect of Lacan’s theory of the gaze in many contexts, including cinema, photography and other forms of visual representation. Lacan’s often-quoted statement – “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides”* – vividly evokes the sense of paranoia that inheres to the notion of the returned gaze. However, of course, when some form of technological/optical assistance (such as a camera and a screen) comes into play, the “impossibility” of seeing oneself from all sides becomes possible and, as we have discussed in other contexts, the duality of self and other seems to collapse into a single (performing) entity. * Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1998), 72.

41 The clinical term Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) has now been replaced with the term Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).

42 For a summary discussion of how a range of “avant-garde” intellectuals and artists have constructed the schizophrenic madman as a heroic figure, and a symbol of the liberation of desire, see Louis Sass, Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature and Thought (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 21-22.

43 See Patricia A. Resick, Stress and Trauma (USA and Canada: Taylor and Francis, 2001 reprint; 2004), 22-4.

44 For a brief summary of research into the impact of media and communication on MPD, see Yacov Rofe, The Rationality of Psychological Disorders: Psychobizarreness Theory (Boston : Kluwer, 2000), 153.

45 For a detailed discussion of the debate over whether or not MPD should be considered “real”, see Ian Hacking, Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 8-20.

For highly skeptical accounts of MPD, see:

46 MPD has not been as widely covered in the media over the past decade or so and during this same period the rate at which patients present with the condition has also declined.


For Robert Reiber’s account of how he claims to have exposed the fraudulent nature of the Sybil case, see The Bifurcation of the Self: The History and Theory of Dissociation and its Disorders (New York: Springer, 2006.), 105-31

One interviewee (Linda Massey) in the documentary, Mistaken Identity, has this to say in opposition to the conventional therapeutic aim of integrating her alters back into her personality: ‘… a lot of my alters are just so opposed to it because they feel so individual, they feel that they are individual people and that they were never part of a whole, that they can’t become part of a whole and that if they integrate somehow it means they’re dead.’ From Mistaken Identity transcript.

Mistaken Identity also provides the example of an MPD therapist (Sarah Francis) who is opposed to the notion of integration and who, herself, has been diagnosed with MPD. Her form of therapy is based on coming to terms with all the different partial personas one has rather than trying to do away with any of them. From Mistaken Identity transcript.


Towards the end of the first series another alter was also introduced. This alter was given the name of Gimme, and was characterized as an under-developed emanation of the id.

Interestingly, some episodes in the series begin with Tara addressing a home video camera in an attempt to keep track of her discontinuous and fragmented existence.


The term “nomad” was employed by Deleuze and Guattari to evoke the idea of a type of subject who can escape the territorializing codes of identity by remaining flexible and protean rather than by being tied down as a subject. As Brian Massumi writes in his translator’s foreword to A Thousand Plateaus: “Nomad thought” does not immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference.’ Brian Massumi, “Translator’s Foreword: Pleasures of Philisophy”, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xii.

The “bio-pic” is, of course, a conventional and well-worn genre. However, it is a form that has been used in interesting ways in recent years by filmmakers such as Haynes (e.g. Velvet Goldmine, 1998) and Michael Winterbottom (e.g. 24 Hour Party People, 2002) to explore notions of celebrity and popular culture via innovative cinematic means. In this context, I’m Not There is a highly intertextual film that not only refers to the career of Dylan, but also reflexively alludes to a number of cinematic styles, filmmakers and films. This is perhaps most interestingly executed in the “Cate Blanchett segments” which relate to the mid-1960s period in which Dylan radically and controversially transformed both his image and his sound by “going electric”. The film explicitly refers in both visual style and content to D.A. Pennebaker’s documentary, Don’t Look Back (1967),
with some key scenes from Haynes’ film seeming almost as if they are continuations of the documentary.

62 In the film Blanchett is often literally quoting words that were said – very often playfully – by Dylan in his interviews and press conferences.

63 For example, and perhaps most notably, in her academy award winning role of Katherine Hepburn in The Aviator, (2004).


The film also conflates time and space in ways that resonate with Godard’s anti-realist strategies in films such as Weekend. For example, the scenes of an ageing Billy the Kid (i.e. a quasi-Dylan incarnation) are peppered both with anachronistic intrusions from the present (eg. recent model cars) and also with surrealist imagery and geographical incongruities such as giraffes and ostriches.
Chapter Four — The Mediated Subject

There can be little doubt that the screen images and performances which surround us significantly condition our understanding of the world. Many of our experiences are mediated rather than actual, and it can sometimes seem that nearly all of our behaviours and responses to situations are the mirrored reflections of images, narratives, or performances that we have seen at one time or another in the cinema or on television. According to media theorists such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard the boundaries between reality and mediation have become blurred, if not indistinguishable. We will begin this chapter by briefly reviewing their theoretical insights, which form a springboard for looking at how our fascination with media representation and media performance has insinuated itself into the way that we see ourselves as subjects.

Seduction by Spectacle – Guy Debord

In 1967, Guy Debord wrote a highly-influential neo-Marxist analysis of the influence of media titled *The Society of the Spectacle*, ¹ which argued not only that the content of mass media functioned to inculcate and pacify its audiences, but that the seductiveness of mediated spectacle tended to become a substitute for everyday life. The overarching thesis presented by Debord was that society and its citizens were diminished by the fact that mediated and manufactured experience in the form of ‘an immense accumulation of spectacles’, had supplanted itself as a substitute for directly lived experience.² For Debord, society was not merely inundated with a proliferation of images, but, rather, it had entered into an entirely new dimension of social relations which was conditioned and controlled by these images, and which
functioned as the reified form of an always present, always visible, celebration and justification of late capitalism. In the society of the spectacle, the commodity-as-image reigned supreme with an excessive and abundant autonomy. Debord viewed the spectacle as a ‘permanent opium war’ which has as its primary objective the blurring beyond recognition of the distinctions between the real and the commodified.³

Debord’s critique was unambiguous in terms of the consequences that he saw for the individual subject, asserting that a system which has invented a visual form (that is, the spectacle) in order to promote the perception that existence is nothing other than depthless appearance constituted a negation of life. The negating effects of the society of the spectacle, according to Debord, can be understood in terms of the individual’s loss of agency and loss of a sense of individual identity. His alienated “spectator” is characterized as passively contemplating the images of desire that are presented via the media, mistakenly accepting them as genuine and authentic personal desires, while at the same time performing actions and gestures – performing a falsely constructed version of the self – that have been absorbed from the exteriority of ubiquitous spectacular imagery. Or, as Debord described this thoroughly mediated and alienated subject:

… the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.⁴
Debord operated from a Marxian base which sought to (re)discover a true consciousness that had been swamped by a constant barrage of media imagery and spectacle. As a leading figure in the Situationist movement, Debord promoted the idea of the alternative praxis of détournement, which was designed to undermine the status quo and counteract the passive alienation of contemporary consumerist existence. As Best and Kellner explain:

In contrast to the stupor of consumption, Debord and the Situationists champion active, creative, and imaginative practice, in which individuals create their own “situations”, their own passionate existential events, fully participating in the production of everyday life, their own individuality, and, ultimately, a new society. Thus, to the passivity of the spectator they counterpoise the activity of the radical subject which constructs its own everyday life against the demands of the spectacle…''

Optimistically, one could argue that the possibilities for alternative and destabilizing media practices are considerably more achievable now than they were when Debord wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*. On the other hand, though, despite this enhanced access to channels of media dissemination afforded principally by the internet, and the accessibility of digital media hardware and software, the degree to which most contemporary subjects tend to be possessed of a politically radical spirit (as opposed merely to a sense of irony and cynicism) is certainly questionable. Regardless of the possibilities or otherwise for raising the ‘consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness’ through such practices, however, it is clear that the influence of media spectacle as an instrument of promoting global capitalism has, if anything, intensified rather than diminished since Debord wrote his influential polemic.

Debord’s way of conceptualizing the individual in relationship to media returns us to the conventional notion of the phenomenological subject perceiving an objective, outside world. According to this view, it is the distortions and obfuscations provided
by institutions such as the media that come between the subject and a realistic and truthful perception of the world. While Debord believed that an authentic existence was still possible, he also believed that this potential was in danger of permanent obliteration by the ‘limitless artificiality’ of the constant barrage of banalities, false needs, and unrealistic role models that constitute the mediated society of the spectacle.\(^8\) While he retained the dualistic perceptions of true and false consciousness, and subject and object (with the individual as a reflection of objective reality), he nevertheless gestured toward a circle of existential and perceptual confusion where the differences between media spectacle and everyday reality start to overlap and blur.

Despite (a somewhat forlorn) hope for the possibility of alternative praxis, the picture that emerges from Debord is one of a society in which the individual is divested of all practical agency, and one in which the image-as-spectacle takes on a self-determining trajectory or, one might say, a life of its own.\(^9\) In this respect, we can say that while Debord undoubtedly remained within the discourse of Marxist dualism, he also looked forward to a more postmodern perspective. This was the case not only in terms of the kinds of radically subversive and deconstructive screen production that he both espoused and practiced,\(^10\) but also in terms of his views of the way in which “real” experience and mediated experience begin to fold into each other. When Debord argues that directly lived experience is in danger of being replaced by mediated experience, we begin to see the emergence of a way of thinking of the media as no longer being an entity which is distinct from the individual but, instead, as something which virtually becomes a constituting part of the subject — or, to put this in the Lacanian terms that we have explored previously, the dissolution of the distance between the subject as self and the media as other.
The Replacement of Reality with the Hyperreal – Jean Baudrillard

Debord’s theories on media and spectacle were an influential precursor to the more extreme claims about the relationship between reality and media representation made by Jean Baudrillard. Whereas Debord’s dialectical conception pitted the spectacular against the real, Baudrillard dispensed with reality altogether in favour of the hyperreal world of simulation. For Baudrillard, ‘it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real’.

With Baudrillard, the tension between reality and representation became stretched to the limit, and beyond. Where Debord warned against the danger of appearances taking over from reality, according to Baudrillard there were now only appearances. Where, in the society of the spectacle, authentic lived experience was being rapidly encroached upon by images, representation, and the mediation of experience, in Baudrillard’s universe of the hyperreal, the replacement of the real was complete and irreversible. And whereas the commodified images and personae of the Debordian spectacular provided signposts of false desire for the alienated subject, in the hyperreal world of simulation, mediated signs become so enticing, intoxicating, and “alive” that our mundane surrounds have no possibility of competing with them for our engagement and attachment.

Reading Baudrillard can induce a chilling sense of nihilism: it can seem that with the complete disappearance of reality goes any chance of political engagement, activism, or any other type of opposition to the pervasive hyperreal, constituting the kind of postmodernist thought that Felix Guattari no doubt had in mind when he described
postmodernism as a ‘new ethics of non-commitment’ and ‘a paradigm of submission and compromise with the status quo’. To take Baudrillard literally is, indeed, to abandon all hope of transforming any aspects of material reality. Nevertheless, the question – often debated – as to how literally Baudrillard should be taken seems to be a somewhat pointless one. Unless one is to assume that Baudrillard was delusional or intentionally writing works of (science) fiction, one must come to the conclusion that he operated from the strategy of taking his ideas to their vertiginous limits in order to emphasize the societial trend towards a world where it is no longer possible to distinguish reality from representation, as well as to underscore the speed with which this trend is accelerating. The form and content of Baudrillard’s writing constituted a kind of hysterical-paranoid poetics, designed to provoke an apprehension of the future.

Before one starts to become too comforted by the notion that Baudrillard was merely describing one possible future, however, it should be remembered that more than a quarter of a century has now elapsed since he wrote his seminal meditation on this issue, Simulacra and Simulation. With this in mind, one could justifiably see many of his ideas as painting a picture much closer to our present moment than when he first commenced documenting his conception of the semiotic assault on reality. To cite just one example, Baudrillard provided quite a detailed analysis and discussion of the seminal “docu-soap” television series, An American Family, made in 1973. While his notion of the ‘dissolution of TV in life [and the] dissolution of life in TV’ may have seemed somewhat exaggerated at the time of its writing, it now seems a considerably more reasonable description of the current mediated landscape in which various forms of “reality TV” and “docu-soap” are amongst the most dominant forms of programming on broadcast and subscriber television, constituting
a mainstream televiusal space which provides consumer-viewers with the experience of a sustained encounter with the “parallel universe” of a mediated reality.

Baudrillard’s ideas continue to fascinate many, as actuality and the mediated universe of representation seem increasingly to be coalescing. In many respects, the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century seemed to provide a catalyzing effect — a kind of “millennial boost” — for a range of examples of media that supported (some would say even proved) Baudrillard’s thesis. While Baudrillard’s 1970s example of *An American Family* could be seen as the forerunner to a range of docu-soaps, confessional talk shows and the like, which began to appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s,\(^{16}\) the phenomena of “reality TV” could be said to have commenced its worldwide proliferation with programs such as *Big Brother*\(^ {17}\) and *Survivor*,\(^ {18}\) which were first broadcast in 1999 and 2000 respectively.

Considered together, Debord and Baudrillard map out a discursive territory which suggests that the world of appearances, the world experienced as images and performances on a screen, has become entrenched in our consciousness to such an extent that it now constitutes its own reality. Baudrillard tries to distance his theories from the historical materialism of Debord, by claiming the ‘very abolition of the spectacular’ in a world where the image becomes ‘its own pure simulacrum’ bearing no relation to reality whatsoever.\(^ {19}\) Nevertheless, as McKenzie Wark points out, Baudrillard’s simulacrum is still a negation of *something* – of the reality that it replaces, and therefore, ‘far from being “postmodern” he mourns the loss of references for signs’.\(^ {20}\) Wark’s commentary on Baudrillard points to the possibility of even more extreme theoretical positions regarding the fate of reality in relation to the televised, the mediated and the virtual. According to Wark, ‘simulacra now need
to be considered in all their positivity: as products of a matrix of relations, as a powerful act of creating a fantasy world, where “world” is deployed in a literal sense rather than metaphorically’. Wark sees Baudrillard and others of his ilk as being nostalgic ‘for a moment before the acceleration and proliferation of flows of communication became so global and total’.

It could be argued that the kind of unbridled enthusiasm for the notion of a totally de-realized free-play of simulacra situated within a world of media globalization that, typified by Wark’s comments, is problematic in terms of its apparent disregard for the possible human and social consequences of this unfettered state of hyper-mediation. Nevertheless, the ever-increasing speed with which information is dispersed, and the ever-intensifying process of the virtualization of reality, certainly creates some kind of “brave new world” that warrants our close attention. In the context of this thesis, these factors appear to be crucial in terms of how we relate to the images and performances that surround us, and how they, in turn, inform the way we understand and express our sense of self-identity. Not only do the images and performances that fill our media screens seem to constitute their own seductive reality, they also seem to become the materials of otherness through which we now construct our sense of self.

Baudrillard’s overall thesis describes a movement away from simple notions of reality towards ever greater degrees of self-referentiality. This idea has strong parallels to the movement away from realism that this thesis explores. According to Baudrillard, the media image is initially conceived of as ‘the reflection of a profound reality’; it is then thought to be something that ‘masks and denatures a profound reality’; it then becomes something that ‘masks the absence of a profound reality’,
before, finally, bearing ‘no relation to any reality whatsoever’, and in this state it becomes ‘its own pure simulacrum’. 23 In a comparable way, this thesis argues that the trend in screen performances, and the narratives in which they occur, follows a somewhat similar trajectory from a straightforward (‘naïve’) realism, to a more problematic form of psychological realism which attempts to pierce the superficial layers that mask “profound reality”, before moving to a state in which belief in the existence of a true reality seems to disintegrate as performances and narratives increasingly refer only to themselves or to other (mostly screen) media representations. While the trajectory of screen performances and narratives and the trajectory of the image-sign theorized by Baudrillard may have parallels, however, it is not suggested here that this “simulacrum” of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity completely replaces or negates earlier realist forms. Rather, this thesis proposes a change of emphasis, as well as suggesting that this trend is in overall accord with the way media representation and social reality seem to be converging in the contemporary media landscape.

The Self-Reflexivity of Contemporary Media and Performances

The movement towards self-reflexivity in media representations (including media performances) is now everywhere to be seen. Furthermore, this self-reflexive turn is crucial to an understanding of how we now tend to see ourselves in performative terms. A myriad of media images and performances have penetrated our thoughts and memories, and this ‘immense accumulation of spectacles’ (to once again employ Debord’s phrase) is now so pervasive that it contributes significantly to our perceptions of reality. We can be fairly certain that the influence of media “works on us” at unconscious levels; however, it is evident that we are also fascinated at a
conscious level by the machinations of the media — its creation and treatment of star images, its manipulations of the truth, and its (often ironic) celebration of its own successes and failures. A self-reflexivity whereby films and television productions gesture towards their own construction, along with intertextual strategies in which they reference other media productions and the phenomenon of media production per se, can be traced back to a number of sources. First, it has affinities with the cinema’s earliest origins as a “cinema of attractions” that reveled in its own act of “putting on a show”, thereby drawing attention to itself. Second, a significant percentage of television programming has always acknowledged its audience and its own status as entertainment – a fact that is especially evident with some of its earliest forms such as the entertainment revue, the sketch comedy, and the “tonight” show format which, like “primitive cinema”, are derived from theatrical traditions such as music hall, burlesque, and pantomime. Finally, notions of self-reflexivity also emanate from the very different source of avant-garde cinema, with its formalist inclinations towards “baring the device” – a technique which was essentially anti-realist and which privileged the signifier over the signified, or, to put it another way, form over content.

The Anti-Realism and Self-Reflexivity of Avant-Garde “Counter Cinema”

During the period of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, structuralist/Marxist-oriented film theorists championed a number of avant-garde films and filmmakers as a counter to what were seen as the ideologically-driven practices of realism in mainstream cinema. In general terms, the aim of the predominant film theory of the time was two-fold: first, it attempted to demystify the apparent naturalness with which conventional cinema pretended to be a mirror of reality via its techniques of
“invisible realism”, and, second, it promoted an alternative form of avant-garde, self-reflexive cinema which manifestly foregrounded the signs of its own production. In this context, cinematic self-reflexivity and other formalist-inspired techniques were primarily seen as methods of awakening the passive, “slumbering” spectator/subject to the ideology inherent in realism.\textsuperscript{26}

Perhaps no filmmaker consistently epitomized the radical spirit of such Brechtian-inspired self-reflexive filmmaking more than Jean-Luc Godard. Increasingly, as his career progressed, Godard’s own filmmaking practices imposed themselves on his films as a form of political meta-commentary. In this context, one could cite nearly all of his films — however, in various ways, films such as \textit{Vivre sa vie}, \textsuperscript{27} \textit{A Married Woman}, \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Pierrot le fou}, \textsuperscript{29} \textit{Two or Three Things I Know about Her}, \textsuperscript{30} \textit{La Chinoise}, \textsuperscript{31} \textit{Weekend}, \textsuperscript{32} \textit{Le Gai Savoir}, \textsuperscript{33} \textit{Wind from the East}, \textsuperscript{34} \textit{Tout Va Bien} \textsuperscript{35} and \textit{Letter to Jane}\textsuperscript{36} are all examples of his highly self-conscious, intertextual and self-referential filmmaking practice.

Like Brecht, a crucial element that Godard has used for the purpose of breaking the spell of realism has been the deployment of actors and performances in unconventional and self-reflexive ways. Many of Godard’s films construct complex and fascinating interplays between character and actor, whilst continually foregrounding the artifice of performance. In \textit{Vivre sa vie}, to cite one example, Godard lingers in close-up on the face of his beautiful protagonist (and then wife), Anna Karina, whilst Karina’s character (an aspiring actress and prostitute called Nana) sits in a cinema, overwhelmed with emotion as she watches the famously wrenching close-up performance of Maria Falconetti in Dreyer’s \textit{The Passion of}
This is a complexly self-reflexive moment which explores a multiplicity of facets of cinema, performance, fetishism, and exploitation. Or, in another example of Godard’s resolutely Brechtian strategies, from the outset of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, we are made explicitly aware of Marina Vlady’s status as both actor and fictional protagonist. In this way, Godard establishes the grounds for us to remain conscious of the role of performance throughout the film, enabling the spectator to engage in a dialogic manner with both the performance of the actor and the role being performed.

As an alternative to the passivity fostered by conventional cinematic realism, avant-garde filmmakers such as Godard invited more dynamic engagements between spectator, performer, and cinematic text in ways that implied the possibility of new relationships between them. The structuralist idea that both the subject and its supposed reality were little (or nothing) more than linguistic constructs would eventually give way to a poststructuralist view, whereby reality and meanings were fluid and undecidable, and the subject was granted the agency to interact with this play/deferral of meanings. In some respects, we can see the seeds of such a perspective in the work of Godard and other avant-garde filmmakers who were directly or indirectly influenced by him.

In a 1972 article, Peter Wollen attempted to define the attributes of a “counter cinema” by explicating the polarities between avant-garde and mainstream cinema, principally using the work of Godard as an exemplar of the former. In so doing, Wollen not only pointed to the anti-realism of Godard’s films, but also to aspects of his work that can be seen to be in keeping with a more poststructuralist stance of
negating his own authorial voice and rejecting the idea that there can be just one final, determinate meaning in favour of the notion of a polyphony of voices and meanings through his constant use of allusion and intertextuality. As Wollen put it, the overall effect of such technique is that:

Godard’s own voice is drowned out and obliterated behind that of the authors quoted. The film can no longer be seen as a discourse with a single subject, the film maker/auteur. Just as there is a multiplicity of narrative worlds, so too is there a multiplicity of speaking voices.40

Playful experimentation with conventional form has continued to fascinate filmmakers and audiences alike, with many of these once radical tendencies now quite common in a world in which it seems that the content of screen-based media is in some respects becoming our new reality. In contemporary times, it is clear that the nature of our engagements with a self-reflexive cinema that readily acknowledges both film and spectator cannot be adequately described solely by recourse to Marxist/Brechtian notions of breaking the spell of realism, and nor can they be explained purely by semiotic models that treat cinema as a form of language which “constructs/positions” a passive subject.

In this context, feminist film theory and practice has played a crucial role in expanding these conceptual horizons. Key elements of feminist film practice have contributed significantly to the kinds of counter cinema referred to above in a way that not only continued in the spirit of the pioneering cinema of Godard and other avant-garde practitioners, but has also more rigorously explored notions of how identity is represented/constructed on screen and elsewhere. Similarly, a great deal of feminist screen theory has contributed significantly to our understanding about
relationships amongst spectatorship, screen language, fantasy, desire, screen performance, stardom, and the construction of representational/fictional dramatis personae in the cinema. Furthermore, along with the gender studies, queer theory, and aspects of performance studies that feminist theory has inspired, feminist screen theory (and the filmmaking practices that it, in turn, has inspired) has played a crucial role in allowing us to see the subject as being able to perform identities — particularly subversive ones — into existence.41

The work of feminist theorists, especially throughout the 1970s, inspired a form of feminist counter cinema praxis that dynamically critiqued mainstream cinematic approaches to representation. The alternative filmmaking practices advocated by Laura Mulvey and others once again had clear affinities with Brechtian and other self-reflexive/anti-realist approaches, whereby the ‘material existence of the recording process’ and ‘the critical reading of the spectator’ were encouraged and embraced.42 Included amongst the most notable exponents of such feminist-inspired counter cinema during the 1970s and beyond are Yvonne Rainer,43 Chantal Akerman,44 Sally Potter,45 and Laura Mulvey herself in the films that she co-directed with fellow theorist-filmmaker, Peter Wollen.46 To a significant extent, these films raised interesting and important questions relating to identity and subjectivity (for women, but also more broadly) within the context of cinematic performance, representation, and narrative by holding such issues up to an unconventional and experimental light.
The Filmmaker as Subject

Another significant strand of avant-garde filmmaking practice which has indirectly, though nonetheless significantly, impacted upon the ever-increasing self-reflexivity of cinema and other screen-based production practices, involves the tradition of “first person” explorations of the relationships between filmmakers and their films. In one sense, such filmmaking practice returns us to the realm of the Lacanian Imaginary as we watch the “filmmaker-subject” explore his or her own phenomenological (and arguably narcissistic) relationship to mediated/image-based versions of the self. In another related sense, this sort of screen practice can also be thought of as part of an ongoing/proliferating tendency for subjects to conceive of their identities as images to be performed (and recorded) in an abstracted/mediated exteriority.

This type of experimental filmmaking practice extends back to the work of Maya Deren (who has often been described as the “mother of the American avant-garde”). Deren’s experimental films — especially *Meshes of the Afternoon* — not only tended towards a surrealistic focus on dreams and the unconscious, but were also self-reflexive insofar as they were vehicles for her to perform her own subjectivity. *Meshes of the Afternoon* provides a complex interweaving of Deren’s authorial presence via a subjective camera, and a number of different versions of a persona performed by Deren, in what becomes an intriguing “dance of self and other” that is uniquely cinematic. In a similar vein to the so-called “trance films” of Deren, Kenneth Anger also performs as the protagonist in an apparent journey through his own unconscious in the film *Fireworks*, while the later “diary films” of Jonas Mekas (e.g. *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*) also strongly foreground the presence of the filmmaker. In a similar vein, Stan Brakhage, another pioneer of the American avant-garde, explored his formalist concerns with the materiality of the
film medium and the way that it is experienced using his own perceptual
subjectivity. Brakhage’s films increasingly moved towards the notion of the camera
as a sensory extension of his own body in ways that recalled both Vertov’s
conception of the kino-eye and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.\footnote{51}

In terms both of films in which the filmmaker performs in their own works (such as
Deren’s and Anger’s), and films in which the filmmaker’s subjective perceptions are
explored (such as those of Brakhage), we can see a significant tendency within the
avant-garde towards questioning the nature and structure of the medium of cinema
by interposing the filmmaker-as-subject with the camera/screen/image. Eventually,
this tendency coalesced with a trend towards the autobiographical/performative/self-
reflexive in documentary and “video diary” forms during the 1990s and beyond, in
ways which can be said to have produced works whereby the camera almost
becomes a literal extension of the self of the filmmaker. Furthermore, such works
have often tended to become an experimental playground for the performance of a
multiplicity of identities, which – either explicitly or implicitly – adds to skepticism
about whether we can ever really be unified and coherent individuals.\footnote{52} We could
say that in these avant-garde instances in which the filmmaker enters into an intimate
relationship with the mediating apparatus of camera and screen, we can witness the
emergence of what has become an ever-intensifying tendency towards a merging
between the “other” of image-based media and the “self” of the subject into a kind of
amalgamated entity.
Self-Reflexivity as Mainstream Practice

While self-reflexivity has been a consistent theme within cinema’s critical theory and radical practice, often being seen as a strategy for breaking the spell of realism by baring the devices of cinematic construction in both fictional and non-fictional forms, this thesis argues that self-reflexivity has now become a common feature of much of the screen content we see, rather than existing primarily as an experimental and oppositional other. These days, sophisticated media-literate audiences hardly need to be reminded about the constructedness of the screen production process and apparatus. In fact, against the tide of the structuralist-Marxist critique of illusionism, Dana Polan argued as early as 1978 that ‘very few actual Hollywood productions would fit the abstract category of transparency which recent criticism has instituted as the Hollywood paradigm’. According to Polan, art, by its nature, is distanced from its audience, and furthermore, ‘we learn to read through this distance, but we also want new distances’. The clear implication we can draw from this view is that the more familiar we become with a set of conventions, the more we need distance from those conventions to maintain our engagement with whatever representation we see (and/or hear). Ultimately, this leads to a hyper-awareness of the conventions of a particular form, and as a consequence, an ironic attitude tends to be taken towards the formal conventions in question. With respect to mainstream American cinema, for example, Polan maintained that ‘campiness is not only a subgenre of films but a tendency of most if not all Hollywood films’.

The topic of self-reflexive cinema was also central to a 1980 essay by Charles Affron, published by Cinema Journal in a special issue on film acting. In this article, Affron focused on those films which are based in the diegetic world of the
movie industry or some similar aspect of “show biz”. He was particularly interested in the manner in which we understand and engage with performances in such films, given that we do not merely surrender ourselves to a complete identification with the narrative character, but instead, remain at least partially aware of the performance value of what the actor is doing. Affron asked, in relation to such films: ‘What is affecting about a movie’s movieness, the performance of a performer?’ Like Polan, Affron also stressed the notion of the distance that is established between the viewer and a self-reflexive (i.e. non-“transparent”) film. Affron, though, was specifically interested in the performances that exist within the types of “show biz” films referred to above:

… when the characters and the fictions themselves pass from one status to the other (the actor performing a role within a role in a play/film within a film) we become conscious of a high level of fictivity. Self-reflexivity then obliges us to re-examine our response to reality and to art, to discard the too-facile categorizations we make, and to grant to art its “real” status. Disoriented by the elisions of fiction and life, we wonder where performance ends and reality begins.

It is possible that the sort of “disorientations” about the distinctions between performance and reality that Affron hypothesized may have had some purchase on audiences in the era of the films to which he referred (the 1940s and 1950s). However, it seems unlikely that, by the time he wrote his article (in 1980), audiences were still insufficiently sophisticated in their reading of cinema that they would be in any way confused by the self-reflexive performativity inherent in such “films about films” (or films about theatre). Moreover, it is clearly apparent from much of the media content which currently surrounds us, that today’s audiences have moved well past the point of simply “wondering where performance ends and reality begins”.

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Rather, it seems more the case that we have become highly attracted to complex plays of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality, where the symbiotic and mobius-like twists and turns between fictive and real, and between performer and dramatis personae, have become central preoccupations for us. That is to say, they have become central not only because we are jaded by the conventions of narration and genre, but also because we see ourselves as being increasingly caught up in these interplays. As we have discussed to some extent already, the practice in contemporary cinematic texts (as well as other media texts) of “layering” such performances within performances is now widespread and sometimes quite complex, and it is clear that contemporary audiences revel in such techniques, presumably satisfying the desire for ever new “distances” suggested by Polan.  

In his article, Affron also analyzed the ‘profusion of ironies’ inherent in Douglas Sirk’s 1959 melodrama, *Imitation of Life*. This was Sirk’s final film, and (according to Affron and others), he reveled in the ironies possible in a genre – the “woman’s film” – that had virtually exhausted itself by the end of the 1950s. That is to say, the film referred to a genre which was virtually at the end of its cycle, and a particularly knowledgeable sensibility was required on the part of its audience in order to appreciate Sirk’s play on the clichés and stereotypes of generic convention. According to Affron’s analysis, one of the more interesting layers of irony in *Imitation of Life* emanated from the casting of Lana Turner, which created a complex performative interplay between the narrative character and the real life Turner as an ageing actress who, at the height of her career, had relied more on her physical appearance than her (somewhat limited) acting ability.
It is clear that contemporary audiences (as, it seems, did audiences of the 1950s and probably earlier) take delight in the sorts of interplays between on-screen narratives, the performances and personae of actors, the events of real life, and the conventions of genres that a film can provide. Whereas, however, a filmmaker like Douglas Sirk could once have been singled out as an exception for his tendency to engage audiences through a complex mixture of irony and emotion, we might be inclined to think that, today, a great many films — perhaps even the majority of them — offer the possibility of at least some level of ironic reading. Indeed, in much the same way that Sirk’s remake of *Imitation of Life* — a title which itself can be read ironically — was a particular response to an exhausted generic formula, we might be tempted to suggest that we now live in an era where virtually all narrative and generic conventions have been more or less exhausted. If it is the case that we now live in a world of exhausted cinematic (and, for that matter, other artistic) forms, this does not of course suggest that there was a particular moment when audiences suddenly came to appreciate a *distanced* viewing of movies. Rather, it would seem that we are dealing with the gradual and compounding effect of audiences becoming “expert” viewers after more than a century of cinema.

Nowadays, there is a proliferation of films about films, films about television, television shows about television, and so forth. This is hardly surprising given that so much of our reality is now filtered through screen mediation, to such an extent that it becomes, in Baudrillardian terms, our new (“more real than real”) reality. There are many examples one could cite of films that reference their own construction and/or the “mediascape” of which they form a part. Furthermore, we could note that many of the most influential directors in cinema have, at one time or another, been moved
to make films that focus on the act of filmmaking, and that have often been to some degree autobiographically self-reflexive.\textsuperscript{57}

While it is outside the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed examination of these films, or the many other “films about films” that exist, one should note a tendency towards increasingly dense layers of intertextuality and self-referencing. In this context, one could briefly cite Adaptation\textsuperscript{68} written by “auteur-scriptwriter” Charlie Kaufman, for the complexly playful way that it blends (and bends) real and fictional characters (including the character of the writer himself), references to the making of past films (such as Being John Malkovich,\textsuperscript{69} also written by Kaufman), and a critique of Hollywood narrative conventions and practices (via a satirical characterization of “script guru” Robert McKee).\textsuperscript{70} Similarly, Michael Winterbottom’s Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story\textsuperscript{71} could also be cited as a highly self-reflexive film which comically layers performances-within-performances and characterizations-within-characterizations. In a manner that has parallels with both Adaptation and the much earlier The French Lieutenant’s Woman,\textsuperscript{72} Winterbottom’s film interweaves two stories: a version of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century Laurence Sterne novel which has variously been described as proto-postmodern and totally “un-filmable”, and the film-within-a-film story of the “making of” Tristram Shandy, in which Steve Coogan, Rob Brydon, and Gillian Anderson play versions of themselves. Most particularly, Coogan’s “performance of himself” is a knowingly playful mixture of fictitious elements and known aspects of his media persona and actual biography.\textsuperscript{73}
In the context of what seems to be an ever-increasing degree of self-reflexivity, it is also worth noting the propensity of star actors to also play on their own star/public personas as an integral part of their on-screen performances. This is a phenomenon that has often occurred throughout the history of cinema. However, it is a practice which seems to have intensified as audiences have become both more “cine-literate” and more “distanced and ironic” in their viewing tastes and habits. If, as suggested earlier, it is true that we have become a relatively jaded audience in terms of conventional Aristotelian narratives and realist performances, such playfulness can be seen as a strategy aimed at engaging us in “intertextual pursuits”. One vivid example of such interplays comes to us by way of many of the performances of Tom Cruise. It could be argued that a significant part of the pleasure in watching a range of his performances is derived from cross referencing them to what appears to be the acutely narcissistic personality of Cruise himself. In various ways, the characters that he plays in films such as Jerry McGuire74, Eyes Wide Shut75, Magnolia,76 and Vanilla Sky77 seem to be intertextual variants on aspects of the Cruise persona. At the same time, we see the “real” Tom Cruise display ever more narcissistic character traits in much discussed media incidents such as the manic nature of his “Oprah couch” performance, or the paranoia evidenced in his widely seen “Scientology interview”. These behaviours, in turn, can be said to refer back to a number of his fictional film performances, in terms of how we read the overall media construct called “Tom Cruise”.78

Films about acting and performance (on stage, screen and television) form yet another subset of this well-established and apparently proliferating trend towards self-reflexivity. In addition to the films already discussed in this and previous chapters, this list could also include such films as Opening Night,79 The Baby of
Macon, Mephisto, Dangerous Game, The King of Comedy, and Ellie Parker.

While many films such as those listed above explicitly or implicitly interrogate facets of screen acting, numerous other films could be said to revel in theatrical and/or carnivalesque aspects of performance, and in so doing, point to the pleasure to be derived from engaging with performances-of-excess that are the antithesis of notions of restrained naturalism and realism.

Pure realism does not, of course, tolerate any such theatrical self-gesturing, either as avant-garde statement or in terms of more extravagantly and gratuitously playful forms of “showing off”. Arguably, though, such pure realism in cinema is more of an ideal than a normative practice. That is to say, due to a number of industrial and formal aspects of cinema — such as the star system and the utilization and manipulation of genre conventions — many films are steered towards a tacit acknowledgement of both their audience and their own construction, even if their performances and narrative techniques fit more or less under the rubric of “fourth wall” realism. Even more emphatically, the essential hybridity of television means that it not only retains many of its traditionally self-referential and intertextual conventions, but also creates ever new modes of making explicit connections to its audience.

One vivid example of the intertextuality of television can be seen in the media’s response to the popular Australian television drama series Underbelly (Series One). The series revolved around the events and characters of Melbourne’s underworld crime scene, and particularly, the gangland killings that occurred in the mid-to-late 1990s. Throughout the series, surviving gangland figures portrayed in the series were featured on a plethora of television current affairs shows and other media outlets.
Thus a (grimly) fascinating dialogue was created between the fictionalized characters and their “real life” counterparts. At the same time, one of the themes of the series was the manner in which many of the gangland figures had become seduced by their own celebrity, and were influenced by media/pop culture images and ideas of how an underworld figure should act.

Over the course of more than a century of film and television image production, the media itself has increasingly become an object of fascination in terms of its processes of production, the semiotics of its iconography, and the seductive nature of its performers and performances. That is to say “the media” is no longer (if, indeed, it ever was) simply the neutral conveyor of narrative and other forms of “content”. Rather, it constantly signifies its own seductive qualities and continually reminds us that we live in a world that is mediated to saturation levels. And this fascination with media is not a static phenomenon: it seems that our absorption in the process of how social reality and social identity is constructed via image and screen continues to intensify as more and more films and television programs refer to processes of media production, and, at the same time, our own social performances increasingly become the primary content of television via various forms of “actuality” and “reality” programming. In this context, the avant-gardist’s determination to remind the spectator that s/he is watching a constructed fantasy — to shock them out of the complacency of being absorbed in an apparently transparent realism — seems almost quaint by today’s standards. Contemporary audiences are now so attuned to media conventions that a more difficult task might in fact be to get them to stop being aware of the “illusionist” techniques that are being utilized.
In many respects, camera and screen-based mediation has become our way of seeing the world, and of seeing ourselves in that world. In this sense, it could be said (again in Baudrillardian terms) that we have become the simulacra of ourselves. For those of us who haven’t literally found our way onto media screens – a task that becomes ever more possible and probable as the dual phenomena of “actuality television” and image-based, online “social networking” weave their way into the fabric of our lives – we nevertheless seem to increasingly act as if we might be caught on camera at any moment. In this sense, we are always “on”. This is not an entirely new phenomenon that has suddenly begun with the advent of reality television and YouTube. Indeed, it seems more likely that these recent media developments grow out of a fascination we have developed over years of exposure to image-based mediation. Some decades ago, Christopher Lasch made the following observation:

We live in swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion. Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. Life presents itself as a succession of images or electronic signals, of impressions recorded and reproduced by means of photography, motion pictures, television, and sophisticated recording devices. Modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions – and our own – were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored for close scrutiny at some later time. “Smile, you’re on candid camera!” The intrusion into everyday life of this all-seeing eye no longer takes us by surprise or catches us with our defenses down. We need no reminder to smile. A smile is permanently graven on our features, and we already know from which of several angles it photographs to best advantage.88

We have acclimated ourselves to a visually-based world of mediations over three or four generations (or even more if we consider this process to have begun with the invention of photography). One vividly apparent example of this process is the
changing “comfort level” with which people from these different generations appear before the camera. In instances ranging from home movies to filmed documentary footage, we see a marked change as suspicion, embarrassment, or formality — all of which signify a degree of discomfort about appearing before the camera — gradually transforms into the facile acceptance and even enthusiastic embrace of being “on-camera”, as suggested in Lasch’s commentary.

Importantly, though, as we are changing so too are our media. We now not only act as if our behaviour ‘were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted’, as Lasch described in the 1980s, this is often now literally occurring as younger generations of media users record nearly all of their behaviour – or at least “samples” of it – onto digital camera devices and then upload them onto various social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube in order to create an (online) identity. In this way, cameras and screens increasingly become the medium not only through which we see and experience the world around us, but also the medium via which many (especially young) people express their identities and relate to other people. In this context of a mediation of experience that seems to encroach into every aspect of life, the question of “who am I?” can no longer simply be answered by the Cartesian equation between thought and existence, nor can it be neatly separated from the universe of our media representations.

It seems that we no longer only see media images and performers as aspirational role models, but instead we begin to equate and conflate ourselves – in some respects, quite literally – with those images and performers. Furthermore, a significant part of this process of turning ourselves into “mediated subjects” has been the increasingly intimate terms upon which we embrace the technologies of mediation — utilizing
cameras and screens, and performing for them — as a natural part of everyday experience. In the next chapter, we will attempt to go beyond the consciously reflexive and self-referential fascination with mediated images and performances, in order to explore the apparent intensity with which contemporary subjects appear to absorb the contents of their mediated exteriority as an amalgamated “resource” for their own performances of self.


2 Ibid., 12.

3 Ibid., 30.

4 Ibid., 23.


*R.D. Crano provides the following concise summary of détournement:*

Literally “to divert”, “distract” or “redirect”, *détournement* is most concisely defined as the mutual interference of two worlds expressed with an acute indifference to the forgotten and inherently meaningless original sources. The revolutionary force of this tactic rests in its bringing together images, sounds or texts that remain separate through the normal functioning of spectacle… *détournement* – as a sort of subset of plagiarism – brings new, indeterminate meaning to cultural artifacts by juxtaposing them in violent and deliberately incoherent ways.


6 An aesthetic of *détournement* could be said to thrive in the current climate of re-appropriation, recycling and “mashing-up” that proliferates in a multiplicity of videos created by a media-savvy generation of consumer-producers. These products can be viewed – in vast quantities - via online sites such as YouTube. While very few such productions are informed by the kind of revolutionary program promulgated by the Situationists, the spirit of irony and disrespect for the sacred cows of capitalism (for example, intellectual property) lives on.

7 Debord, *Society*, 34

8 Ibid., 45.

Debord’s films include: *Howls for Sade* (1952), a type of anti-cinema comprised of blank screens accompanied by readings of text; *Critique of Separation* (1961) which principally explored the alienated relationship between the worker and their labor; *Society of the Spectacle* (1973) which was the cinematic articulation of his famous thesis via the re-appropriation of many images (from photographs, films, advertising, etcetera) to visualize the capitalist culture of commodity fetishism, and his final film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1979), which laments the fate of all personal relationships under the sway of the spectacle. In one way or another, the technique of *détournement* is at the forefront of the strategies used in all of Debord’s films.


Baudrillard tells us that now: ‘There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication.’ Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 12.


Baudrillard also wrote: ‘…. the consumer society was lived under the sign of alienation; it was a society of spectacle’ but now we live in a time when ‘there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication.’ Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 21-2.


Ibid.

As noted in Chapter One, Tom Gunning refers to the majority of the films that were made in the first decade or so of cinema’s existence as constituting a “cinema of attractions”. Gunning’s assertion that such films ‘relate more to the attractions of the fairground than to the traditions of legitimate

The Lacanian conception of the mirror stage – based as it was on the visual power of identification – held a strong attraction for many film theorists and was one of the underpinning theoretical conceptions for a great deal of structuralist film theory during the 1970s. Chief amongst these structuralist film theories were the so-called “apparatus” theories of Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, as well as Laura Mulvey’s highly influential “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” essay. Theories such as these conceptualized the spectator (in an analogy with the pre-linguistic infant) as a passive subject who is without agency but who is duped into believing himself or herself to be an omnipotent voyeur by misrecognizing images (and/or image systems) for the self. According to such theories, the fiction of the spectator’s omnipotent, mastering gaze could only be maintained as long as the artifice of the cinematic apparatus remained invisible. Thus, conventional cinema’s technique of “invisible realism” was considered reactionary in that it disguised its ideological functions.

While, in some respects at least, these predominantly image-based, phenomenological theories of cinematic spectatorship tended to be overshadowed by the “linguistic turn” of structuralism, the privileging of anti-realism and self-reflexivity remained. During its structuralist phase, film theory added two language-based elements to its previous basis in Althusserian-inspired structural Marxism: firstly, Saussurean-based semiotics (whereby the individual is theorized to be bound by a pre-existing system of linguistic rules, i.e. a *langue*), and, secondly, the Lacanian reformulation of Saussure (whereby the very constitution of subjectivity is only possible via entry into the Symbolic order of language). According to the structuralist semiotics which dominated much 1970s film theory, realism was no more or less than a form of representation constructed from a particular set of codes. The insidiousness of realism for these Marxist-oriented critics, however, was that it appeared to exist naturally and independently of any such codes.


In 1975, Peter Wollen wrote an influential article titled “The Two Avant-Gardes” which provides a useful perspective on the non-mainstream cinema of the time and, importantly, on how it was viewed in the context of structuralist/semiotic film theory. According to Wollen’s categorization, one avant-garde tradition – “structural film” - was based in North America, and had its roots in artistic practices such as minimalism and conceptualism; while the other, mostly European, tradition retained its allegiance to the anti-realism of Brecht and Eisenstein. Structural film, like its post-cubist counterparts in art, tended to be highly abstract, doing away with narrative and, in fact, any form of “content” as it is conventionally understood. (Examples of Structural cinema included the films of Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, and Ernie Gehr.) However, while strictly formalist experimentation in the elimination of narrative has continued in various forms of avant-garde film practice, it can be (and has been) argued that the steadfast refusal to engage with any form of narrative content offers little by way of meaningful critique of representation other than by its absence. And it was in this context that Wollen identified another tradition of avant-garde filmmakers who engaged with the ideological problematics of narrative and realist representation by deconstructing the conventional strategies of cinema. According to Wollen, this “other avant-garde” remained grounded in narrative signification, and rather than having its roots in painting, its affinities were with the modernist traditions of literature (e.g. Joyce) and theatre (e.g. Meyerhold and Brecht). Practitioners of this second avant-garde included Jancso (e.g. *Red Psalm* and *Electra, My Love*), Oshima (e.g. *Death by Hanging*, and *Dear Summer Sister*), Straub-Huillet (e.g. *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg’s Accompaniment for a Cinematographic Score*), and, most particularly, the films of Jean-Luc Godard.


30 *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, feature film. Directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard. 1967.


38 In the beginning of *Two or Three Things I know about Her* we are told by the whispering voice-over of the narrator-filmmaker that the “her” of the title refers both to Paris and to “Marina Vlady, an actress.” Vlady looks directly at the camera, telling us that Brecht demanded of actors that they “speak as though quoting the truth”. We then jump-cut to an almost identical close-up of Vlady, but this time the filmmaker’s voice-over tells us the “she” being referred to is Juliette Jansen (i.e. the fictional character). Vlady then delivers another monologue to camera, this time relating details in the first person about the life of the fictional character that she is representing.


40 Ibid., 506.

independent film.

Potter herself played a character named Sally who is a filmmaker struggling to finance her filmmaking could be said to have reached a high point with her 1997 film, specifically, the function of the female star in this economic context. The self-interrogation of techniques. In her debut feature film, highly stylized, while in other sections of the film the narrative is dictated of the genre. Performances in the film are decidedly non-manner in which the main female character so that the first (Mimi 1) exists outside the narrative interrogating the way in which narratives (and, specifically, the conventional representation and objectification of women) are taken for granted. In her film, Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), for example, Potter deconstructs melodrama (in this case Puccini’s opera, La Boheme) by doubling the main female character so that the first (Mimi 1) exists outside the narrative interrogating the manner in which the second (Mimi 2) is constructed (and killed off) according to the conventional dictates of the genre. Performances in the film are decidedly non-realist – i.e. what we see and what we hear seem to be sure whether (or when) we are watching a documentary about a group of dancers, or a fictional account of the personal and romantic involvements between these performers. Also, the film contains much contradictory information between images, text (in the form of inter-titles) and sounds; and, consequently, the source and veracity of any or all of them remains in constant doubt. For example, we see a rehearsal session being taken by Rainer herself, but we cannot determine the exact status of the scene. Is it a rehearsal being “documented” for the camera? Is it a fictional scene contrived as part of the narrative? Or, is it a self-reflexive move which includes a rehearsal for the film itself as part of the “final product”? Such indeterminacies are then amplified by mismatches of synchronicity between voice and image – i.e. what we see and what we hear seem to exist on (at least) two different planes.

Chantal Akerman has, along with Rainer, been one of the most influential filmmakers in the tradition of feminist counter-cinema. Akerman also utilizes acutely self-reflexive and formalist techniques, including those which highlight and problematize many of the presumptions of psychologically realist performance and narrative. In her film Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), for example, Akerman eschews the normal strategies of narrative identification by presenting the life of a middle-aged prostitute primarily through the repetitious tedium of her domestic life, and via the minimalism of both the staged (but non-dramatized) action and a rigorously composed regime of distant and static camera coverage. Throughout the film, the motivations behind Jeanne’s actions are impenetrable, or at least not open to easy and facile “psychologization.”

Sally Potter’s films are often imbued with formalist and self-reflexive strategies utilized to interrogate and problematize the way in which narratives (and, specifically, the conventional representation of women in those narratives) are taken for granted. In her short film, Thriller (1979), for example, Potter deconstructs melodrama (in this case Puccini’s opera, La Boheme) by doubling the main female character so that the first (Mimi 1) exists outside the narrative interrogating the manner in which the second (Mimi 2) is constructed (and killed off) according to the conventional dictates of the genre. Performances in the film are decidedly non-realist – i.e. what we see and in some parts the acting is highly stylized, while in other sections of the film the narrative is told via still photographs of a stage performance. As Potter’s career progressed, she continued to explore formalist and self-reflexive techniques. In her debut feature film, The Gold Diggers (1983), Potter offered a distinctly Brechtian interrogation of the musical comedy genre via its two female protagonists (Ruby and Celeste), who attempt to understand both the nature of the circulation of money in a capitalist system, and, specifically, the function of the female star in this economic context. The self-reflexivity of Potter’s filmmaking could be said to have reached a high point with her 1997 film, The Tango Lesson, when Potter herself played a character named Sally who is a filmmaker struggling to finance her independent film.


43 Yvonne Rainer’s films are often seen as the most explicit exploration of feminist film theories regarding the representation and objectification of women. Her films explore gender relationships while simultaneously interrogating the ways that those relationships have been represented in commercial narrative film, thus critiquing patriarchal society's oppression of women and the formal structure (narrative) implicated in that oppression. At the same time, her challenges to conventional cinematic form question the existence of a number of assumptions that are often taken for granted (such as clear divisions between documentary and drama, fact and fiction) and invite an actively interpreting role for the spectator. For example, her first feature-length film, Lives of Performers (1972), interrogates, amongst other issues, the problematics of both narrative representation and the distinction between documentary and fiction filmmaking via a series of disjunctions and indeterminacies. We can never be sure whether (or when) we are watching a documentary about a group of dancers, or a fictional account of the personal and romantic involvements between these performers. Also, the film contains much contradictory information between images, text (in the form of inter-titles) and sounds; and, consequently, the source and veracity of any or all of them remains in constant doubt. For example, we see a rehearsal session being taken by Rainer herself, but we cannot determine the exact status of the scene. Is it a rehearsal being “documented” for the camera? Is it a fictional scene contrived as part of the narrative? Or, is it a self-reflexive move which includes a rehearsal for the film itself as part of the “final product”? Such indeterminacies are then amplified by mismatches of synchronicity between voice and image – i.e. what we see and what we hear seem to exist on (at least) two different planes.

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Given their reputations as prominent and influential film theorists, it is perhaps unsurprising that the films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen are exemplary screen-based explorations of theories about cinematic and other forms of representation. Their 1977 film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, for example, employs multiple narrative strands and includes the self-reflexive performance of Mulvey herself speaking directly to the camera. Through its own practice, the film advances a preference for cinematic structures other than those of linear narrative on the basis that conventional narrative is necessarily (i.e. by its very structure) patriarchal and objectifying of women. Consequently, the main narrative component of the film – the story of Louise and the significant females in her life – eschews any conventional narrative/dramatic arc in favour of a fragmentary story that is intersected by parallel discourses about her representation and the representation of women more generally.

*Meshes of the Afternoon*, short film. Directed by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid, written by Maya Deren. 1943.


The first and most celebrated of Brakhage’s first person perceptual films – films that were often classified as being part of a mode of “lyrical” cinema – was *Anticipation of the Night* (1958). Brakhage continued along this path with films such as *Window, Water, Baby, Moving* (1959), and *Thigh, Line, Lyre, Triangular* (1961). As Brian Frye notes, ‘Brakhage intended to film not the world itself, but the act of seeing the world’. In his “Metaphors on Vision”, Brakhage wrote:

> Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of ‘Green’? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the ‘beginning was the word.’ (From “Metaphors on Vision”, quoted in Frye.)


In Chapter Six we will explore this idea in some detail in an analysis of the work of two avant-garde filmmakers, Sadie Benning and Jonathan Caouette.


Polan draws on examples such as Hollywood cartoons. In particular he cites the Warner Brothers cartoon, *Duck Amuck* (1953), in which Daffy Duck is victimized by his animator who, it turns out, is none other than fellow animated character and trickster, Bugs Bunny. In the cartoon, Daffy is tortured via all manner of formal devices – e.g. manipulations of framing, background, sound and colour, as well as by the partial erasure of his own image by the hand/pencil of the animator. Polan concludes that *Duck Amuck* ‘closes in on itself, fiction leads to and springs from fiction, the text becomes a loop which effaces social analysis’ emphasizing his point that, contrary to the beliefs of a number of his contemporary critics, self-reflexivity does not, in and of itself, become a “political” strategy.


In this context, Affron cites a range of “theatrical films” or films about filmmaking such as *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945), *A Double Life* (1947), *All About Eve* (1950), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *A Star is Born* (1954) and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952).

According to Stern, the terms *histrionic* and *quotidian* can be used to delineate two fundamental propensities or impulses which are always present to varying degrees in cinema. Since its inception, the cinema has had dual obsessions with recording aspects of the everyday and with theatricalized spectacle. In more naturalistic cinema, gestures tend toward the utilitarian and quotidian; while in histrionic forms the tendency is more towards the expressive, abstract and stylized. Histrionic cinema is, according to Stern, self-conscious, ostentatious, non-naturalistic while at the same time being emotionally charged and affective. This conflation of what are sometimes seen as opposite poles constitutes a paradox in terms of contemporary Western performance theory which generally posits an either/or divide between performativity and engagement. Traditionally, engagement and illusion line up on one side under the rubric of Stanislavsky while estrangement and contemplation are seen to fall into the Brechtian category. Stern’s interest is in the histrionic is motivated by an understanding of certain cinematic modalities that defy this either/or categorization. Stern points to the kinds of actors whose performances declare (histrionically) “I like to act” thus creating a dialectical exchange between their persona (or idiolect) and their role. In contrast, she points to actors such as Tom Hanks or Meryl Streep, whose performances declare “look at me, look at how good I am at being a human being, just like you”. This latter, more quotidian type of performance is, for Stern, far less engaging. In Stern’s view, the histrionic opens up an imaginative space for the viewer. In addition to discussing films such as *All About Eve* (1950), Stern also refers to Pedro Alomodavar’s *All About My Mother* (1999) (which begins with direct references to *All About Eve*), John Cassavetes’ *Opening Night* (1977), and Martin Scorsese’s *The King of Comedy* (1982).


The film was itself a remake of a 1934 film.
The narrative also included the sexual rivalry between mother and daughter which, Affron asserts, would have drawn clear resonances in the minds of the audience between this narrative aspect and the notorious real life murder of Turner’s lover by her teenage daughter. See Affron, 50.

It is also interesting to note how contemporary filmmaker, Todd Haynes, references Sirk’s melodramas such as Imitation of Life and All That Heaven Allows (1955) to give an ironic context for his film Far From Heaven (2002). And, like Sirk, Haynes manages to simultaneously appeal to our “distanced” and ironic appreciation of generic convention and to our emotions. The German filmmaker, Rainer Werner Fassbinder was also strongly influenced by the melodramas of Sirk. This was made explicit by Fassbinder himself in his article, “Fassbinder on Sirk”, trans. Thomas Elsaesser, Film Comment 11, no.6 (November-December, 1975), 22-24.

If we restrict ourselves just to films which deal specifically with some aspect of filmmaking or television production, that list could include: Behind the Screen (1916); Sherlock Jr (1924); Movie Crazy (1932); Sunset Boulevard (1950); The Bad and the Beautiful (1952); Singin’ in the Rain (1952); Peeping Tom (1960); Beware of a Holy Whore (1971); Demon Lover Diary (1980); S.O.B. (1981); The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985); Close-Up (1990); Barton Fink (1991); Man Bites Dog (1992); Dangerous Game (1993); Super 8 ½ (1993); Ed Wood (1994); Wes Craven’s New Nightmare (1994); Living in Oblivion (1995); Lumiere et Compagnie (1995); Salaam Cinema (1995); Irma Vep (1996); Boogie Nights (1997); Tango (1998); American Movie (1999); The Blair Witch Project (1999); Bowfinger (1999); Cecil B. Demented (2000); Shadow of the Vampire (2000); State and Main (2000); Timecode (2000); Bollywood Calling (2001); Hotel (2001); Mulholland Drive (2001); And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself (2003); Baadasssss! (2003); The Amateurs (2005); For Your Consideration (2006); Hollywoodland (2006); Inland Empire (2006); Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story (2006); Tropic Thunder (2008); What Just Happened (2008); Zack and Miri Make a Porno (2008).

Similarly, there are many films about television, including: Medium Cool (1960); Network (1976); Real Life (1979); Tootsie (1982); The King of Comedy (1983); Videodrome (1983); Broadcast News (1987); The Running Man (1987); UHF (1989); Soapdish (1991); Wayne’s World (1992); Public Access (1993); S.F.W. (1994); Quiz Show (1994); To Die For (1995); Wag the Dog (1997); Pleasantville (1998); The Truman Show (1998); Edtv (1999); Magnolia (1999); Bamboozled (2000); 15 Minutes (2001); Series 7: The Contenders (2001); Confessions of a Dangerous Mind (2002); Death to Smoochy (2002); Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy (2004); Good Night, and Good Luck (2005); American Dreamz (2006); The TV Set (2006). Clearly, there are many other permutations of this such as television programs about filmmaking (e.g. Entourage), television shows about television (e.g. Extras second season), etcetera.

And to list just a few examples in this category, we could cite the following directors and their films: Frederico Fellini - 8 ½ (1963); Jean-Luc Godard - Le Mepris (1963), Passion (1982) and Soigne ta droite (1987); Francois Truffaut - Day for Night (1973); Woody Allen - Stardust Memories (1980); Wim Wenders - The State of Things (1982), Lightning Over Water (1980), and Robert Altman - The Player (1992).


Recently, Kaufman made his directorial debut with the film, Synecdoche, New York, which he also wrote. This film is perhaps even more complexly self-reflexive than Adaptation in its interweaving of performance and reality, as the world that the theatre director, Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman), creates, and the “world outside”, increasingly come to mirror each other. Synecdoche, New York, feature film. Directed and written by Charlie Kaufman. 2008.


This play on performance, celebrity, persona and identity is even further complicated by the fact that an interview between Coogan and (the real) journalist, Tony Wilson, (who Coogan has also portrayed in the equally self-reflexive Michael Winterbottom film, 24 Hour Party People) is not only used in full in the DVD extras (which seems to signify that it is a genuine interview with the “real” Steve Coogan), but a segment of the interview is also incorporated into the feature film’s narrative (implying that it is part of the film’s representation of the fictionalized “Steve Coogan”). In the interview, Coogan discusses the complexities of “being” Steve Coogan and playing a representation called “Steve Coogan”.


For a discussion of how Stanley Kubrick utilized the Tom Cruise persona in Eyes Wide Shut, see Dennis Bingham, “Kidman, Cruise and Kubrick: A Brechtian Pastiche”, in More than a Method, 247-74.


The Baby of Macon, feature film. Directed and written by Peter Greenaway. 1993. The Baby of Macon is particularly interesting for its complex “Chinese box” structure of performativity and representation by which the film continually moves through various registers: We see a play being performed; the narrative of the play includes characters who make up a kind of audience to the main action; and we see (and sometimes seem to join) an audience watching the play from the auditorium, and we are given access to the discourse of the actors who comment upon their characters and the play itself.


The King of Comedy, feature film. Directed by Martin Scorsese, written by Paul D. Zimmerman. 1982. The King of Comedy is especially interesting for the way that it explores different registers of performance – i.e. performances in real life, cinematic performance and televiusal performances. James Naremore and Lesley Stern have both analysed this film in some detail. See Naremore, Acting in the Cinema, 262-85; and Lesley Stern, “Acting out of Character: The King of Comedy as a Histrionic Text”, in Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance, eds. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (Australia: Power Publications, 1999), 277-301.


There is such a profusion of cinematic performances that could be said to be based in theatricality and excess that it is difficult to provide examples that adequately convey a sense of this diverse range. However, one might include the following: the films of The Marx Brothers; the films of Fellini, Almodovar and Fassbinder; the performances of Jack Nicholson in many of his films; the cinema of Peter Greenaway; the flamboyant and exorbitant “underground” cinema of filmmakers such as Andy Warhol and John Waters; the entire history of screen melodrama, and a vast array of Hollywood musicals and films that are centrally about “putting on a show”.

Whereas cinema is generally comprised of one-off narrative films that are relatively self-enclosed in their own diegesis, television is a much more varied medium that ranges across many forms and genres of programming. Even with respect to its approach to narrative comedy and drama – the most comparable forms to cinema fiction – television exhibits a strong tendency of drawing attention to itself. Such self-reflexive elements in television drama and comedy forms include: the use of “canned laughter” or live audiences in sit-coms; the tendency to combine performers into an amalgam of actor and TV celebrity; the similar practice of intermixing appearances of actors in narratives and TV commercials; the practice of creating “spin-off” series which often share the airwaves with “repeats” of the original show in a way that distorts any sense of narrative and temporal unity; the increasingly prevalent tendency for television dramas and comedies to reference other programs or elements of popular culture more generally, and the practice of cross promotion in interview and current affairs programming whereby elements of a fictional program’s production details become a (manufactured) topic of “current affairs” interest.

86 Underbelly, television series. First screened on February 13, 2008 on the Nine Network. Produced by Des Monaghan and Jo Horsburgh/ Australian Film Finance Corporation.


88 We will take up this issue in more detail in Chapter Seven.
Chapter Five — (Re)turning to the Image in the Performative Play of Self and Other

According to cultural critic, Christopher Lasch, the contemporary western culture of late capitalism is fundamentally narcissistic, manifesting itself in a preoccupation with the self, an inability to distinguish between self and other, an infantilization of the individual, and a focus upon externality and appearance.¹ It can be argued that our fascination with images (which increasingly includes a fascination with the screen images and performances of ourselves) keeps us bound into a dualism of self and other that is inherently narcissistic – a dualism which can be thought of, in Laura Mulvey’s evocative phrase, as an unending ‘love affair/despair between image and self-image’.²

The idea that we are somehow captured by our relation to external images implies that, rather than being completely free to create and discard identities at will in a kind of hyper-liberated postmodern mania, we actually remain (to some extent at least) locked into the ultimately unachievable task of trying to individuate ourselves from, and/or join ourselves to, various forms of otherness in the quest for identity. Mulvey – like many film theorists of the 1970s – was strongly influenced by Lacan’s conceptualization of the Imaginary order, and to the extent that our apparently inexhaustible fascination with screen images and image-based performances returns us to the narcissistic question of “who am I?”, there may indeed be good reason for us to keep in mind Lacan’s highly influential theories on how images and mimicry constitute the foundation for the development of identity that we discussed in Chapter Two. The idea that we are seduced by performance – the performances of others and our own performance of self – seems as if it may be strongly grounded in
the all-important (ego-forming/ego-maintaining) relationship between self and image.

As already discussed, Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage concerns itself specifically with the (mis)perceptions of the infant in its earliest stages of apprehending itself as a phenomenological entity. However, it is also possible to speculatively extend this model in order to help us understand the confusions between self and image that continue into adult life — confusions that now seem particularly relevant in terms of the kind of fluid and transposable intimacy we have developed with the media images and performances that surround us. Although the mirror stage of Imaginary experience is described as occurring prior to our entry into language, and therefore prior to our full constitution as subjects, Lacan always maintained that the Symbolic did not simply replace the Imaginary, but instead, that these two facets of human experience were entwined throughout the individual’s psychic existence. Given the enduring nature of our Imaginary relations, then, it has often been extrapolated that the fictional drama of/with otherness that each of us plays out in the mirror stage of infancy extends into a life-long compulsion to look to images of the other for affirmation of the self. Of even more specific relevance to this thesis, we could say that such a compulsion might well be the motivation behind our penchant for looking to media images — for example, the performances of celebrities, images of fashion and beauty — in order to provide a more complete sense of self. While one could find countless cinematic examples of this engagement with the image of the other, it is probably more correct to say that nearly all cinematic experiences may in some way be based on this type of engagement. Although he may well have been unaware of Lacan’s writings on the mirror phase, in a number of ways Ingmar Bergman’s 1966 film, Persona, provides what might be the most
evocative cinematic representation of our ocular engagements with otherness in the whole of cinema. This is particularly true of the enigmatic and self-reflexive prologue to the film.

Towards the end of this prologue, we find ourselves in what appears to be a mortuary. We see a boy wake up — or perhaps come back to life — providing a point of identification/reference for the audience as the film is about to make the transition from a surrealistic cinematic dream to a more or less realistic narrative. The identity of the boy, like much in the film, remains an enigma. He may be the abandoned son of one of the two female protagonists, Elizabet, and/or he may be the aborted son of the other protagonist, Alma. He may be a representation of the young Bergman. He may be none or all of these. In any event, the boy briefly starts to read a book (to engage with words, with language, with the Symbolic order), but is quickly distracted by the allure of the camera/screen. First he looks directly at the camera. He puts his hand up to the lens, which then becomes the screen as the shot is reversed. On the screen/mirror is the face of a woman. Is this his mother? Is it a metaphorical replay of the mirror stage of primary narcissism? That is to say, is it telling us something about the inability to distinguish self from m/other? Or is it a pure cinematic moment, one of the many sublime moments in the history of cinema in which a beautiful woman’s face fills the screen? The boy tries in vain to touch the face behind the screen — but the image is pure surface, it has nothing behind or beneath it, it is an exteriority that promises something deeper but, due to its Imaginary nature, it can never deliver. At first the face alternates between Alma and Elizabet, and then possibly becomes an amalgam of the two faces in anticipation of the famous split screen “fusion image” that will occur later in the film. In its own right, however, the image also seems to have a kind of universality. Is this the face of
every woman who has appeared on a cinema screen? While none of these questions can be answered with any certainty, this one sequence captures perfectly the sense of the mysterious connections between childhood, fantasy, memory, longing, identity, and imagination that links cinema to our psyches and to our dreams.

It may prove difficult to find a similarly elegant metaphor for our contemporary engagements with a plethora of images and performances in today’s digital, media-saturated universe. Nevertheless, it certainly seems evident that the ethos of our late capitalist/hyper-consumer driven society remains strongly connected to the psychic power that we invest in visibility. Whereas the media has traditionally focused on providing us with distant and inaccessible images of desire that we can only passively and longingly gaze at, there is now an increasing emphasis on encouraging us to construct and display our own visibility to the world via screen-based performances. That is to say, while we have always viewed media celebrities as “aspirational” role models (as idealized images of the self), we seem increasingly impelled towards the notion that we now have the opportunity to be validated by turning ourselves into mediated screen images that can be seen and acknowledged by others. Clearly, the popularity of internet sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and YouTube are indicative of this trend, as is the apparent desire of so many people to perform in all manner of reality shows, game shows, and the like, along with the willingness, more generally, of many people to allow the intrusive presence of TV cameras into their lives.

There are a number of inferences that we could make regarding the reasons behind these emerging trends. On one level, at least, it seems reasonable to say that we are simply witnessing a relatively new version of the market capitalization of our
psychic needs — in this case, the need to be acknowledged by our own visibility. It should be emphasized at this point that we are not describing a development which has suddenly emerged from a vacuum; but, rather, one that results from the convergence of a number of factors which have been evolving for some time. These factors include: a growing familiarity with the codes of media performance and imagery as our relationship to mediated representation becomes such an intimate part of our everyday experience; an apparently inexorable conflation of the public and private spheres; the (r)evolution of media production and distribution technology into increasingly accessible and interactive forms, and an ever-increasing fascination with all forms of visibility. In this context, it could even be suggested that our obsessive relation with otherness at the level of image may be thought of as a manifestation of a belief that, ultimately, our visibility is the only meaningful way we can verify our own existence — the only means by which we can be fundamentally authenticated by (and for) the other. This is a key theme that we will address in some detail in the remainder of this thesis.

According to Lacan, the subject’s gaze at the other always implies reciprocity. Beginning with the infant’s earliest ocular experiences (for example when, as an infant, our looking towards our mother is validated by an approving look back), the exchange of looks has great power. As the subject becomes entrenched within the order of language, society, and authority, the position from which the Symbolic Other regards the subject via a returning gaze becomes a fundamental aspect of what Lacan referred to as the paranoid nature of human knowledge and experience. That is to say, while the feeling that an object of our gaze is looking back at us can be an uncanny and unsettling one, it is also, according to Lacan, fundamental to how we are constituted by our relation to alterity. It is in this respect that we might well
unconsciously believe that we exist only if we are looked at by the other. In the context of our investigation of mediated performances of the self, this thesis speculatively reformulates this concept to suggest that, as subjects of a media-saturated world in which we are increasingly encouraged to perform ourselves as “user generated content”, we may start to feel that we only exist if we are gazed upon by an “audience” of some sort.

In the context of film theory, an influential use of the Lacanian mirror stage metaphor emerged during the 1970s in the “apparatus” theories of cinematic identification espoused by theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz. In these apparatus theories, the emphasis was not primarily on identification with screen characters, but, rather, identification with the experience of cinematic spectatorship per se. That is to say, spectators identify with the screen imagery being projected in front of their eyes in what Metz described as “a pure act of perception.” This perception was, Metz claimed, analogous to the mirror stage insofar as the spectator sits in a fixed point in space and misconstrues (“misrecognizes”) himself or herself as having some kind of mastery over the entire gestalt of imagery appearing on the screen in front of his or her eyes.

The perceptual analogy between the infant’s experience of mirror stage narcissistic identification and the experience of watching a film which underpins such theories relies to a significant extent on the conventional cinematic viewing experience. That is to say, the spectator sits in a darkened cinema in a more or less immobile (and dream-like) state in which the separation between one’s self and the images on the screen becomes quite blurred. In this context, screen images represent a “primordial elsewhere” that invites us to situate ourselves in an indeterminate space between our
own phenomenological bodies and the images that appear before us on the screen. In fact, it is the interplay between being “here” (in our own bodies) and “there” (with the images on the screen) that was conceptualized by Metz and others as the psychic dynamic that closely mimics the interplay between the infant and the specular image.

The notion, integral to Metz’s theorizing, that the viewer primarily identifies with the camera rather than with any particular character, evokes not just the passively observing cinematic spectator, but also has the potential to suggest a more dynamic melding together of subject and camera – a phenomenon that seems to increasingly characterize our contemporary engagements with image-based media. The concept of a “pure act of perception” which allows the subject to perceive and record the world through the eye of a camera has fascinated a variety of filmmakers since the early days of cinema. For example, the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov experimented with such notions under the rubric of the “kino-eye”, and, as referred to in the previous chapter, the connection between the camera and the phenomenological perception of the subject was also a major preoccupation of the American experimental filmmaker, Stan Brakhage. However, these experiences are not restricted to the experimental works of avant-garde practitioners. Just as in the case of its predecessor, the photographic (stills) camera, the moving image camera has become increasingly accessible and familiar to us over time. As technology and marketing have created a transition from 16mm and super 8 film cameras to videotape-based “handycams”, and then on to miniaturized and hybridized digital cameras which are now becoming a ubiquitous component of all “personal media devices”, the camera almost literally becomes part of our sensory equipment as we seem to incessantly capture and utilize images of everything in our midst, including our own performances.
In these and other respects, then, our engagements with the image are no longer restricted to our visits to the cinema, or even to our passive consumption of television. Screen images and performances are now present everywhere in our environment (on a scale ranging from the miniature to the gigantic), and our fascination with them seems to be steadily intensifying. However, this contemporary fascination with media-generated representations of the other can also no longer be thought of as simply analogous to that of the immobile, observing infant. We are now increasingly liable to interact with these media images and performances in an active and dynamic manner. We no longer merely gaze at them in an enthralled and quasi dream-like state: we now copy them, paste them, manipulate them, upload them, and download them. While it still seems likely that we identify and define aspects of ourselves in terms of the images and performances that exist in our environment, we also need to consider how the dynamics of this relationship changes in a world that is now truly replete with such representations. What, for example, are the experiential differences between the occasional visit to the cinema for a “dream fix”, and our everyday lives in which we now inescapably consume and interact with a constant stream of imaged-based performances?

The fundamental meaning of Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary mirror stage is that, through the images we see, we extend the boundaries of the self to include our exteriority. While this was undoubtedly an apt analogy in terms of our conventional role as cinema spectators, we might ask ourselves whether or not such notions can be extended into the vastly different world of hyper-mediation and virtuality which includes not only cinema and television, but also a range of other visual engagements.
with screens, images, and performances. And in so doing, we might also ask whether such a model of an alienated self, defined by its relationship to its own sense of lack and its desire for the other, can be useful to us in trying to understand how we seem increasingly seduced by the notion that we can perform multiple and mutable versions of ourselves in the postmodern world.

Josko Petkovic has provided one possible solution to this question by bringing together the Lacanian Imaginary subject and the Deleuze and Guattari schizo-subject in what he hypothesizes as a “return to the Imaginary” in a world dominated by images. In a number of respects, his hypothesis usefully informs the discussion in this thesis of what it means to be a contemporary “performing subject” in a hyper-mediated world, and, consequently, the main points of Petkovic’s hypothesis are outlined below.

The Schizo-Imaginary Subject

Petkovic hypothesizes that we now exist in an “Order of the Visual”. He argues that there has been an epistemological shift from a word-based interiority to an image-based exteriority – a new way of knowing and experiencing the world based on the surfaces and free-floating polysemy of the media images that surround us. In order to elucidate this hypothesized shift towards exteriority, Petkovic contrasts the way we experience word-based language on the one hand, and image-based signs on the other. According to Petkovic, while we relate to word signs in a logical and symbolic register, we associate images with their referent objects and we relate to those images as if they themselves were objects. Petkovic argues that a word-based phenomenology resides within the interiority of our own thoughts, and that we
experience and understand these thoughts as being of a different order to material reality. As children, we understand the distinction between thought and reality as part of our earliest encounters with language and the Symbolic order. By contrast, however, we experience visual signs in our spatial exteriority and perceive them as objects in the real.\textsuperscript{11}

Petkovic emphasizes, however, that an image-based epistemology cannot simply be seen as the binary opposite of a word-based epistemology, because we relate to visual images not just as objects but, in the context of language, also as abstract signs. Consequently, our visual perception is split across interiority and exteriority, a crucial fact that impels us to internalize these external object-images, thus incorporating them as a constituting part of our subjectivity.\textsuperscript{12} It is in this context that we can best make sense of the notion that we can be possessed by objects, images, and performances in exteriority, relating to them as if they were part of ourselves. Some of the implications of this hypothesis should be readily apparent in terms of the entangled and rather blurred contemporary relationship between reality and its mediated representation through image-based performances we have been discussing so far in this thesis.

As a means of commencing his speculations on how we enter into a relationship with images, and how we negotiate the dual codes of image and language, Petkovic adopts the established Lacanian model of the mirror and the Imaginary. The subject’s sense of identity is conceptualized in classic Lacanian terms as beginning its process of formation through the misrecognition of an image in exteriority as a complete and unified version of the self, with this Imaginary phase being a precursor to the subject’s eventual and inevitable socialization via its entry into the Symbolic
order of language. The core of Petkovic’s hypothesis, however, is the idea of a subsequent phase that further modulates contemporary subjectivity. Petkovic suggests that, due to the hypothesized epistemic shift towards an image-based exteriority, we are impelled back towards a state which bears striking similarities to the Lacanian Imaginary. Petkovic is in accord with Lacan’s view that we never exist exclusively under the sway of one psychic structure: the Symbolic order of language precedes even our birth, while both the narcissistic Imaginary and the inexpressible Real are forever intruding into our existence, even when the socializing forces of the Symbolic are predominant. To Lacan’s conception of the drama of ‘paranoiac alienation that dates back to the time at which the specular I turns into the social I’, however, Petkovic proposes a “reverse cycle”, whereby we could be thought to exit ‘the Symbolic logic of reason’ and re-enter ‘the contradictory logic of childhood’.

The hypothesis that, under the pressure of an exteriority saturated with media images, we are returning to an ambiguous, contradictory, and in some senses, almost primordially chaotic state, is rich in possibilities. The idea, for example, that we have become captivated by external images that we take to be representations of ourselves seems, at first glance, to be no more or no less than a perfect description of culturally induced narcissism, whereby we are seduced into identifying with desirable media role models and performances. This idea is complicated, however, by the fact that the content of media images and performances that abound in our exteriority are no longer merely the straightforward consumerist-lifestyle ones that they perhaps were in the “simpler times” of an earlier phase of capitalism, but are, themselves, contradictory and ambiguous. Furthermore, it could also be said that there are times when our social behaviours and performances (at the individual, societal, corporate,
and nation/state level) display a curious and sometimes very frightening combination of sophisticated and atavistic impulses. All in all, then, we might well agree with Petkovic that a different type of “logic” – the logic of childhood, of dreams, of desire, of the id, and of Dionysian performances – seems to be making increasing incursions into what we had once supposed to be a relatively ordered and rational world. In certain respects, of course, we could say that such incursions are the very hallmarks of our contemporary existence, in which many of the certainties of the Symbolic/patriarchal order seem to be rapidly dissolving.¹⁷

The implications of such a “return to the Imaginary” are significant in many respects, and, as suggested previously, bear directly on key aspects of this thesis. The misrecognition of the self for the image of the other described by the Lacanian mirror stage, when transposed onto adults who have already been socialized by the constituting processes of the linguistic/Symbolic order, and when put into the context of a hyper-mediated Imaginary, seems likely to manifest itself as a kind of double-conflict. Firstly, one might expect to see conflicts between the interdictions of the Symbolic order and the chaotic, child-like and Dionysian impulses of the Imaginary become increasingly acute as society’s — and the individual’s — return to the Imaginary becomes progressively pervasive. Secondly, a replay of the mirror stage conflict, this time in an arguably more abstract and even more alienating form, between one’s own insecure sense of self and the various versions of an ideal ego that are placed before us via mediated performances, would also seem likely. Given these escalated conflicts between the planes of Symbolic interiority and Imaginary exteriority, it seems hardly surprising that we can now witness so many instances of acting out in a range of theatricalized and exhibitionist ways in the mediated and/or
social performances that surround us. This tendency is clearly in accord with the idea that we have, in a sense, become the postmodern performers of our own subjectivity.

One of the underlying aims of Petkovic’s hypothesis that our image-based culture is returning us to a type of Imaginary state is an attempt to situate the contemporary subject within the conditions of an image-saturated postmodernity. Petkovic eschews simple either/or binaries in favour of bringing together, via an “inclusive disjunctive synthesis”, 18 Lacan’s notion of the Imaginary subject and the postmodern “schizo-subject” conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari, 19 despite the latter’s implicit rejection of the former under the banner of “anti-Oedipus”. Ultimately, Petkovic argues that the logic of schizophrenia — Deleuze and Guattari’s model for a postmodern “schizo-logic” — is equivalent to the logic of the Imaginary order, hypothesizing ‘that the postmodern subject is deterritorializing itself towards a kind of symbolic infancy…’. 20 The model suggested by Petkovic seems to characterize the contemporary subject as a hybrid creature who has, by way of its relation to exteriority, managed to shuck its “armour of alienating identity” 21 and adapt to the fragmented, chaotic, and dispersed postmodern world. This may be an optimistic view. The question as to whether contemporary experience is best typified by a subject who has de-territorialized himself/herself to the point of being able to productively relate to the flow of images and performances in their exteriority, or by a subject who remains a territorialized prisoner of late capitalism’s “image machine”, exiled into an infantilized and de-politicized state of alienation and insatiable desire, is an open one.

Another issue which is relevant to the analogy between the infant’s relation to its specular image and our relationship to a mediated and performance-oriented
imaginary is that of coherence/fragmentation. While, in the original Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, the infant beholds what appears to be a perfect image of cohesion and totality, it would seem that the images and performances that one perceives in the contemporary mediated exteriority are the very antithesis of such cohesion. Rather, the aggregate effect of the multiplicity of media performances we encounter seems more likely to be the creation of a sense of fragmentation, dissonance, and chaos. Where media performances may once have reflected back to the viewer reassuringly “perfect” images (of consumerism, family, security, etcetera), the surreal and increasingly disjointed media images and performances that now constitute the totality of our mediated experience can hardly be said to be the least bit comforting or security-inducing. It is perhaps in this respect that we could most convincingly argue that the imaged-based performances we behold in our “neo-Imaginary” state rehearse us for, and adapt us to, life in the contemporary world.

Petkovic’s hypothesis is, of course, a speculative one. However, it does provide a compelling rationale for understanding a number of processes related to our relationship with mediated experience, including the manner in which we seem so readily to attach ourselves to mediated object-images of desire in the form of screen actors and other celebrity-performers. That is to say, it may be that the reason these mediated performers seem to exert such an influence over us is that we have a tendency to try to absorb their performances into our own subjectivity, our own sense of self. Petkovic’s argument implies that this inclination to dissolve ourselves into the screen images in our exteriority would mean that, put in a slightly different way, we have a desire to merge with the mediated “super-subjects” presented to us by these exteriorized images and performances in a manner not unlike the mimetic drive conceptualized by Caillois and developed by Lacan, along with the related

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Lacanian notion of the Ideal Ego. This desire to merge with idealized and exteriorized images seems to be a crucial aspect of our relationship to screen performers, and is a major theme of this thesis. We will explore this theme in a selection of case studies and examples in the remaining chapters. At this point, though, we will simply note two things: first, the general extrapolation that can be made from Petkovic’s argument, which is that we have the potential to internalize any or all of the mediated performances that we encounter, and, second, that this extrapolation also suggests the corollary that we have the predisposition to perform a version of ourselves that utilizes, in some amalgamated form, this internalized “databank” of performances.

Capturing the Image – the “Problem of Photography”

There is one other aspect of Petkovic’s argument which is particularly relevant to this thesis. Petkovic situates the invention of photography and film as pivotal moments in what he posits as this new way of knowing the world, arguing that it was the invention of these image-capturing media that enabled the objectification/exteriorization of our interiority — of our thoughts, fetishes, and fantasies. At the heart of Petkovic’s hypothesis of a new visual order is the idea that much of what used to be the interiority of our thoughts is now to be located in an exteriority of images that promise to gratify and satisfy our desires. As a part of this argument, Petkovic invokes Foucault’s notion of the postmodern episteme. However, Petkovic establishes a rather different cause for the move from interiority to exteriority than that proposed by Foucault. The proposition put by Petkovic posits the ascendancy of photography, along with the photographic image’s problematic
relationship with language and meaning, as the real forces behind the development of the postmodern episteme.²³

As Petkovic encapsulates it, the postmodern episteme as formulated by Foucault arises from a general epistemological shift towards exteriority in the late nineteenth century, following a period of “involution of knowledge.” For Foucault, the involution of knowledge ushered in the modern episteme. It did so as a consequence of science having to go beyond the observation of appearances in the search for causes — for example, the search for the microscopic basis for electricity or magnetism — thus, making man subject to a universe of invisible, abstract forces, exterior to himself. Resulting from the oscillations between two discursive opposites — an inward-directed tendency (exemplified by the image of “psychological man”) and the discourse which posits man outside of himself as an object of knowledge — we have the conflated image of the individual as simultaneously both the subject and object of knowledge.²⁴ Crucially, Petkovic argues that the movement towards exteriorizing our interiority is encapsulated by the birth of photography in 1839. The rationale for Petkovic’s claim is two-fold: first, photography provided a perfect focus for the discourse of man in exteriority, and, second, the connections between the photographic image and the progress of commodity capitalism allowed this focus to flourish.

Indeed, Petkovic expresses surprise that the invention of photography and its implications in the context of the shift towards exteriority are never mentioned by Foucault. According to Petkovic, this omission is especially surprising as Foucault places such emphasis on visibility and the sense of sight in his writings — for example, the direct link that Foucault argues lies between the inability to see the
causes at the root of phenomenal events and the notion of “psychological man.” In any event, Petkovic makes the point that Foucault’s argument, based on an absence of vision, is a very different one to that which Petkovic himself posits, albeit tentatively, that photography and related visual media provide the primary focus for an epistemological shift towards exteriority. As Petkovic argues, the “problem of photography” has always been related to questions of the relationship between visible surfaces and invisible depths and meanings, and, in this respect, photography is at least as instrumental in the shift towards exteriority as the evolution of the scientific quest proposed by Foucault. At this point it is perhaps best to allow Petkovic to summarize his own case:

The argument put forward by Foucault is that the postmodern episteme came into existence in part because scientists could no longer see the Real in the observable exteriority. By contrast, the proposition put forward here is that the postmodern episteme came into existence precisely because scientists and everyone else could see exteriority in a new light, and photography was the new paradigm for looking at exteriority.

This thesis similarly emphasizes the ongoing centrality of camera-to-screen media in the construction of what I have been referring to as a performing subjectivity. The “problem of photography”, which Petkovic characterizes as epitomizing the stresses that exist between surface appearances and interior meanings, succinctly describes the tensions also inherent in the performance of self-identity in a contemporary social context. That is to say, the apparently opposing concepts of “seeming to be” by means of a display of surface appearances and external performances on the one hand, and “authentically being” in a more inwardly-focused existential sense on the other hand, could be said to represent the primary dilemma of the self in contemporary experience.
One important implication that can be drawn from Petkovic’s argument in this respect is that the similarity between “the problem of photography” and “the problem of identity” is not merely coincidental, if we accept the instrumentality that Petkovic attributes to photography in terms of directing our attention outwards towards exteriority. The invention of photography, of course, is only the beginning of any story that narrates our engagement with a new order of visuality. If we are to accept the idea that the invention of photography was, to some degree at least, the catalyst for initiating the movement towards our contemporary “depthless” culture of the image – to use one of Frederic Jameson’s defining features of the postmodern – then it would seem reasonable to assume that the exponential growth in the pervasiveness and influence of cameras and screens over the past few decades only intensifies the trend towards ever new levels of “surface-worship” and performative displays of identity.

This thesis argues that there is strong evidence to suggest that we are increasingly behaving as performing subjects in a culture which has been conditioned by acute camera awareness, and which places an increasing value on notions such as “telepresence” (to slightly adapt the general usage of that phrase). In this context, it certainly seems apparent that, in nearly every aspect of late capitalist culture — or as Debord called it, the “Society of the Spectacle” — value seems to be increasingly placed only on that which can be exhibited in exteriority. Thoughts, knowledge, emotions, the very notion of an inner life, now seem to mean very little unless they can be displayed and demonstrated — unless they can be performed — in some manner.

On the basis of his argument that our visual subjectivity is split across interiority and exteriority, Petkovic tells us that we are dealing not with a total shift towards
exteriority but rather with an experience that is inclusive of both, even though the
locus of contemporary subjectivity may reside in exteriority. A synthesis such as
this enables the subject — for example in the act of watching a film, or while logged
into cyberspace as a consumer and/or a performer — to experience the world from
multiple positions and vantage points. This notion is, of course, a dramatic departure
from the conventional “commonsense” view that our subjectivity resides entirely
within our thoughts, and in some ways could even be interpreted as taking us out of
our phenomenological bodies. Such a departure is not only a hallmark of discourses
of the postmodern subject but, as we shall touch upon in the final chapter of this
thesis, also forms the basis of much theorizing about the subject within a techno-
cultural environment. It is perhaps worth noting, too, that the notion of an expanded
subjectivity can also be seen as a type of madness — a schizophrenic state in which
subjects believe themselves able to take up multiple positions both inside and outside
of their own bodies, to radically doubt the veracity of their own embodied presence,
or even to believe that they can do away with their bodies altogether. As we have
already noted, of course, a number of theorists — perhaps most notably and
emphatically, Deleuze and Guattari — have argued that the experiences of the
schizophrenic subject and the postmodern subject might not only be characterized as
metaphorically similar, but may indeed be two sides of the same coin.

The movement from interiority to exteriority, and as Petkovic argues, the inclusive
disjunctive synthesis by which the two are conflated, seems to imply the attenuation
of the sense of an interior self, and as a consequence, a greater reliance on external
sources in the construction, maintenance, and authentication of identity. If this is the
case, then one would expect such a development to be manifested in the social
performances we witness in the world around us. We would expect to see less
emphasis on, and less belief in, the idea that it is possible to draw knowledge, wisdom, imagination, and creative inspirations from our own interiority, and in its place, more emphasis on modeling the self on mediated/public identities, lifestyles, and performances. Indeed, as we look around us at the performances we see in the media, and at the social performances of contemporary subjects, this would indeed seem to be the case. There can be little doubt that the proliferation of camera-to-screen media has created a world that is awash with images of desire, and a world in which these images have garnered exceptional currency. The implication in all of this – an implication directly related to questions of screen performance – is that mediated experience bears an increasingly significant relation to our understanding of our own identities.

**Media Images and Media Performances as the Currency of Contemporary Subjectivity**

Petkovic’s thesis that the contemporary world and the contemporary subject are retreating from the Symbolic order of language and re-entering an Imaginary state that is based on the more diagrammatic, multi-dimensional “logic” of the image is, of course, a highly speculative and quite radical one. It is based on the conception that the visual emphasis in our thoroughly mediated world – an emphasis that begins with the invention of photography and continues to the digital present – has had a determining effect on our perceptions and knowledge of the world, including our understandings of ourselves. In common with much of the radical theorizing about contemporary/postmodern experience we have explored thus far in this thesis, one could argue that there is a metaphoric/poetic element to Petkovic’s argument.
Are we literally returning to a child-like state? Do we literally mistake the images and performances we see in the media and elsewhere for ourselves? Do we now literally think of ourselves as surfaces with absolutely no sense of our own interior consciousness? When expressed so clearly as binary oppositions, the answer to these and similar questions would almost certainly be “no”. However, the value of such theorizations is that they can provide insights about significant tendencies in our behaviours, our perceptions (including our self-perceptions), and the ways in which we interact with the institutions that comprise our social world. A Lacanian-inspired interpretation of contemporary media-influenced subjectivity, for example, highlights the intensity of our attraction to the ubiquity of images and performances in our exteriority. Likewise, the insights of a range of poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists remind us that we can better understand ourselves in relation to our world by considering how we are constituted by the effects of elements such as language, knowledge, power, or desire, rather than uncritically taking the realist/humanist position that we are grounded and centred subjects who simply perceive a neutral reality outside of ourselves. In this context, Deleuze and Guattari are particularly influential theorists of a multiple and non-linear approach to subjectivity that seems highly relevant to considering a world in which we would be better able to respond by performing ourselves as flexible and adaptable “assemblages”, rather than clinging on to a belief in the enduring and permanent nature of our social institutions or, indeed, of our own authentic being. In addition to this, a range of contemporary media theorists show us that the material world we consider to be “reality” on the one hand, and the media-constructed world of spectacle and performance on the other, are becoming less distinguishable and less separable by the day. Some of these theorists characterize the contemporary world as one in which the individual is a passive victim of the processes of hyper-mediation,
while others claim that there is significant potential for individual agency as we interact in increasingly intimate ways with the content and technologies of mediation.

So far in this thesis we have explored a number of respects in which conventional preconceptions about the individual subject, and the supposed reality that they perceive, have been put under considerable theoretical pressure during the latter stages of the twentieth century. The questioning of such presumptions has specific relevance to understandings of screen performance, which have traditionally relied on more or less humanist presuppositions about the authenticity and interiority of the individual, along with the assumption of a stable ground of reality that is represented in a performance. As we will discuss in the final two chapters, the fact that these presumptions can no longer be held onto with certainty has had a significant effect on many of the screen performances with which we now engage. In this respect, not only is there a discernible change in many of the performances that we see in fictional feature film and television dramas, but there also appears to be an increasing emphasis on the sorts of screen performances that engage the fluid and uncertain space which divides actuality from representation. That is to say, in a number of different ways we seem to be becoming increasingly intrigued by media performances that reflect on notions of mediation and performativity (and not simply by performances that purport to transparently represent a fictional narrative). The logical extension of this increasing interest in the self-reflexivity of performance (and of media practices more generally) is the current tendency for media audiences and media producer/performers to converge into a conflated entity.
It seems that media images and media performances have become the currency for transmitting our identities and our personalities — a currency that we have adopted as a result of our exposure to, and intimacy with, an increasingly ubiquitous and influential media landscape. The way that contemporary subjects increasingly commingle their own sense of identity with media images and performances has many potential ramifications which are, at the very least, important to consider. While theories of postmodern subjectivity and contemporary media/technoculture can sometimes seem extreme and/or abstruse, there are many respects in which the behaviour and attitudes of contemporary individuals puts such radical theorizing into practice on a daily basis. In our contemporary world of media-aware and media-generating subjects, media performance takes on new meanings and new directions.

In the next chapter we will look in considerable detail at two case studies of screen practitioners — Sadie Benning and Jonathan Caouette — who are exemplars of a postmodern performing sensibility in a number of the ways we have identified so far. Both of these screen practitioners demonstrate a sophisticated understanding and knowledge of popular screen culture, along with an ability to utilize the camera, the materials of popular culture, and their own performance skills, in order to fashion new identities in a playful and creative manner. At the same time, however, we can see in both of these artists a tension at work, between the playfulness of a postmodern approach to identity, and a desire to “find themselves” through their mediated performances.

According to Marshall McLuhan, the overall nature of our relationship to media is inherently narcissistic. In his discussion of our “sensory connection” to the media, McLuhan invokes the myth of Narcissus, reminding us that the word Narcissus derives from the Greek word narcosis, or numbness, and then explains his analogy in the following way:

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. … He had adapted to his extension of himself and become a closed system.

Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves.


3 As Yannis Stavrakakis writes: ‘From the time of its birth, and even before that, the infant is inserted in a symbolic network contructed by its parents and family’; (19) and, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan puts it, ‘the Imaginary spills childhood material into adult life’. Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 19; and Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Great Britain: Croom Helm, 1986), 155.


(Although Lacan originally presented his mirror stage theory in a paper in 1936, it was not widely read until *Ecrits* was published in 1966; therefore it seems highly unlikely that it would have influenced Bergman in the making of *Persona.*)

5 In another parallel with Lacan, the relationship between Elizabet (actor/star) and Alma (nurse/fan) is in some respects one of self (Alma) to idealized other (Elizabet) and in some ways echoes Lacan’s notion of self-punishing paranoia as manifested in his doctoral thesis on Aimee.


8 This clearly evokes Marshall McLuhan’s notion of the media as “extensions of man”. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*. It is also worth noting that the “immersive” imperative of computer gaming means that they are nearly all designed with a first person subjective/experiential view which is much like the “camera-eye” view – a theme which is taken to its “bio-tech” limit in films such as *Strange Days* (1995) and *Existenz* (1999) in which images and sounds are plugged directly into the senses of the individual.


10 Ibid.,130.

11 Ibid., 130-1.

12 Ibid, 132-3
13 Ibid., 104-7.

14 Ibid., 105.


16 Petkovic, 105.

17 In this context, Slavoj Zizek refers to a “demise of symbolic efficiency” in contemporary society. That is to say, the absence of an erstwhile authoritatively meaningful and clear social (paternal) framework of authority – an absence which manifests itself in a regression to a state of reflexive narcissism on the part of individuals. See Slavoj Zizek, The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology (1999; reprint, London and New York: Verso, 2000), 323-347.

And in specific terms of how we relate to the variety of mediated images and performances with which we are regularly confronted, Jodi Dean provides what seems to be a very apt summation of Zizek’s idea when she writes that one of the effects of this decline of symbolic authority is an uncertainty with regard to identity on the part of the contemporary subject:

……identities shift and change, taking on different meanings and attributes in different contexts. Indeed, part of the confusion in contemporary life stems from our inability to read many of the images it offers. What is radical and transgressive at one moment becomes conformist kitsch at another.


18 Petkovic explains that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the disjunctive synthesis of schizophrenic logic has the potential to escape the restrictions of conventional Either-Or logic by allowing for both terms of a disjunction to be possible without negating one another. Petkovic, 92.

19 Ibid., 148-53

20 Ibid., 123


22 The TV series Mad Men, situated around the advertising industry in the late 1950s/early 1960s, can be seen as an evocative exploration of how such naively comforting ideological images of consumerism began to reach a “crisis of confidence” in a changing society. Mad Men, television series. Created by Matthew Weiner. First screened July 19, 2007.


26 Ibid., 139-40.

27 Ibid., 140.

28 In his influential writing about “the cultural logic” of postmodernism/late capitalism, Frederic Jameson tells us that ‘perhaps the supreme formal feature’ of postmodernism is ‘a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense’. Frederic Jameson,
By “telepresence” I mean being present in a (televisual) medium as opposed to being present in the material world. The term “telepresence” as it is generally used in robotics and virtual reality discourses refers to the sensation of being in a location other than where one is physically located, or as Ken Goldberg puts it, “presence at a distance”. See Ken Goldberg’s “Telepresence” website: http://presence.stanford.edu:3455/Collaboratory/372 (accessed July 22, 2009).

Petkovic, 132-3.
Chapter Six — Postmodern Performing Subjects: Sadie Benning and Jonathan Caouette

Sadie Benning and Jonathan Caouette are two filmmakers who create screen performances which interrogate the self, document the self, play out versions of the self, and/or simply revel in the narcissistic urge to exhibit the self. Benning’s “Pixelvision” video productions made mostly during the 1990s, and Caouette’s documentary, Tarnation, utilize images and sounds in the creation of complex interplays of autobiography and fiction in their performance of identity, or, rather, a multiplicity of identities.

Benning deconstructs aspects of the relationships that can exist amongst identity, mediated image, photographed subject and camera. She performs multiple versions of herself — multiple “Sadies” — across gender and racial lines, utilizing a complex and ambiguous combination of autobiographical “fact” and narrative fiction. Her productions – invariably shot on her trademark low resolution “Pixelvision” video camera – are mostly produced within the confines of her bedroom and often take on something of the form of the “video diary”. Caouette’s camera is similarly used as a way of exploring the self. It seems apparent from the autobiographical bricolage of Tarnation, however, that Caouette is compelled — almost as a matter of psychic survival — to make his camera, and his performances in front of his camera, an essential part of his life. In a sense, it could be said that the reality of Caouette’s existence is double: simultaneously lived experience and dramatic/cinematographic content.
In the works of both Benning and Caouette, we can see examples of the creative use of cameras and screens that vividly demonstrate how the construction of contemporary identity is intimately tied to images, media and performance. Their works – and their creative aesthetics – have emerged from a range of influences including experimental and avant-garde cinema and the content of mainstream popular culture, indicating a postmodern sensibility which can be said to contain fertile mixtures of media awareness, irony, self-reflexivity, and theatricality. In some respects the relatively minimalist and “primitive” work of Benning is in contrast to Caouette’s almost overwhelmingly rich collage of images and sounds. At the same time, though, the work of both screen practitioners clearly anticipates our expanding media universe of so-called “user generated content” in which increasing numbers of young people are expressing themselves (and performing themselves) via cameras and audio-visual screens.

**Sadie Benning: Coming Out with a Camera**

Sadie Benning is a highly regarded American video artist/filmmaker. Her early work consists of a series of short productions, all of which were shot on a low resolution Pixelvision video camera. These early productions use Benning’s own bedroom as the anchoring location, and, indeed, a number of the productions are located exclusively within these confines. Her productions centre on images of herself (which includes not only a range of differing “versions of herself”, but also other clearly fictive characters that she portrays), inter-cut with the iconography of popular culture, and text-based graphics in the form of crudely handwritten or paper “cut-out” titles. These visual elements are accompanied by a combination of monologues and voice-over narrations that, once again, represent a number of fictive
characters and/or facets of Benning’s identity. The soundtracks of her productions also contain a rich variety of popular cultural sources in the form of music tracks and soundtracks from film and television programming.

In a number of respects, Benning’s videos exemplify the kind of experimentation and identity play that is at the performative heart of postmodern subjectivity. In terms of the notion of an identity that is explored, experimented with, and developed, there appears to be a discernible trajectory in Benning’s work. Her earliest work commences as a somewhat anxious and narcissistic exploration of her own presence, before turning to a process of affirming her identity as a young lesbian woman, and then proceeding on to a more playful expression of the implications and possibilities of identity conceptualized as polymorphous and multiple. Benning’s body of work to date – and especially her earlier work – can be thought of as the documentation via audio-visual means of an identity in the process of being developed. Her employment of a diaristic mode, and her utilization of camcorder technology, seems to privilege immediacy and performativity over reflection and interiority in a manner that is in keeping with contemporary trends towards the construal of reality as a spectacle of the here-and-now. Even when Benning articulates what seem to be painful and intimate feelings and memories, there is a sense that they occur as a “present-tense” stream-of-consciousness process rather than being “scripted” or pre-mediated. Bill Horrigan’s account of Benning’s significance as a video artist captures something of this sense of an identity-in-progress when he writes that:

The teenage isolation she charts is of course nothing new. What is new is the record Benning’s work provides of the very process of coming out as a teenage lesbian as it’s happening.⁴
However, Benning’s work is also interesting and relevant to this thesis in other respects as well. Her productions explore the tensions between a number of problematic relations that impact upon issues of identity and representation in a way that resonates deeply with notions of the postmodern construction of self. First, one could say that the essence of Benning’s work is a conflation of her (developing) identity and the camera-based images and performances that she creates. There appears to be such a strongly symbiotic relationship between Benning’s on-screen portrayals and the creative construction of her own identity that it is tempting to conjecture that the image-identities she invents for the camera/screen function as prototypes for her own life. It seems as if Benning attempts to discover a way to be in the world through the characters that she constructs and performs in front of the camera. Second, Benning is her own photographer in all of her productions. She is both the photographer and the photographed. In this respect, she interestingly deconstructs certain problematics of the relationship between camera, photographer and photographic subject/object that are deeply ingrained in the ideology and practice of photographic and cinematographic representation. Third, the tension that Benning creates between autobiography on the one hand, and narrative and performance on the other, is strongly evocative of the corroded distinctions between reality and fabulation, fact and fiction, that seem to characterize much of what we encounter in the exteriority of our mediated imaginary. Finally, the ambiguity, gender fluidity and androgyny that define many of Benning’s on-screen images and personae can be seen to represent a praxiological incarnation of much that queer and feminist theory has had to say on the subject of the performative and cultural construction of identity.
There are a few different senses in which we could say that Benning’s work is about “coming out”. As with the familiar usage of the term *coming out*, there is an explicit focus in much of Benning’s early work on her coming to terms with and then proudly (pro)claiming her sexual identity as a lesbian. Alongside this, there is a sense of her artistic voice emerging as her filmmaking develops, as well as a literal coming out from the cocoon of her bedroom to embrace the outside world. In all of these respects, there is a sense of *passage* from a shy, perhaps even debilitating, introversion to a more empowered ability to interact with the external world on her own terms. In this respect, a significant element of Benning’s work seems to represent a desire to engage with exteriority through the use of that most exteriorizing of technologies, the camera.

In her first film, *A New Year*, we stay almost exclusively enveloped inside Benning’s bedroom. The only “external” images throughout the body of the film emanate from her television set – the televised imaginary that is clearly a crucial source of material and inspiration for her personal and creative expressivity. In this film there is neither voice-over narration nor direct address: Benning only ever “speaks” to us textually, via primitive handwritten title cards. Nor do we see Benning’s own image throughout the entire film – save for one, fleeting, almost subliminal glimpse of her mirror image. Also, while the text-based inter-titles deal with aspects of her adolescent anxieties, and with her emerging social concerns, there are no references to Benning’s sexuality in the film.

All of these aspects change and develop over the course of Benning’s next few films. In her second film, *Living Inside*, we hear Benning’s voice as narration in the form of first person diarizing. We also witness the beginning of what will be a constant...
motif in many of her subsequent films: a lingering examination of her own face, almost as if she were peering into a mirror, trying to connect her inside feelings to her outside appearance. In her third film, *Me and Rubyfruit*, Benning begins to explore her sexual identity by narrating the story of a romance between two teenage girls. With the customary ambiguity of Benning’s narrative technique, however, it is never entirely clear whether the first person protagonist is to be taken as Benning herself, as a fictitious character, or as a hybrid, mid-space persona that exists between these two poles of autobiography and fiction. For the first time, though, Benning’s voice and image are brought together as she presents her final narration in a “lip synched” shot rather than — as in the rest of the film — in the form of voice-over narration overlaid by separate images (including, sometimes, her own mute close-ups). This represents a distinct formal change which could be seen as connoting a declaration by Benning that she is, indeed, the protagonist of the story: that is, “owning up” to the character through the act of combining the visibility of her image and the audibility of her voice. In any event, it seems that the protagonist remains fearful of the consequences of allowing the lesbian identity that she now acknowledges to herself to “come out” into the public sphere. Unlike the defiant and confronting direct address that will characterize her subsequent films, in this shot Benning is framed in a three-quarter profile, “objective” angle that is more reminiscent of the interrogative style of the conventional documentary interview than that of the “video diary” form. Benning tells us that she and Leota, the girl to whom she was attracted, ‘knew enough not to go kissing in front of everyone’.

In her next film, *If Every Girl Had a Diary*, however, Benning tells us through a form of direct address which is variously intimate, confessional, and confronting,
that she is finally ready to move from a furtive acknowledgement to an open embrace of her sexuality:

It’s only been a year since I crawled the walls. And, you know, I’ve been waiting for that day to come when I can walk the streets. People would look at me and say, ‘that’s a dyke.’ And if they didn’t like it, they’d fall into the centre of the earth and deal with themselves. Maybe they’d return, but they’d respect me.

From this point on, it seems clear that Benning’s own identity as a lesbian is never really in question. Furthermore, it seems that this discovery – this emergence of her sexual identity – marks a significant turning point in Benning’s filmmaking. She now seems sufficiently “at home” with herself to be confident of venturing out into more playful and performative explorations of her own identity, and of the notion of contemporary identity more generally (and from this point, it is perhaps also significant that Benning emerges from the confines of her bedroom to film some scenes in exterior locations). In her subsequent films — especially Jollies,10 A Place Called Lovely11 and It Wasn’t Love12 — Benning moves towards a more elaborate mode of narrativity and performativity whereby her own (gendered) image seems to become increasingly indeterminate, and whereby she quite explicitly performs a range of characters that traverse gender, race, and class.

In Jollies, Benning takes the step — contrary to most of her early films — of introducing another person to the screen, albeit briefly, for a tightly-framed two-shot of herself and a woman kissing sensually. Benning then takes us through another apparently autobiographical narrative which charts a course from her very early attraction to girls, through her sexual experiences with both males and females, to a
final affirmation of her “true” lesbian identity which she summarizes, textually, in a manner which is unequivocal and to the point: ‘I found out I was as queer as can be’.

Whilst this reading is the most obvious and the most probable, it seems to be playfully undercut (or, rather, complemented) by what could be read as a parallel, other-gendered narrative. That is to say, because the “self-images” of Benning are so androgynous, and the language employed by Benning as the first person narrator never really signifies gender, it is possible to also read the narrative as being about a young male negotiating the map of his sexual identity. The validity of this possible double reading also seems justified by the image of Benning applying shaving cream and shaving her face, as well as wearing a business shirt and tie in one sequence. It is only after this sequence — towards the end of the film, and just prior to her final declaration of her sexual identity — that she tells us, ‘I’m not a man’. This double reading, which seems intentional on Benning’s part, appears to typify the kind of “subversive” performance of gender that Judith Butler has in mind when she writes of ‘proliferating gender configurations’ and ‘destabilizing substantive identity’.13

In *A Place Called Lovely*, Benning seems to continue her play on the theme of the agency one has in creating identity. She begins by narrating a number of personal, childhood stories (which could, once again, be factual, fictive or quasi-fictive), in which she was bullied or preyed upon by boys and men. She also narrates accounts of other incidents which have profoundly disturbed her, such as the serial killing of black children in Atlanta in the late 1970s. Against this compendium of risks and threats to vulnerable childhood, Benning recounts her grandmother’s opinion that ‘bad things happen to bad people’. Then, after concluding that her grandmother’s opinion is a ‘big fat lie’, Benning transforms herself into the image of an “all-
American-girl-next-door” in blonde wig and conservative dress, standing in front of an American flag as “America the Beautiful” is played on the soundtrack. This image, we are told, is the ideal that Bennning’s grandmother had for her granddaughter – ‘one of those sweet little white girls who were some people’s dream of what was right in the world’. We then cut dramatically from this image to a shot of a short-haired, androgynous-looking Benning staring defiantly at the camera. Clearly, this oppositional cut takes us from a “possible Sadie” (that her grandmother would have chosen) to the “preferred Sadie” that Benning has chosen for herself.

In It Wasn’t Love, Benning moves even further along the path of narrative and performance in a manner that could be seen to continue to subvert normalizing and essentializing notions of gender identity. Benning assumes a number of personae and gives a range of performances throughout the film. At times, the characters she portrays are clearly gendered, while at other times their gender seems more ambiguous. The film also traverses, and ironically deconstructs, a range of cinematic genres: in particular the road movie, and the young-love/outlaws-on-the-run films such as Badlands, Gun Crazy, and Bonnie and Clyde. As we follow a somewhat convoluted and ambiguous narrative of how Benning’s character ‘drove to Hollywood with this chick’, we encounter a multiplicity of characters that Benning performs. These characters include: a (somewhat effeminate, possibly gay) bikie with tattoo, bandana and goatee beard; a femme fatale-type woman in night-robe and clearly fake/cheap-looking blonde wig (who, equally, could be a man in drag); an urbane and sophisticated woman with beret and cigarette; a black female (or feminine-looking male) character miming to a Fats Domino song; a young male hoodlum-type with beard, over-sized (phallic?) cigar and walking cane with which he performs a “phallic-play” mime of masturbation, and, finally, a series of differing
images of what would seem to be “Benning-as-Benning”, but which arguably range
in appearance from apparently (lesbian) female to possibly (gay?) male. Benning
concludes the narrative by informing us that, contrary to their romantic, cinema-
inspired master-plan, she and her lover ‘didn’t make it to Detroit, much less
Hollywood. Instead [they] pulled into a fried chicken parking lot and made out’. As
if to underscore the performative aspects of the film itself, and the way that (young)
people live their lives according to the myths and narratives of the media, Benning
adds: ‘We didn’t need Hollywood, we were Hollywood’.

There is much about Benning’s films — and, most particularly her own
performances in those films — that resonate with poststructuralist/postmodernist
notions of fluid, mutable and decentred identities. Likewise, Benning’s films
strongly evoke theories of performativity — such as those of Judith Butler — that
suggest it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes sexual identity; or, as
Butler herself, puts it, that ‘identity is performatively constituted by the very
“expressions” that are said to be its results’.17 We could say that, through her films,
Benning creatively expresses, or plays out, the very constructed and contingent
nature of gender identity to which Butler refers, and, due to the conflation of
Benning’s own life and her creative work, she could be said to doubly manifest these
notions of performativity. First, she demonstrates (in a more or less “documentary”
sense) how she has performatively (and consciously) constructed her own gender
identity, and second, she performs (in the more theatrical-representational sense of
the term) the idea that sexual identity is non-essentialized and able to be creatively
(re)constructed.
Butler tells us that the ‘appearance of substance’, in terms of an integrated and continuous core of gender identity is, in fact, no more than ‘a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in their mode of belief’. However, Benning’s films take us out of the realm of the mundane by way of a conscious deconstruction of the naturalness and given-ness of gender, through a performance of its discontinuity and provisionality in a way that seems to accord with Butler’s suggestion that ‘[j]ust as bodily surfaces are enacted as natural, so these surfaces can become a site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself’. Clearly, Benning’s work fits snugly into discussions of performativity in the context proposed by Butler because of Benning’s apparent “identity shift” from the hegemonic norm (that is, “a sweet little white girl”) to the more marginal space of her lesbian identity. In another sense, though, Benning could be seen to represent an openness and preparedness to experiment and play with the ideas of changing and performing versions of one’s identity that is observable in many young people — not only those who appear to occupy marginalized positions in society due to gender, race, class or other factors. In this respect, notions that “we are what we perform ourselves to be” seem to take on a wider context than the specificities of gender and sexual identity focused upon by theorists such as Butler and could, indeed, be seen to more generally represent a contemporary, postmodern attitude and strategy for being in the world.

For all that we may wish to say about Benning’s playful and provisional approach to identity, however, there is nevertheless quite a strong sense of longing that runs through her work. This longing seems to equate to a need Benning has to find her place in the world, or, one might say, to be true to herself. For Benning, this need
appears to be closely aligned to her discovery/acknowledgment of herself as a lesbian, which, despite her playful and sometimes ambiguous performances, she seems clearly to perceive to be her “true identity”. That is to say, it appears that Benning considers her lesbian identity to be at the core of who she is, regardless of how such a “core” might have been constructed, or whether or not some might consider the very notion of a core of identity to be merely the misrecognition of the discursive/linguistic constitution of the “I” for a more profound interiority.

As we have already discussed, one of the themes that runs through this thesis is an exploration of the tension that seems to exist between the (increasingly prevalent) elements of contemporary existence that signify to us the discontinuous, fragmentary and construct-able nature of our identities on the one hand, and the psychic need to believe in a meaningful inner core of selfhood on the other. This thesis suggests that, while a flexible and creative approach to identity might be considered an important strategy for operating in the contemporary world, it would nevertheless seem psychically unsustainable to understand ourselves purely as discursively constituted “signifying practices”.

The tension between these two apparently opposing conceptions — the constructed nature of our identities set against a psychic/existential need to believe in at least some semblance of a coherent and centred self — returns us to the notion of a drama between exteriority and interiority, with its numerous possible implications and manifestations. One aspect of Benning’s work that seems to particularly mark this dramatic tension between exteriority and interiority is her narcissistic fascination with her (self) image. As already suggested, we could see this motif — particularly in Benning’s earliest work — as a somewhat anxious attempt to assure herself of her
own presence in the world. In this view, we find ourselves confronted once again by
the Lacanian mirror. Perhaps more significantly, though, such an interpretation
suggests an “adult replay” of mirror stage misrecognition whereby, in our
contemporary image-dominated world, a camera-derived image of oneself appears to
be a more authenticating guarantee of presence than even the phenomenological
perception of one’s own corporeality.

Benning’s fascination with her own image is a consistent theme in much of her
work. In particular, the lengthy and detailed self-explorations of her face become the
linchpin of nearly all of her early films. Occasionally, Benning finds a relatively
objective angle from which to view herself, but more often than not she stares
directly into the lens. Her facial expression is sometimes dependent upon the tenor
and narrative circumstances of the performance that she is giving at the time;
however there are many other instances when she stares steadfastly and defiantly
into the lens, as if daring the viewer to judge her or to disbelieve what she has just
said. In these instances, Benning appears to be conflating an explicit self-reflexivity
with an implicit desire to implicate the viewer through a reciprocity of gazes.

Sometimes Benning stares mutely at the camera, while at other times she addresses it
directly. There are also occasions when, even though she is speaking, she
deliberately frames her mouth out of the image, as if to evoke the confessional yet
secretive air of a diary entry. And then there are still other moments when all we are
able to see are extremely magnified and fragmentary close-ups of “facial parts”, that
could perhaps be said to further destabilize any notion of a unified and coherent
subject.
The proximity of the camera is a crucial aspect of Benning’s work. She nearly always has the camera physically in her grasp. When Benning explores her face, or other aspects of her body, we are left with a strong impression of the camera being used as an extension of her sensory apparatus — she looks at herself, but with a type of looking that is almost tactile. As Ann Cvetkovich has noted:

…. Benning produces images that ask to be touched rather than seen. In fact, Benning touches her viewers both literally and figuratively through what might be called an aesthetics of intimacy. She takes intimacy literally by getting close to the objects she shoots and thus narrowing the distance between the viewer and the visual field.20

Indeed, the manner in which Benning uses the camera to scrutinize herself creates the most extreme kind of intimacy, occupying a liminal position at the threshold between the surface and the interior of her own body. For example, Mia Carter describes Benning’s close-up use of the camera in the following way:

… her body remains spectacularly visible, due to the Pixel camera’s fixed lens and unlimited focus and her placement of her body in the audience’s field of vision. The Pixel camera has the technological ability to record images in as close proximity to an object as possible. In Benning’s videos this ability allows the viewer the most intimate access to her body permitted in a filmic medium. The camera moves up her leg, exploring what appears to be, because of the lens’ closeness, a forest of downy hair; at other times, the viewer almost feels as if she can enter Sadie’s body via an ear, a nostril, an eye, pores of the skin.21

The idea that the camera, almost of its own volition, seeks beneath superficial layers — figured in Benning’s work as the surface/skin of her own body — is an evocative one. The metaphorical image of the camera as an apparatus designed to poke and prod in an attempt to pierce surfaces seems to be so culturally ingrained that there is
a tendency to think of intrusive camera practices as inherent to the nature of photography and cinematography (as well as their analogue and digital video descendents). To think purely in this way, of course, would be to fail to factor in the desiring implications associated with both the act of photographing, and with our society’s insatiable appetite for images. In characteristically resonant manner, Susan Sontag managed to synthesize attributes of the camera apparatus with human and societal desires in her account of such practices:

… there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.22

The history of the camera is replete with vivid examples of such predatory and exploitative practices — beginning with the earliest uses of photography to catalogue and surveil (as well as more prurient and entrepreneurial activities such as the creation of pornographic images, which was also a key component of the medium’s nascent development).23 And yet, it seems that in our contemporary mediated world in which image-capture technologies (for example, video cameras and surveillance cameras, phone-cams and web-cams) are as ubiquitous as are the opportunities to appear on a variety of screens, there is an increasingly strong impulse for individuals to willingly yield themselves up to be “symbolically possessed” in the manner suggested by Sontag.

In Benning’s case, of course, there is no intrusive photographer – there is only Benning herself. It would seem that Benning’s practices reflect contemporary trends
towards “documenting the self” in a manner that paradoxically implies both a sense of willing self-objectification, and a sense of self-empowerment suggested by having dispensed with any notion of a “third-party” photographing auteur. That Benning is both the photographing and the photographic subject is not only of theoretical interest, but is crucial to the creative form her work takes in terms of an ongoing “dance” between the conventional sense of performing for the camera, and the equally prevalent sense of being connected to the almost literally subjective camera-eye. Elements of her film, Living Inside, will serve as just one of many possible examples from Benning’s work of her dual relationship with the camera. Throughout the course of her “diarizing” in this film, we watch an almost continual exploration of Benning’s face: a combination of speaking directly into the lens of the camera, and staring mutely at it as if privately scrutinizing her own reflection. At one point, however, the camera suddenly changes to a more objective angle on Benning’s face as she chews gum and makes the occasional bubble (presumably, Benning has framed up on a real mirror and/or has found a place to rest the camera instead of hand-holding it). The change is significant, as Benning seems to move from subject to object, and indeed, there is a hint of voyeuristic eroticism about the shot as it focuses on her lips and masticating jaw-line, punctuated by the quasi-organic membrane of the gum emanating from her mouth. We then return to the more familiar “subjective” style of Benning’s hand-held camera work as she continues to explore her face, concluding on a frozen extreme close-up of her eyeball staring directly at the lens — perhaps reproaching us for our recently voyeuristic one-way gaze.

In these examples of Benning’s “intimate” utilization of the camera, we are reminded of that which Petkovic identifies as “the problem of photography”: the
tension between visible surfaces and invisible depths that characterizes not only camera-originated, image-based media, but, arguably, all of contemporary epistemology. Of course, we could argue that such a tension belies the apparent equanimity with which the postmodern subject is thought to play only across the surfaces of reality, by suggesting a co-existent urge to “dig deeper” in the search for more profound meanings and more intense feelings.

Ultimately, however, all desires to penetrate the surface of the image are bound to be frustrated. It is, of course, impossible to actually enter into interiority with an image. No matter how close we get to an image, it can only ever offer up its own surface. In an on-screen performance, for example, there is no direct access to the internal thoughts, motivations, and emotions of a character, except to the degree that they are articulated by language. In one respect, we could say that a significant part of the allure of engaging with the image of a performer and their performance is the active and imaginative attempt on the part of the viewer to decode interior meanings from ambiguous surface signifiers. Another sense of the way we relate to such images, however, revolves around the pleasures – almost tactile, corporeal pleasures – that can be gained from interacting simply on the level of surface qua surface. Referring specifically to the field of portrait photography (where the anchoring of meaning through language is not generally an important factor), it is interesting to note that the celebrated photographer, Richard Avedon, draws an analogy between portraiture and performance. He writes:

Portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural. I can understand being troubled by this idea – that all portraits are performances – because it seems to imply
some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter. But that’s not it at all.

The point is that you can’t get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you’ve got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface.'

We should keep in mind, of course, that Benning’s productions are not simply comprised of images, but include language — both spoken and textual — as crucial components of signification. Like most screen productions with which we engage — and, indeed, like the material and mediated “realities” we encounter more generally — Benning offers us a rich semiotic field that mixes Imaginary and Symbolic elements. And, as Petkovic has argued, it is precisely this mix of Imaginary and Symbolic signification that requires us, as contemporary subjects, to be able to hold together the two very different perceptual modes of exteriority and interiority.

Much of the engaging quality of Benning’s work derives from the tension created by paradoxical desires associated with interiority and exteriority — a desire to penetrate impenetrable surfaces in order to return to the security and privacy of her own interiority, and yet, at the same time, to emerge from an excess of (introverted) interiority into the material world of external action. In the aspects of this “drama of interiority and exteriority” that suggest an outward impulsion in Benning’s work, a particular inflection of the term coming out once again seems resonant and apposite. As already suggested, Benning seems to demonstrate a desire to externalize, through her performances, aspects of herself that might otherwise have remained internalized or repressed (and, as we have also discussed, a great deal of the discourse on acting is based on the notion of exteriorizing one’s interiority). Indeed, it could be said that a performance is no more and no less than the transformation of thoughts and
emotions into external actions and behaviours – though, on the other hand, it is also possible to view performances, like photographic images, purely as a play of surfaces. However, while some will argue that identity exists only through the very performance of it, there seems little doubt that Benning’s early films are a manifestation of her need to find an external expression for her inner conflicts.

It may also be worthwhile reminding ourselves, as we ponder the Imaginary and narcissistic connotations of Benning’s work, that although an image captured by a camera and shown on a screen might be like a mirrored image, it is not literally a mirror. While a photographed-and-screened image could be used purely for one’s own self scrutiny, the intention behind most images captured on screen is that of exhibition/performance. It would be a rather unbalanced interpretation, then, to only see Benning’s work as a mode of exploring her identity, without factoring in the intention of exhibiting these images to a wider audience. In Benning’s case, it seems that while her first production or two may have been originally conceived as private explorations – in that sense, the camera used as a true diary – her subsequent productions progressively take into account their status as works of (performance) art and as pieces of communication. In fact, Benning makes just this point in an interview when she says:

Originally the camera was very valuable to me as something that was immediate. It was my diary. It was like having a pen and being able to write things down. It was that immediate. Turn on the camera, and just being able to edit in the camera. And in some ways I don't think that writing in a diary could have been as accurate - you have the power of performance and using your voice, as well as text. I never really saw it as a toy. I didn't feel like I was playing. I did feel secret: I didn't want anybody to see this, this is private, it wasn't made for an audience at all. [However,] I don't look at Jollies, It Wasn’t
One final aspect of Benning’s work that is of interest here, and which emphasizes her postmodern sensibility, is the manner in which she both appropriates and comments upon the products of popular culture in her creative work, as well as the way that these mediated images, sounds, and performances have been influential in her own creation of identity. The narratives contained within Benning’s monologues often include references to the way in which young people tend to align their sense of self to mediated experience. In Me and Rubyfruit, we are told that Benning and her lover were ‘running away to be famous actors’ and that all they had to do in order to become engaged was to ‘kiss like in the movies.’ And, as referred to previously, the main narrative that runs through It Wasn’t Love is inspired by a number of Hollywood genres, and concludes by highlighting the way in which real lives are styled on cinematic mythology with the line: ‘We didn’t need to go to Hollywood. We were Hollywood”. In Girl Power, Benning tells us how, as a child, she modelled herself on “heroic” male media stars such as Matt Dillon and Erik Estrada, as well as imagining herself to be a range of powerful female rock stars such as Debbie Harry and Joan Jett. More generally, popular music, posters, photographs, and images from film and television, are used consistently by Benning throughout her work to ironically underscore and counterpoint her thematic concerns.

Benning’s ambivalent attitude towards the corporate-capitalist structures and media content of popular culture is both a crucial aspect of her creative work and – as it seems to be for many people of her generation – an important contributing factor in
the stylization of self-identity. Indeed, Benning is quite explicit about her mixed feelings in terms of her relationship with the phenomena of commodified popular culture. In an interview, she says, of her typically ‘postmodern childhood’:

I know my life has definitely been affected by late capitalism. With the development of each new technology there's a consuming allure as well as a questionable repulsion. Change is not always better, but you can use these things to create your own dialogue with the world, to kind of talk back to them. It's the only way that I know to live in the modern world. There's certainly a division between the politics of a consumer culture and the feelings that a product can evoke for a child. There is a sort of fondness toward these things because they represent your own personal history. You remember the pleasure aspects of playing with a certain toy or going to a movie.

…. to some degree they're more consistent and they're more readily available than an absent parent. Yet even though you appropriate music, films, and consumer culture in your tapes, there's an ambivalence — there's an affection for what you're critiquing. 30

Rather than simply providing an affectless take on the images and narratives issuing forth from the media, however, Benning’s particular form of postmodern sensibility suggests that the critical distance required for pastiche and parody is often mixed with a sense of affinity for, and intimacy with, the mediated imaginary. In fact, the manner in which Benning intermeshes the products of popular culture and her own childhood memories and feelings in the above quote, brings to mind the charged relationship and enveloping bond an infant develops with particular images and objects. At the very least, we could say that there seems to be rather more at stake in her relationship to aspects of popular culture than would be suggested by the notion of a purely ironic “postmodern distance”.

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Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation*: Family History, Hysteria and Histrionics

Judging from his film *Tarnation*, Jonathan Caouette seems not in the least ambivalent in his attitude towards the audio-visual materials of popular culture he utilizes freely in this production. These materials form one layer of a multi-faceted, kaleidoscopic collage of images and sounds in the film, which explores aspects of Caouette’s own identity and “life-narrative”. The other audio-visual layers of *Tarnation* are primarily made possible by virtue of Caouette’s predisposition towards documenting himself and his family via the media of photographs, super 8 film, video images, and audio tape recordings. Caouette began recording both the daily life of his family and images of himself (including performances specifically staged for the camera) from a very early age – a practice he has continued during his adult life.

It is clear that Caouette uses the camera as a way of exploring the self, although to put it in this way inadequately expresses the fullest sense of Caouette’s relationship to his camera, to images in general, and to images of himself in particular. Caouette seems compelled — almost as a matter of psychic survival — to make his camera, and his performances in front of that camera, an integral part of his life. As we are told in *Tarnation*, Caouette’s life was interwoven with tragedy, trauma and abuse from an early age. As if instinctively, it seems that Caouette understood the need to find a way through his painful life by means of the interplay of image-creation and performance — practices which were to constitute the foundation of his filmmaking. A belief such as this, however, can only arise in the context of a particular sensibility that perceives an intimate correlation between “real life” and the “mediated real” — a sensibility that could be thought of as one of the defining aspects of contemporary existence. It is in this sense that the reality of Caouette’s existence can be said to be
doubled: simultaneously lived experience and dramatic/screen content. The documentation of himself and his family, the multiplicity of self-images and performances, and the incessant appropriation and adaptation of cultural images and stereotypes that clearly constitute a significant aspect of Caouette’s consciousness, seem to imply a complex psycho-social behaviour: an intricate mixture of mimesis, catharsis, denial, “acting out”, and “working through” the crisis points of his life. It is not coincidental, of course, that these psychic processes appear to have narrative and dramaturgical parallels, and it is according to these parallels that Caouette seems to have been, in the postmodern manner of the performing subject, intent on turning his life into a film(ed) drama.

The approach that Caouette has taken to the making of Tarnation results in a production that resists easy and conventional generic classification. It has clear affinities with experimental/avant-garde traditions, it incorporates the stylistics and aesthetics of the music video form, and it contains undeniable aspects of, and allusions to, narrative cinema. For all this, though, it is reasonable to say that the primary form of Tarnation is that of documentary – especially given the plasticity that has increasingly characterized the genre in recent decades. First and foremost, Tarnation documents Caouette’s own life and family history in a manner that is partly self-reflexive autobiography and partly “domestic ethnography”. That is to say, Tarnation focuses not only upon the familial sphere, but also includes the filmmaker as a primary participant in the family (and the film), in contrast to the conventional ethnographic stance of the outsider looking in. Such a distinction separates Tarnation from, for example, domestically-based television “docu-soaps”, in which the behaviours and interrelationships of family members are documented.
using observational techniques employed by a filmmaker who is external to the family, and to the narrative of the film.\textsuperscript{32}

An understanding of \textit{Tarnation}'s place within the tradition of documentary can perhaps best be explored through notions of the “performative” mode theorized (in different ways) by Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi, as well as by means of the trend towards “new subjectivities” in documentary-making identified by Michael Renov.\textsuperscript{33} These (closely related) notions of subjectivity and performance within documentary practice bear directly on this thesis insofar as they identify an increasing trend towards exploring, defining, and asserting one’s identity through camera-based performances in the context of a rapidly expanding mediated universe of performance/image signifiers. Increasingly, it seems that these mediated performances not only become self-referential in the Baudrillardian sense of taking on their own order of (hyper)reality, but also, as Nichols suggests, tend to prioritize ‘the experiential quality of an individual’s relations to signs’ over any external (“real world”) referents,\textsuperscript{34} (or, as Nichols wittily sub-titles his discussion of the affective, subjective, and experiential characteristics of the performative documentary, “The Referents R Us”).\textsuperscript{35} The performative documentary could be said to demonstrate – both theoretically and as an almost palpable manifestation of such theory – that the self is constructed through its performances. And the increasing incidence of this performative mode of “self-documentation” – especially via the utilization of readily accessible video and image-capture technology – demonstrates that notions of the constructedness of identity may be finding increasing acceptance, not only in the relatively arcane universe of academic discourse, but also in popular consciousness.
In his book, *Blurred Boundaries*, Bill Nichols added the performative mode to his four well-established modalities of documentary representation — the expository, the observational, the interactive, and the reflexive. His rationale for adding this extra/new mode was to help account for ‘the ways in which the boundaries of documentary and experimental, personal and political, essay and report have blurred considerably’, along with the ongoing corrosion of ‘the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction’. In Nichols’ view, the performative category is enfolded within the *reflexive* mode of documentary practice, even though in most instances our attention tends not to be specifically drawn to the formal qualities or political context of such films. Rather, the performative documentary makes explicit the nature of the creative process of filmmaking in a way that foregrounds the personal experience of the filmmaker as subject. For Nichols, the fact that such films tend towards the ‘poetic and evocative’ in favour of the ‘evidential and referential’ makes them ‘seem comprehensible more as fictions or formal experiments than as documentaries’.

Determinations as to whether a film is more likely to be read as a documentary or a fiction will depend, of course, on the particularities of the work in question. However, given the increasingly “blurred boundaries” that are the major focus of Nichols’ attention (and also, indeed, an important aspect of this thesis), it may be more useful to dispense with attempts to discriminate between the binary opposites — fiction or documentary — and, instead, to look to more nuanced and complex readings in which the fictive and the factual can be seen as co-existent, if not symbiotically co-dependent.
With respect to *Tarnation*, the demarcation between the fictive and the factual is not at all clear-cut: the documentary real merges freely with an “embellished real” and a “fictional/(re)constructed real”. For example, the opening (post-titles) scene in *Tarnation* is a clearly contrived account of Caouette dealing with the discovery of his mother’s overdose of the mood stabilizing drug, Lithium – an event that leads to the emotional climax of the film and which is foreshadowed in this introductory set-up. In stylistic terms, the scene seems more reminiscent of a television drama than an observational documentary, with its varied coverage and steady framings. It is not clear from watching the scene whether it is a reconstructed account of what actually happened, a complete invention, or a point that lies somewhere between the two. (In the commentary included in the DVD release of *Tarnation*, Caouette tells us that it is a “staged re-enactment”). The sequence culminates in a series of jump-cut close-ups of Caouette as he makes a number of telephone calls to seek further information about the state of his mother’s health. There is quite a high degree of self-consciousness about this final segment of the introductory scene, as Caouette lingers on images of his own face and presents an elliptical performance of his emotional and physical distress.

The DVD commentary also reveals other apparent slippages between the real and Caouette’s creative inventions. For example, we are told early in the film’s exposition that Caouette’s father abandoned his mother, Renee, before Caouette was born. Later in the film, an inter-title tells us that Caouette ‘located his father’ in 2002, and then this information is followed by a scene which purports to be their first meeting since that contact was made. This, however, proves not to be factual, as Caouette’s DVD commentary reveals that their first meeting had actually occurred over a decade earlier. Caouette tells us:
In reality I met my father when I was nineteen years old, and this was the only existing footage that I had of all of us together in one room so I preserved the story of us getting together for the first time but because this was the only footage that existed I had to bump it up in the future. So, in reality I met him when I was nineteen. \(^{38}\)

Similarly, a crucial scene which appears — through its temporal placement in the film and the inter-titles that precede it — quite unequivocally to be showing the extent of Renee’s ‘brain damage’ as a result of Lithium toxicity, was actually recorded two years prior to the overdose.

There are numerous such instances in the film in which it seems that Caouette utilizes strategies of temporal re-ordering, creative (re)construction, and the inclusion of certain images, to represent other times, places or characters in his attempt to construct a dramatically and narratively satisfying film. There is, of course, nothing new in this approach to filmmaking – in fact, techniques of displacement, juxtaposition, and elision could be considered as fundamental creative elements of the craft. Nevertheless, it is likely that some would find Caouette’s “flexible” approach to “historical fact” troublesome, given the truth claims that are historically associated with the documentary form. Indeed, one might feel that, at times, Caouette pushes Grierson’s famous notion of “the creative treatment of actuality” beyond reasonable limits.

Caouette himself would no doubt argue that his film remains faithful to a deeper truth. Nevertheless, the approach that he takes to documentary veracity seems to stand as a vivid example of how the distinctions between objective documentation and (dramatically satisfying) invention have become quite fluid within documentary
practice. More generally perhaps, we might also see his approach as an example of the way in which discourses of truth and dramaturgy have become intermeshed within contemporary consciousness. Without access to any “meta-narrative” — such as Caouette’s DVD commentary — there are few, if any, referential markers in *Tarnation* to suggest that we are watching anything other than a faithful documentary account of actuality. Yet Caouette seems quite comfortable in discussing aspects of his film that do not accurately document historical reality. His apparently complacent attitude and rather pliable approach to actuality is, of course, merely one small example of a much broader trend within many forms of mediated communication that go under the banner of “non-fiction” or, more ambiguously, “reality-based” programming. At this point, we might begin to feel that the phrase, “never let truth get in the way of a good story”, nowadays tends to be interpreted as a straightforward maxim relating to the mediated representation of reality, rather than an acerbic and ironic critique of manipulation and dishonesty.

To some postmodern minds, of course, the very notion of being able to faithfully represent an objective reality is little more than a naïve fantasy. Better, some would argue, to have done with the pretence that there can be an objective truth and to get on with the business of creating one’s own perspectival and subjective life narrative. In this sense, the “real” Jonathan Caouette and his “real life” could be thought of as mutable and subject to re-formulation in an equivalent manner to that by which one edits/re-edits a film by re-ordering or creatively juxtaposing events and causalities.

To return for a moment to Nichols’ formulations for the performative mode, however, it seems reasonable to say that Caouette’s approach to filmmaking does indeed tend to favour the ‘poetic and evocative’ over the ‘evidential and
Tarnation certainly does foreground its stylistic and expressive qualities, particularly through its visual editing strategies, special effects, use of music, and juxtapositions of image and sound. Perhaps more centrally than this, though, Tarnation tends to privilege emotion and theatrical display as its driving forces. In this sense, Tarnation seems in accord with another of Nichols’ defining characteristics of this particular mode when he writes that the ‘[p]erformative documentary attempts to reorient us – affectively, subjectively – toward the historical, poetic world it brings into being’. Caouette deals with themes of family dysfunction and mental illness; however these aspects are not treated in a systematic, investigative, or historically referenced manner. Rather, they tend to be treated as the narrative circumstances that give rise to an emotional drama of family interaction and personal journey in a way that also seems consonant with Nichols’ view that ‘performative documentary addresses the fundamental question of subjectivity, of those linkages between self and other that are affective as fully as they are conceptual’. Indeed, it seems fair to say that the dramaturgical impulses that appear to motivate Caouette’s filmmaking practice favour the emotionally affective at every (theatrical) turn.

Stella Bruzzi takes a rather different perspective on the performative documentary to that of Nichols, by calling upon the notion of performativity proposed by the linguist J.L. Austin, and subsequently employed by Judith Butler in her gender theorization. Just as Austin proposed that some linguistic utterances could be defined as performative, as opposed to being merely descriptive (or “constative”), in that they simultaneously describe and perform an action (for example, when a priest at a wedding ceremony says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife”), Bruzzi suggests that:
The notion that subjects — the filmmaker and/or other individuals — can be thought of as ‘acting out a documentary’ seems to be a particularly useful approach in the context of an increasingly indistinct separation between “real life” and its performed simulations. There is certainly a significant degree to which Tarnation is imbued with a spirit of performance. Caouette, himself, is an actor and his urge to perform is evident throughout the film. From an almost unimaginably early age, Caouette uses performance as a kind of self-therapy: a combination of acting out and acting through his fears, anxieties, and hurts. In one of the most compelling scenes in Tarnation, we see Caouette as an 11-year-old — in the early days of his camera use — giving a sustained monologue performance of a southern American woman who has been abused by her husband and who is now giving a court testimony after having murdered him. Clearly, the young Caouette’s performed persona has been derived from a complex mixture of popular culture media performances, his mother’s life and personality, and his own fears and anxieties. The filmed performance constitutes an early indication of Caouette’s lengthy journey of finding himself/constructing a self through his experiments with performance and image.

Also significant — and particularly striking in the youthful drag performance referred to above — is the ease with which Caouette performs before the camera. While Caouette is clearly a very able actor, he can also be seen as a typical example
of a generation to whom performing for the camera, and basing one’s performances on the materials of mediated popular culture, seems to be an effortless and unproblematic process.

Caouette, however, is not the only performer in the film. His mother, Renee, sings, dances, and performs monologues for the camera on a number of occasions. In fact, in one way or another, Renee plays to the camera in nearly all of her on-screen appearances in the film. We are told (and shown) that Renee, too, was a child performer, appearing in fashion photography and television commercials prior to an accident that, it seems, was the catalyst for her subsequent life of mental illness and psychiatric (mis)treatment. While, for the most part, Renee seems less comfortable than her son in front of the camera, there are also times when her self-consciousness disappears. These latter times, however, appear to be associated with the manic phases of her mental illness. That is to say, at those moments when she performs in a state of madness for Caouette and his camera, Renee seems liberated from her “normal” inhibitions which manifest themselves in an awkward self-awareness. One could say that Renee gives her “best performances” at these times of madness, and, indeed, it is possible to identify the phenomenon of performing one’s madness for the camera as a significant motif in Tarnation.

Perhaps the most notable example of this is an uncomfortably long scene towards the end of the film in which Renee exhibits hysterical, infantile and often incoherent behaviour in front of Caouette’s relentlessly recording camera. As already mentioned, this scene was intended to represent Renee’s mental breakdown following a Lithium overdose. In fact, however, the scene was shot some two years prior to the overdose and was, according to Caouette, a typical example of her
behaviour during her manic episodes. In his DVD commentary, Caouette tells us that the use of the camera to record his mother’s manic performance was quite a routine occurrence within the domestic/family sphere. Caouette seems somewhat defensive in his discussion of this scene — clearly he has received some criticism for what could be seen as a remorseless exploitation of his mother’s mental illness. Caouette says:

A lot of people ask me ‘why did you keep the camera on so long?’ First of all, when I was shooting this footage I was never thinking ‘Oh this is good, this will be great for the movie.’ I mean …. essentially what me and my mum were doing here is having fun – believe it or not – and this is a type of behaviour that she would have, sometimes, in a manic state; this was just very normal – around the house, this was day-to-day. You know, as far as exploiting my mother, or anything like that, that’s over-intellectualizing what this is. I think exploitation is something that an outsider would come in trying to exploit something or somebody or someone, but this was my role, I mean this is what I grew up with, and breathed and knew every day of my life.45

This extended scene of Renee’s hysterical and histrionic behaviour is difficult and disturbing to watch. Caouette’s editorial decisions regarding the duration of the scene, its temporal placement in the film, and, indeed, whether or not to use it at all can be (and have been) both criticized and defended on a number of grounds. One reviewer of the film, for example, believes that ‘Caouette [was] right not to have shortened this scene; it documents Renee's mental state, demonstrating how damaged she is’,46 while another reviewer describes Caouette as ‘a man who follows his sick mother around with a camera and records her mad ravings at wearying length for what looks suspiciously like an exercise in self-glorification’.47 Regardless of how one may view this scene in ethical or artistic terms, however, it does seem rather disingenuous for Caouette to claim that he did not give at least some thought to the
spectacle value of this — and other similar scenes — that he recorded over the years and eventually included in his film. Despite his claims to the contrary, it seems quite evident that Caouette captures performances of madness on camera by both his mother and his grandmother (whom we shall discuss below) with considerable relish.

While some might find Caouette’s approach to documenting his family rather troubling in this respect, as we have previously discussed, the performance of madness for the camera (especially women’s madness), has a long tradition in the history of photography and cinematography, as do the connections between the symptoms of madness and aspects of performance per se. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine historical aspects of this issue in detail. Nevertheless, as we briefly touched upon in Chapter Two, there are a great many strongly evocative and highly relevant interconnections between the earliest uses to which photography was put in the recording and cataloguing of both theatrical gestures and psychiatric symptoms, and the manner in which the phenomena of histrionics and psychopathology not only bear similarities but, indeed, can be seen to have interpenetrated one another in significant ways.48 In this context, we can reiterate the point made earlier, that the camera, though capable only of scrutinizing and recording the surface appearances of materiality, has historically been conceived of as an instrument which has the potential to reveal deeper truths. And, in a similar fashion, we can also note that the gestural language of performance and the bodily symptoms of mental illness have both been thought of as surface codes which, if interpreted correctly, can illuminate more profound meanings (and pathologies). In a number of respects, Tarnation can serve as an exemplary text for a contemporary examination of how the phenomena of madness and performance are interrelated,
and, in turn, how these phenomena connect to a *culture of the image* in which the all-devouring, insatiable desire of the camera to capture performative displays seems to become an end in itself.

In the case of *Tarnation*, familial performances and/of symptoms can be seen to merge with Caouette’s particular perception of the mediated universe in a way that produces a film which is both performative in a documentary sense, and intertextually related to aspects of photographic, cinematic, and televisual culture. There are clear indications in *Tarnation* that Caouette’s creative and emotional sensibility incorporates a number of interrelated sources and inspirations, including the aesthetics of camp, an appreciation of the histrionic and the theatrical, a fascination with mental illness, and an attraction to the grotesque. In a number of respects, all of these influences could be said to come together in Caouette’s filmmaking practice under the rubric of an overarching predilection for melodrama. In this context, a strong sense emerges of the manner in which a postmodern subject such as Caouette amalgamates popular cultural influences — including a heightened awareness of the role of performance (evoking notions of both “putting on a show” and “putting on a mask”) — in the creation, not only of a media product, but also of his (and his family’s) own social reality. In this context, it is tempting to suggest that as well as being the inspiration behind his particular mode of filmmaking, Caouette’s melodramatic sensibility is also the prism through which he views his social and familial relations and his own construction of self-identity. In a sense that resonates both with Nichols’ suggestion of the porous boundary between the documentation of the historical real and the performance of fiction-like subjectivities, and Bruzzi’s notion of a documentary that comes into being by *performing itself*, we could say
that Caouette not only creates his film in the vein of a Hollywood genre but, indeed, constructs and performs his social reality as if it, too, were a family melodrama.

In his often-quoted essay on the cinematic genre of *family melodrama*, “Tales of Sound and Fury”, Thomas Elsaesser offers a summary of the generally understood characteristics of melodrama. He writes that:

…. when in ordinary language we call something melodramatic, what we often mean is an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement, a foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity – all of which produces a graph of much greater fluctuation, a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural, realistic or in conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude…. 49

Leaving aside questions of either verisimilitude or facticity for one moment, it could be suggested that the “narrative details” of *Tarnation* seem very much in keeping with these general principles of melodrama. In a segment of exposition communicated through text on screen early in the film, for example, dramatic and traumatic events are communicated in such an elliptical fashion that they set the tone of the ‘foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity’ in a manner very similar to that identified by Elsaesser. In less than seven minutes of screen time, we are presented with a summary of events spanning approximately fifteen years and including the following incidents: an accident curtailing Renee’s childhood acting career and causing apparently psychosomatic symptoms, including paralysis; the decision by her parents to initiate what became years of electric shock treatment on Renee; her parents’ livelihood being destroyed when their grocery store burnt down; Renee falling in love with a young man, marrying him, becoming pregnant and then
being abandoned by him and left to bring up a child on her own; Renee being raped in front of her young son; Renee being incarcerated for her psychotic and unruly behaviour; the young Caouette being placed in a foster home as a child, where he was subject to cruelty and abuse, including being tied and beaten by his foster parents; the disintegration of Renee’s original personality and state of mind, and her long-term institutionalization in a mental hospital. As film reviewer for *Cineaste*, Michael Bronski, comments, ‘the extent of horrific psychic and medical destruction here is overwhelming (if not based on fact, *Tarnation* would play like a second-rate John Waters film)’.\(^50\) As already noted, there do appear to be some slippages between actual events and their representation in Caouette’s film — nevertheless, one would be inclined to assume that the events described here are more or less based on historical fact. More to the point, though, we could say that *Tarnation* “plays” both as a documentary (that is, “based on fact”), and as a form of family melodrama that contains many of the elements characteristic of that particular genre of (usually fictive) filmmaking. As we shall also see, *Tarnation* has strong resonances with camp-inspired exaggerations and distortions of the family melodrama that are, indeed, exemplified by filmmakers such as John Waters.\(^51\) In a complexly postmodern way, then, we could say that *Tarnation* is, simultaneously, performative documentary and family melodrama and an amplified, distorted, and transgressive deconstruction of the melodrama genre.

Elsaesser offers a number of specific definitional aspects of the melodrama that can be seen to apply to *Tarnation*, and yet do not appear to negate the conceptualization of the film’s “parallel existence” as a performative documentary. In a way that has clear affinities with Nichols’ characterization of the performative documentary as being a mode that tends to personalize rather than generalize/typify in the traditional
ethnographic manner, Elsaesser writes that melodramas ‘resolutely refuse to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms’. While *Tarnation* touches upon a number of important social issues — such as the treatment of mental illness and problems of abuse within the state-run foster home system in Texas — it does so exclusively from the insular perspective of the personal experiences of Caouette and his immediate family. This insularity in *Tarnation* also seems to resonate with another generic characteristic of the family melodrama, which Elsaesser describes as ‘[a]n acute sense of claustrophobia’, whereby individual family members have little recourse to cathartic external actions and are forced to ‘constantly look inward, at each other and themselves’. Elsaesser’s comment that ‘[t]he characters are, so to speak, each others’ sole referent’ seems, once again, to share common ground with Nichols’ view of the inherent self-referentiality of the performative documentary. Indeed, we do find in *Tarnation* that, with the exception of Caouette’s relationship with his partner, David, who he meets when he finally leaves the family home for New York, there are few, if any, other meaningful encounters that are explored outside of the family unit.

There are further features of the family melodrama articulated by Elsaesser and other theorists that also seem particularly relevant to *Tarnation*. In summary, Elsaesser describes ‘hysteria bubbling all the time just below the surface’, a focus on nervous breakdowns, emotional extremes, panic, and a strong emphasis on ‘victimization and the enforced passivity of women’ as being amongst the genre’s most common features. Likewise, in an essay on the cinema of Todd Haynes (who, like Caouette, is another filmmaker whose films often explore generic elements of melodrama in a postmodern context), Mary Ann Doane tells us that ‘pathos [is] the central emotion of melodrama’ and that it ‘closely allies itself with the delineation of a lack of social
power and is effectively characteristic of the cultural positioning of children and women’. Noting the excessive nature of emotions relating to pathos, as well as the multiple connections between pathos and pathology, Doane also writes that the etymological affinity between the two ‘indicates a semiotic slippage among intense affect, suffering and disease’ — an observation that seems to resonate with previous references to the parallels between histrionic (“melodramatic”) modes of performance and certain pathological symptoms of madness.

The pathological model that tends to be most closely associated with the pathos (and the performance) of melodrama is the hysterical woman; and, as Tina Modleski reminds us, ‘women are hysterical in patriarchal culture because, according to the feminist argument, their voice has been silenced or repressed’ and ‘melodrama deals with a return of the repressed through a kind of conversion hysteria’ from repressed idea to bodily symptom. Also in this context, Doane observes that both pathos and pathology deal with marginality, a condition of being on the edge, and that while this site has traditionally been the woman, it can also be extended — in the films of Todd Haynes, for example — to the queer subject, who is often socially characterized as ‘incarnating aberration, exemplary of the impossibility of “being oneself”’.

It would be a relatively straightforward matter to systematically cross-reference all of the melodramatic elements identified above with specific aspects of Tarnation. Such a painstaking task, however, seems unnecessary here. The parallels are many and, generally speaking, quite readily apparent. Suffice it to say that Tarnation deals centrally with the pathos of the victimized circumstances of a woman (Renee) and a child (the young Caouette), that an undercurrent of hysteria and pathological behaviour permeates the film, and that the marginalized positions and subjective
journeys of Renee and Caouette — a (mad) woman and a (queer) man — are key preoccupations in the film.

It seems fair to say that only the least generous viewer of the film would doubt Caouette’s intense love and genuine concern for his mother. However, it seems equally clear that Caouette also recognizes and utilizes the inherent theatricality and potential for emotional engagement that Renee’s behaviour and history of physical and psychological trauma provide for him as a filmmaker, and for us as an audience. To put it bluntly, Renee’s suffering, her delusions (or, possibly, memories) of parental abuse, her apparent mistreatment through electric shock therapy and institutionalization, and her vacillations between depression, mania, paranoia, and hysteria, are the ingredients with which a filmmaker such as Caouette is able to fashion a gripping screen drama. While it would be possible to assign more noble intentions to Tarnation by viewing it as an example of the sort of domestic ethnography that, according to Renov, responds in a positive fashion to the ‘crisis of ethnographic authority’ through ‘a reciprocity between subject and object, a play of mutual determination [and] a condition of consubstantiality’, there also seems to be a significant degree to which Caouette — and, arguably, other such “domestic ethnographers” — appropriate the intimate lives of family members (and themselves) to provide material for the insatiable lenses and screens of our mediated exteriority. And while reviewer Chris Freeman’s view of Tarnation is that ‘[i]n an era of reality television, the film exposes the vast gap between such "reality" and what is real in the world’, one could equally argue that such distinctions are merely a matter of degree in the context that, in the end, family members such as Caouette’s could be said to become just so much more “screen content”.
In certain respects this latter view could be said to be evidenced most vividly by Caouette’s treatment of the other “star performer” in *Tarnation* — his late grandmother, Rosemary. Caouette’s fascination for capturing Rosemary’s eccentric and idiosyncratic performances on camera also constitute the most sustained illustration of how *Tarnation* contains elements of the parodic and the camp — elements that could, indeed, be said to share the sensibility of a John Waters film — enfolded within its more conventional status as a documentary. Unlike the undercurrent of poignancy that seems present in all of Caouette’s representations of his mother, his persistent depiction of Rosemary as a rather grotesquely humourous character seems to overshadow the affection that he claims (in his DVD commentary) to have had for her. Caouette tells us:

> I shot tons of footage of my grandmother because I desperately wanted to make a movie about her, starring her and using her likeness in every conceivable way. There were a lot of times when I was pretty relentless. She was like my own private Edith Massey. 

The reference to Edith Massey — one of the celebrated members of John Waters’ pantheon of cinematic grotesques — indicates the kind of camp sensibility which, as Annalee Newitz reminds us, ‘is the production of, and appreciation for, what is artificial, exaggerated, or wildly, explosively obscene’ and which ‘is associated almost exclusively with the half-reverent, half-repulsed fascination gay men have for certain female movie stars and opera divas’. Caouette’s desire to incorporate his grandmother into his filmmaking – we see Rosemary not only featuring heavily in *Tarnation’s* scenes of observational documentation, but also as one of the central actors in the campy films he made as a youthful auteur – often seems inflected with a degree of cruelty and, at times, possibly even malice. His camera repeatedly concentrates on her ageing face in unforgiving close-up, seeming to revel in her
bulging eyes, toothless smile and odd facial expressions. In a way, the images of Rosemary are the obverse of both Caouette’s narcissistic fascination with his own photogenic image, and with the similarly aesthetically pleasing images of Renee as a young woman that constitute a significant portion of Tarnation’s screen time. Rosemary appears to enjoy performing for the camera in her own self-conscious and peculiar manner, and it seems equally clear that Caouette takes delight in spurring her on to ever more bizarre performances, both in the register of everyday life and as the “in-house diva” of a number of his Grotesque/Grand Guignol-inspired films — films that he describes as being a part of his ‘John Waters/Paul Morrissey phase’.65

There is undeniably a degree of (somewhat uncomfortable) humour to be derived from many of the sequences in which Rosemary appears. However, much of this humour is retrospectively undercut by her final scene in the film, which Caouette recorded after she had suffered a stroke and, presumably, not long before her death. In this scene, Rosemary has an emaciated and demented demeanour, and as the scene continues it becomes apparent that she is, at best, only partially aware of what is being said to her. We hear the off-screen voice of Caouette asking Rosemary to do her “Bette Davis impersonation” (and, indeed, there is something in Rosemary’s appearance that is reminiscent of images of the ageing Davis, towards the end of her career, as she appeared in outrageously camp melodramas such as Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? 66 and Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte).67 As the camera lingers on Rosemary’s face, we hear Caouette saying: ‘Do you feel pretty? Pretty Grandma. Grandma, say hello, start talking. Look into the camera’. We then hear an unidentified female voice, quite possibly belonging to Renee, who also attempts to goad a performance out of the apparently uncomprehending Rosemary. This is followed by the action of a female hand coming into shot to put a chocolate or toffee
into Rosemary’s mouth – an intervention which has the result (and the intention?) of making the scene even more grotesque. At this point, the scene jump-cuts to a shot in which Rosemary is wearing a rather ridiculous looking wig and we hear both Caouette and the female voice hectoring Rosemary to take the wig off for the camera. (‘Take the wig off. Pull it off, grandma. You can just pull it off, you don’t have to do it from the top. Take it off.’) The scene seems to rejoice in its own abjection as a grotesque spectacle, resembling a cruel deconstruction of a filmmaking/photographic session as the director cajoles the subject into a humiliating performance. In addition, one could also conjecture that there might be more than a hint of Oedipal revenge in this scene as Caouette and (presumably) Renee appear to band together in an activity designed to punish Rosemary by humiliating her — perhaps for past sins, such as her allegedly abusive behaviour towards Renee as a child.

_Tarnation_ is a dense cinematic text that can, in a number of respects, be thought of as representing the complexities of postmodern experience. For example, we have already discussed aspects of the way the film goes beyond the more straightforward and conventional notions of documentary by being a multi-layered work that engages with the materials of mediated popular culture, as well as with varying registers of performance in the context of what seems to be an experiential exploration of subjectivity and identity-formation. In this sense, _Tarnation_ can be thought of as a _performative_ text in a quite rich and polysemic sense of that term – a text which, in part, attempts to come to terms with the nature of fragmented and multiple identities as family members perform versions of themselves for the camera, and as the film _enacts itself_ as a vehicle for the staging of these behaviours and interactions. Similarly, Caouette’s intentions as a filmmaker seem complex, and
at times contradictory, in a way that might also be thought to be in keeping with the postmodern times in which we live. Caouette appears to take on multiple, often simultaneous, roles – for example, ethnographer, autobiographer, psychodrama therapist and ruthless cinematic exploiter – in the course of documenting himself and his family.

When, for example, Caouette defends his decision to film the protracted scene of Renee’s disturbed behaviour by saying ‘this was my role’\(^{68}\) he could be implying that he was quite consciously aware of the idea that his camera documentation was in some way therapeutic not only for himself, but also for his mother in the context of her mental illness. In another sense, though, such a statement also seems to be referring to Caouette’s self-appointed role as family chronicler/ethnographer. And it is in this latter sense that \textit{Tarnation} can be seen as a quite remarkable (in)version of the “home movie”.

As Patricia Zimmermann notes in her socio-historical study of amateur film, the home movie tradition was a celebration and inscription of what was considered to be ‘the most important and consuming narrative of all – the grand, happy epic of nuclear family life’.\(^{69}\) In many respects this tradition has close affinities with the even more commonplace phenomenon of the family photo album whereby, as Susan Sontag tells us, ‘each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness’.\(^{70}\) \textit{Tarnation} can be seen to obvert the traditional home movie in this respect: as a record of family dysfunction instead of connectedness, and of insecurity and mental illness in place of the stereotypical positivities associated with the familial sphere.
Zimmerman also suggests that the home movie — in its “classic” (pre-domestic video) form — could be thought of as having been a reiteration of the specifically patriarchal basis of the nuclear family: the father as the “man behind the camera” who, at various times, either surveilled the rest of the family in an observational mode, or directed them towards (generally rather self-conscious) performances of familial happiness and cohesion. While the father’s own image very often remained absent from the frame, his presence was inescapably signified by his off-camera authorship.\textsuperscript{71}

Alongside the ideology of the patriarch in total control of the happily compliant family unit, according to Zimmerman, was the ‘ideology of excessive child nurturance as the ultimate goal in life’ which, as a result, ‘increasingly associated amateur movies with the preservation of the images of children and with the cultural production of the myth of parenting as a leisure-time hobby’.\textsuperscript{72} In her description of the images from a “Christmas morning scene” in a 1950’s home movie reel — a scene shot in characteristically hand-held fashion from the relative high-angle of the father’s point-of-view — Zimmerman provides a typical example of a patriarchally directed, image-based iteration of the idealized nuclear family:

The angle of the camera, its mobility, and its control over representation unfurls patriarchal prerogative. The woman and her children are immobilized by the camera, yet blissfully and almost self-reflectively participate in its representation like a game of charades or a pantomime of Parents Magazine covers. They all seem to be having fun: the camera explores with moves and pans; the woman and her children look quizzically at the camera and periodically sprout small smiles that give away the ruse. Several more shots ensue: the same Christmas scene repeats with two grandmothers on either side of the frame, removed from the children and mother, trussing the edges of the frame like pillars.\textsuperscript{73}
From this sturdy encapsulation of familial stability, permanence, and normality in a 1950s-era home movie, we can shuttle forward half a century or so to *Tarnation* (and with just a hint of hyperbole we might even be inclined to proclaim *Tarnation* as a home movie for the twenty-first century). Caouette’s childhood, and the dynamics of his family, would seem to be the very antithesis of the mythically positive representation of the nuclear family epitomized in the cultural artifacts of early post-war decades, including the home movie. In a number of respects the domestic environment in which Caouette grew up, along with his particular approach to filmmaking, provides us with a microcosmic means of thinking about the movement from the idea (and ideology) of the unwavering unitary subject, to the more fluid and fragmentary notions of the self that we have been exploring in this thesis.

One of the most noticeable differences between these two vividly contrasting “home movie” representations of the domestic sphere is the presence/absence of the father — a difference that seems to be a useful entry point into a discussion of how these two types of filmic text signify divergent aspects of subjectivity and social experience. While the authorial presence of the father in the creation of the classic home movie, as elaborated by Zimmerman, can be thought of quite unambiguously as a symbolic representation of a paternalistic and patriarchal social fabric, the absence of a father in *Tarnation* is arguably suggestive of a more fluid, postmodern matrix of influences and manifestations.  

In his book, *The Protean Self*, Robert Lifton explores the notion of human resilience in the fragmented and rapidly changing contemporary world. For Lifton, contemporary existence brings with it the possibilities of both trauma and
transcendence, and the individual most likely to thrive is one who possesses the 
adaptive quality of flexibility (or, as Lifton terms it, “proteanism”) — a trait which 
provides the ability to manage ‘the balancing act between responsive shapeshifting 
on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and cohere, on the other.’ In identifying 
a number of conditions that precipitate the necessity/opportunity for protean 
behaviour, Lifton proffers the state of fatherlessness as one such primary catalyst, or 
source of flux. While, according to Lifton, fatherlessness can cause a subject to feel 
cast adrift in a sea of uncertainty and disconnection, it can also be experienced by the 
individual as liberation from the constrictions and strictures of patriarchal authority.

In the absence of a father — and, for all intents and purposes, a 
responsible/functional mother as well — Caouette seems to have parented himself 
(with some help from his apparently maladapted and dysfunctional grandparents). In 
this respect, we can think of Caouette’s preoccupation with the images and 
performances emanating from cinema and television screens as a crucial aspect of 
his self-parenting and role-modeling. As well, in terms of his use of the camera in an 
ongoing and quite comprehensive documentation of himself and the other members 
of his family, Caouette can be seen to have supplanted the absent figure of the 
authorial/authoritarian father with his own more protean (though still authorial) 
presence. In a literal and specific sense, the implications of the notion of 
fatherlessness for the social subject can be related to the increasing prevalence in our 
society of single-parent (mostly fatherless) child-rearing. By extension, we could 
also say that the connotations of such a “post-father”/“post-nuclear family” condition 
are consistent with conceptions of a contemporary existence that appears, in some 
respects at least, to have unshackled itself from patriarchal controls. By way of a 
literary and philosophically-inspired biographical example of the liberating potential
of fatherlessness, Lifton cites Jean Paul Sartre. Lifton tells us that Sartre celebrated the absence of his father — who died before Sartre was born — because he believed that it ‘left him free of the heavy authority of the past, free to create himself’ in a manner that constituted a ‘release from not only paternal authority but the more general burden of social origin’.  

Lifton also tells us that ‘in most cultures, the father is identified with social and moral authority, while the mother …. represents more intimate and personal connection’.

In the context of our present discussion, the Oedipal and pre-Oedipal connotations of paternal and maternal absences and presences — especially in their more Lacanian dimensions — seem almost inescapably to present themselves to us. Caouette retains his father’s surname despite the paternal absence since his birth — a quite literal acknowledgment of the sphere of influence signified by the “name-of-the-father”, and, as we have discussed, to some degree Caouette even takes on an ersatz role as “patriarchal author” within the family himself. Nevertheless, his preoccupation with the creation of a viable and desirable persona through a multiplicity of image-performances of himself (along with an intense focus on, and undeniable identification with, images of his mother) is strongly suggestive of a movement away from Symbolic strictures and towards an attempted re-integration with the Imaginary aspects of the image. There are many elements of Tarnation that could be said to represent phallic disavowal in favour of a desire to engage, or perhaps even merge, with the inexpressible plenitude of feminine/infantile/psychotic jouissance — a desire fuelled by the intoxicating and seductive possibilities of play, gratification, drama, trauma, risk, and even oblivion.
For our purposes, it seems germane and appropriate to at least contemplate the extent to which such a psychic trajectory can serve as a more widely applicable paradigm for the contemporary experience of engaging with the images of plenitude and desire in our pervasive mediated exteriority. In a number of respects, Caouette’s performance and utilization of the camera seem to be exemplary of a contemporary tendency to create parallels between the content and practice of one’s life, and the drama, spectacle and imagery of mediated experience. In Caouette’s case, of course, it is not only the particularly traumatic circumstances of his “life story”, or his individual aesthetic and (melodramatic) sensibility, but also his ability and will to “re-version” his life back into a media experience that separates him, as a filmmaker, from the majority of contemporary subjects who have tended to retain the more passive role of media consumers. That said, it nevertheless seems reasonable to suggest that, for an increasing number of young people, the ever-increasing availability and accessibility of digital image-capturing technology (along with, of course, the interactive capabilities of the internet) facilitates a movement beyond the passive consumption of “ready-made” images of desire to a productive re-imagining of such images – or, one might say, a more energized and creative engagement with the Imaginary register.78

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Caouette is certainly not alone in his use of the camera for purposes that simulate (and subvert) the home movie’s urge to document familial images and performances. Zimmerman identifies a trend — beginning in the 1980s when video cameras and recorders started to become more readily available — of ‘college-level film students’ and other young practitioners appropriating the home-video camera and turning it
towards (and, in some senses, *against*) their parents and conventional representations of the family. Zimmerman also argues that in productions such as these — which, like Caouette’s, are characteristically intercut with inter-titles, images from the mass media, and other types of found footage — ‘the home-video footage sheds its naturalistic aura and its masquerade of unmediated humanity’. In this context it would seem that films such as *Tarnation* — and, for that matter, the films of Sadie Benning — are examples of hybrid and multi-layered texts, that can rightly be thought of as postmodern in the way they combine a diverse range of elements, from Hollywood genre film to conventional documentary, experimental art film and underground schlock, to home movie and intimate video diary.

Caouette and Benning are just two examples of what seems to be an increasing incidence of screen practitioners who share both a finely-honed awareness of the role of performance in the determination of (self-)identity, along with an acutely subjective and self-expressive approach to filmmaking. In accord with Nichols’ identification of a more emphatic degree of subjectivity within the relatively recent phenomenon of the performative mode of documentary representation, Renov notes the appearance of this highly subjective approach in a growing body of work during the 1980s and 1990s, by individuals from a diversity of cultural backgrounds, ‘in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription’.

And in this context it seems significant that Benning and Caouette are, respectively, lesbian and gay screen-image practitioners. Indeed, Renov observes that — in what he identifies as the “post-verite” period since 1970 — ‘documentary explorations of gay and lesbian identities have exhibited a particular dynamism and vitality’. 
Certainly, the playful blurring of identities and genders is an important aspect of the work of Benning, Caouette, and a number of other gay and lesbian filmmakers, as well as being a central preoccupation of queer theory and gender studies. Although Judith Butler unequivocally distinguishes between performativity and “theatrical” notions of performance, there do seem to be distinct resonances between her conception of gender identity, whereby the gendered body is conceived of as having ‘no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’, and the manifestly self-reflexive and intentional uses to which performances are put in the creation and negotiation of identity by filmmakers such as Caouette and Benning.

In the screen productions of both Benning and Caouette we find a complex and intriguing interplay between the representation of a series of clearly fictive performances, the presentation of the “real” selves of the practitioners (which, of course, could also be thought of as socially constructed personae), and the performance of identities that smudge sharply delineated lines between the real and the fictive. As previously suggested, there are a number of respects in which we could say that the creative works of Caouette and Benning put contemporary theories of identity into substantive creative practice, although, to some extent at least, their practices (as filmmakers who are also contemporary subjects) seem to be a function of their intuitive responses to being in the world of floating and fluid image and performance signifiers. Or, perhaps, one could say that their work is indicative of a convergence between theorizing the postmodern on the one hand, and the existential pragmatics of living in the postmodern world on the other.

Renov, certainly seems to be of the view that the self-inscription inherent in such works functions to enact ‘fluid, multiple, even contradictory’ identities. He writes:
If indeed we now live in an age of intensified and shifting psychosocial identities, it should surprise no one that the documentation of this cultural scene should be deeply suffused with the performance of subjectivities.\(^{86}\)

Interestingly, Renov argues that such a practice allows these filmmakers to remain ‘fully embroiled in public discourse’ which, as a consequence, enables them to escape ‘charges of solipsism or self-absorption’.\(^{87}\) While it is certainly possible to find evidence of an explicit social/political awareness in aspects of Benning’s productions and, to a lesser extent, in Caouette’s film, it should be said that there also appears to be a significant degree of narcissistic self-absorption in the works of both. Indeed, Caouette’s fascination with his own image in *Tarnation* is really quite acute and, for some viewers, rather distasteful — one highly disparaging review of *Tarnation*, for example, is sub-titled, “He’d Fuck Himself if He Could”, in reference to the degree of narcissistic self-indulgence that the reviewer finds in Caouette’s film.\(^{88}\) As has been discussed to some extent already, however, the type of narcissistic preoccupation with (versions of) one’s self-image inherent in both Benning’s and Caouette’s films can be interpreted as being quite consistent with the notion of an Imaginary engagement with the surfaces of image and performance that surround us, and which, in some senses, construct us.

One motif that recurs quite emphatically in the works of both Benning and Caouette — a feature that is both symptomatic and emblematic of the narcissistic basis of our Imaginary relations with exteriority — is the lingering close-ups of the filmmakers’ own faces which appear frequently throughout their films. The close-up — and in particular the close-up of the face — is an often theorized and highly fetishized aspect of photographic/cinematographic signification. As Mary Anne Doane has observed, the close-up is often considered to be ‘the privileged receptacle of affect’ while, as
its symbiotic complement, the face is perceptually and culturally designated to function as an equally ‘privileged site of meaning’. The face’s status as the primary perceptual signifier of subjectivity or, as Doane puts it, ‘the very origin of representation insofar as it is founded upon resemblance and identity’ — conjoins with the objectifying and ‘inescapably hyperbolic nature of the close-up’ to produce an intense drama between subject and object. The face as surface is the perfect complement to the photographic image as surface. In both cases, and especially in combination, we experience surfaces that promise depths, exteriorities that imply interiorities. As Doane writes:

The close-up transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence, and yet, simultaneously, that deeply experienced entity becomes a sign, a text, a surface that demands to be read. This is, inside or outside of the cinema, the inevitable operation of the face as well. 

It is barely possible to see a close-up of a face without asking: what is he/she thinking, feeling, suffering? What is happening beyond what I can see?

In general, extended close-ups of faces in classical cinema have the effect of halting the narrative to allow a pause in which the viewer feels able (or perhaps even compelled) to engage with, as Bela Balazs put it so long ago, the ‘silent soliloquies’ and ‘mute dialogues’ which can reveal ‘what is really happening under the surface of appearances’ and/or to immerse oneself in the display of a face that has apparently been presented to us for our voyeuristic pleasure. (This latter function has, of course, predominantly been assigned to the faces of women throughout the history of cinema.) As Doane observes, however, the fantasy that the close-up is directed exclusively at me or for me as the viewer, is usually undermined in classical cinema.
due to the fact that any such close-up is generally ‘caught in a network of other gazes’.  

In most of Benning’s films there is insufficient sustained narrative in place to negate the notion that (her) facial close-ups function as pure display. However, any reading of gratuitous display appears to be negated by the underlying engagement with issues of gender, along with the sense of subversion and, at times, parody that characterize Benning’s films. Many of the shots of Benning’s face are distorted — “made strange” — by virtue of having been framed in extreme close-up (and in extremely close proximity to the camera). Put another way, the images that Benning presents of herself to the viewer are often too intimately, revealingly, and threateningly proximate to carry the conventional present-absent allure of the cinematic close-up. Benning’s series of close-up self-images invite complex readings of polymorphous identity and fictional character construction, intertwined with confessional self-revelation. However, they could hardly be construed as images presented for the pleasure of voyeuristic consumption, given the defiant manner in which they tend to look back at the viewer.

Caouette, on the other hand, seems to revel in his own photogenie. Like Benning, Caouette also presents numerous image-versions of himself — a multiplicity of styles and “looks” — to the viewer. In his case, though, the images do seem to be imbued with a “to-be-looked-at-ness” — a display of himself not only as subject but also as (desirable) object. While this could be said to represent a relatively conventional cinematic intention, the self-images present in Caouette’s film could also be said to have a subverting (or, queering) function, by virtue of his gender identity and camp sensibility. His self-images are nearly always reminiscent of other
images, other characters, other texts – a sense of performance and masquerade is ever-present, as his own image seems interpenetrated with the images of other people and types: for example, Goth girl, southern ‘white trash’ woman, androgynous pop star, teenage street hustler, and so on.

Despite the apparent differences in their intentions, the consistent manner in which both Benning and Caouette use close-up images of their own faces as the anchor for their films seems to be united by a sense of self-inscription for its own subjective sake. That is to say, the incessant projection of images-of-self that appears to fascinate both Caouette and Benning seem to be imbued as much (if not more) with the quality of mirror image as with screened image. Such a preoccupation – the drive towards visual self-inscription – could be said to represent a playing out of the desire to view the self as a mediated other and, in a sense, could also be thought of as a replay of the narcissistic psychic drama of alterity, in which one attempts to find the other in the self and the self in the other. Caouette and Benning explore a myriad of “selves” in front of their cameras, in intimate moments and — in the case of Caouette — during interactions with others in the domestic sphere. Their performances are highly visible and subject to — indeed, inviting of — scrutiny. In this respect they could both be said to be representative of a developing sensibility which privileges the public over the private, and which also seems to regard the mediated performance of one’s subjectivity as a validating process.

In the next and concluding chapter, I will briefly summarise the main points of my thesis argument, before turning to two areas which I believe provide further evidence for the claims I have made, as well as pointing to potential future research. The first of these areas exists under the umbrella of what I call “media actualities”,

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encompassing a range of television and documentary forms; and the second area incorporates a variety of performances which are now occurring in cyberspace as a result of the internet’s apparently ever-expanding capacity for the interactive use of images and sounds. I will argue that, through these phenomena, we are able to witness a vivid manifestation of how mediated screen performance is becoming an increasingly central aspect of contemporary experience, and how the tendency towards a conflation of screen audiences, producers, and performers is intensifying.

1 Sadie Benning made her first production in 1989 at the age of 15 after having been given a “toy” Fisher-Price Pixelvision camera by her father, the experimental filmmaker James Benning. The “early” films that are of particular interest to this study are: A New Year (1989); Living Inside (1989); Me and Rubyfruit (1990); Jollies (1990); If Every Girl Had a Diary (1990); A Place Called Lovely (1991); It Wasn’t Love (1992); and Girl Power (1992). Her other productions include: German Song (1995); The Judy Spots (1995); Flat is Beautiful (1998); and Aerobicide – Julie Ruin (1998). A collection of Sadie Benning’s work is available for purchase through Video Data Bank, or on-loan from the Australian Film and Video Lending Library (http://www.vdb.org).


3 Benning’s video work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Centre Georges Pompidou, the Tate Modern and the 1993 Venice Biennale. A more extensive “resume” can be located at http://www.bard.edu/mfa/faculty/faculty.php?id=2420 (accessed July 22, 2009).


6 There are two exceptions to this: There is one brief shot looking out through Benning’s bedroom window; however the blind is quickly pulled shut; and in addition, there is one exterior shot, at the very end of A New Year, in which we see a dog approaching from the camera’s point of view. Perhaps we could say that these few glimpses of the world outside represent the very beginning of “coming out.”


9 If Every Girl Had a Diary, short film. Directed and written by Sadie Benning. 1990.


18 Ibid., 179.

19 Ibid., 186.


24 See Josko Petkovic, “The Rhizome and the Image: The Genealogy of Letter to Eros”, PhD thesis. (Murdoch University: 1997), 139-40; and also see the discussion of this idea in Chapter Five of this thesis.

25 See Chapter Five.


27 See Chapter Five.


31 See Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the “Other” Self”, in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 140-55. Renov uses the term “domestic ethnography” to describe a type of production which documents the lives of close family members but which also operates as ‘a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice’ by functioning ‘as a vehicle of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other’ (141). Renov also notes that: ‘Domestic ethnographies tend to be highly charged investigations brimming with a curious brand of epistephilia, a brew of affection, resentment, even self-loathing’ (142).

32 *An American Family* (1973) is generally regarded as the seminal family docu-soap, while the Australian-British (ABC-BBC) co-production *Sylvania Waters* (1992) is another example.


35 Ibid.


38 *Tarnation*, director’s commentary (DVD: Wellspring Media, 2005).


41 Ibid., 105.

42 For a useful and brief summary of how Butler utilizes the concept of performativity and how it relates to Austin’s original notion, see Sara Salih’s introduction to an excerpt from *Gender Trouble*. Sarah Salih, ed., *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2004), 90-4.

43 Bruzzi, 154.

44 Ibid., 155. Bruzzi writes: ‘…. what a filmmaker such as Nick Broomfield is doing when he appears on camera is acting out a documentary’.

45 *Tarnation*, director’s commentary.


48 There are many possible sources that one might refer to for discussion on aspects of these relationships. As touched upon in Chapter Two, Charcot’s nineteenth century attempt to authenticate (or, some have argued, “author”) the condition of hysteria involved both a comprehensive photographic enterprise via the multi-volumed *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpetriere* along with the theatricality of his (in)famous “Tuesday Lectures.” [See Georges Did-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpetriere*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) (originally published, 1982)]. The final chapter of Petkovic’s thesis deals specifically with many of the connections between the history of photography, Charcot’s documentation of hysteria and the interrelationship between images, symptom and theatrical gesture. (See Petkovic, *The Rhizome and the Image*, 141-7). For a useful account of the ideology and history of photography, see John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*. And for an interesting account of a creative research project that explored the connections between eighteenth century notions of female madness and the performance of theatrical melodrama, see Rachel Fensham, “On Not Performing Madness”, *Theatre Topics* 8.2 (1998), 149-71.


51 See Chapter Two.

52 Elsaesser, 516.

53 Ibid., 521 and 524.

54 Ibid., 521.

55 Ibid., 532.

56 Mary Anne Doane, “Pathos and Pathology”, *Camera Obscura* 19.3 (2004): 4-5.

57 Ibid., 14.

58 Tania Modleski, “Time and Desire in the Woman’s Film” (1984) reprinted in *Film, Theory and Criticism*, Mast et. al., 538.

59 Doane, “Pathos and Pathology”, 17.

60 Renov, “Domestic Ethnography”, 141.

61 Ibid., 143.

62 Chris Freeman, “Renee’s Baby.”

63 *Tarnation*, director’s commentary.


65 *Tarnation*, director’s commentary.


68 *Tarnation*, director’s commentary.


71 Merrilee Bennett’s *Song of Air* (1987) and Barbara Bird’s *Album* (2002) are examples of documentaries which have, in a sense, deconstructed this patriarchal authorship by re-using home movie footage which was originally taken by the father of the family.


73 Ibid., 112-13.

74 We are told in the film that Caouette was substantively raised by his grandparents, Rosemary and Adolph, as his mother spent a great deal of time in mental institutions and his father abandoned his wife and child soon after Caouette’s birth. Although Caouette does refer to Adolph as “Dad” in the film, it seems clear that his grandfather was never regarded as a strong paternal figure. Moreover, the
absence of Caouette’s father – he had no memory of him and did not meet him until he was 19 years old – seems to have been an important issue for Caouette.


76 Ibid., 75.

77 Ibid.

78 We will deal with online implications of this phenomenon in the next chapter.


80 Ibid.


82 Ibid., 92.

83 In this context Renov includes works from the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, Marlon Riggs, Sadie Benning, Gurinda Chada, Su Friedrich, Jan Oxenberg, Sabdi Dubowski and Deborah Hoffman. Renov. “New Subjectivities”, 92-3.

84 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 173. For a useful discussion of the distinction that Butler makes between performativity and performance, see Elin Diamond, “Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett and the Politics of Seeming”, *The Drama Review*, 44, No. 4 (Winter 2000): 31-3. Diamond observes that, for Butler, an act of performance suggests a degree of “humanist subject intentionality” that undermines her conception of performativity as a reiteration of norms and regulatory schemas rather than being any singular act. Nevertheless, Diamond argues that the resignifying potential of a concept such as (e.g. gender) performativity requires the embodiment of a performance for it to be put into meaningful practice.


86 Ibid., 90.

87 Ibid., 91.


90 Ibid., 96.

91 Ibid., 90.

92 Ibid., 94.

93 Ibid., 96.


Only in Benning’s later film, *Flat is Beautiful* (1998), is there a more or less traditional narrative structure and cast of characters in place. In this film, however, all characters wear paper masks throughout, which means that there is no real network of glances possible.

The term “to-be-looked-at-ness” was used by Laura Mulvey in terms of how, in mainstream narrative cinema, female stars existed primarily as objects of the male, voyeuristic gaze. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 750. (Originally published in *Screen* 16 no. 3 [Autumn, 1975]: 6-18.)
Chapter Seven — Screen Performance and the Performing Subject: Further Considerations and Concluding Comments

The trajectory that I have been describing in this thesis follows a movement away from the humanist/realist conception that we exist purely as authentic individuals centred within our own interiorities, and towards the idea that our sense of self is created and continually adjusted by reference to external sources. Screen-based media, along with the performances which are their primary content, are amongst the most influential and pervasive of these external sources, and much of our thought and behaviour is now complexly imbricated with them. Due to this apparent tendency towards externalizing our sense of self, and to the undoubted prevalence of media in our lives, I have argued that we seem not only impelled to express ourselves to the world as if we are somehow giving a perpetual media performance, but also that our performances of contemporary subjectivity are now literally becoming enveloped within screen-based media. In this context, I have proposed that having some kind of media presence — the on-screen performance of aspects of ourselves to an audience, however large or small — is rapidly becoming an important means by which we validate ourselves as subjects in the contemporary world.

Throughout this thesis, I have taken care to avoid implying that realism, realist performances or the belief that we possess an integral and authentic interiority has somehow vanished entirely from our lives. This is clearly not the case. Many screen-based representations in the cinema and on television remain within a realist paradigm, even if realism is now seen as a stylistic choice rather than a way of representing a transparent and unambiguous truth. Similarly, many of the finest and
most affecting screen performances we see resolutely avoid theatricality, or any explicit or implicit reference to their own status as constructed artifice. More fundamentally, it is difficult to imagine ourselves existing as functional social beings without retaining some core sense of an interior self — or, as R.D. Laing expressed it, some degree of “ontological security”.¹

Rather than suggesting that we have reached “the end of realism” then, I have attempted to characterize the exteriorization of the self as having a traceable history in terms of screen media, screen performance, and more generally, the nature of contemporary experience. Furthermore, I have argued that many current media and social performances are characterized by a tension between a postmodern tendency to reflexively create versions of the self, and an underlying existential anxiety about identity. It is clear, however, that the existence of such tendencies and tensions cannot be categorically proven, nor can the nature of the interrelationship between subjectivity and mediated performance be precisely defined. In fact, I would venture that the phenomena which constitute these tendencies and relationships are changing and intensifying so rapidly that it is not currently possible to gain a completely clear perspective on them.

Consequently, I will conclude this thesis by signposting a number of areas and examples in which the trend towards contemporary individuals taking a performative, mediated, and exteriorized stance to their own subjectivity is becoming increasingly apparent. My purpose in doing so is to provide more evidence for the validity of my claim that this tendency is indeed proliferating, as well as to point towards areas I believe warrant further exploration. I will first look at how such performances occur within the (mostly television-based) context of what might be
called “media actuality”, before turning to the ever-expanding realm of performances in cyberspace.

**Performances in Mediated Actuality**

The performances that exist in the various forms of “media actuality” which seem to constitute an ever-increasing aspect of screen content are vividly revealing of what appears to be a growing interdependence between media performance and social identity. These mediated performances exist in a range of forms and styles, including documentaries, “docu-soaps”, news and current affairs programs, chat shows, video diary-style programs and competition-based reality TV. On the one hand, we could say that the performative aspects of these media actualities conflate the quotidian and the dramaturgical whereby, in a Baudrillardian sense, performances in the media become a replacement for experiences in the real world. On the other hand, though, it might equally be the case that what seems to be a growing interest in media actualities over explicitly fictional representations reflects a growing hunger for some sense of the real in a world of simulation.

The question of why these performances of actuality seem so intriguing and inviting to many people cannot be answered in a simple and unqualified way. However, I have already pointed to two tendencies in our highly mediated culture that might be pertinent to the issue. The first of these tendencies is that the fictional narrative forms inherent in conventional feature films and television drama series seem to be nearing the point of exhaustion, insofar as they are decreasingly able to engage us emotionally (by getting us to “suspend disbelief”) due to our acute awareness of their narrative and performative conventions. Consequently, it may be that we find
ourselves turning to other media forms in the hope that they might offer us some frisson via encounters with reality. Just as we no longer duck for cover when a train hurtles towards the camera, it may be that we now watch all narratives (and performances within such narratives) with such ironic distance that it is only in the realm of media actuality where we can hope to find something that is potentially dangerous and surprising. That is to say, in a world of simulations, it may be that the promise of seeing reality (real violence, real sex, or even real death) on our screens offers something more than just another familiar narrative, another car chase sequence, or another montage of special effects. In this context, it may also be the case that the mirror-like identification we putatively experience with media images — and, in particular, with images of people — is more intense when we believe that what we are seeing is “real” rather than fictional.

The second tendency which seems relevant in terms of our apparent attraction to media actualities is that it appears increasingly evident that the phenomenon of exhibiting oneself through image and performance in various screen-based media has become a new form of “currency” by which one’s worth and significance is seen to be validated. To put this another way: for both media audiences and performers alike, the appearance on a media screen — and therefore in front of an audience — becomes a proof of meaningfulness in what, at times, may seem like an otherwise meaningless existence.

Instances of events covered by screen media in which information and entertainment, news and narrative, seem to fold into each other in ways that capture our collective imaginations are too numerous to catalogue. However, some of the more well known examples over recent decades would include: the arrest and trial of O.J. Simpson; the
videotaped evidence, court trials and subsequent riots related to the beating of Rodney King; the saga of Michael Jackson’s life and death; the destruction of the World Trade Centre, and the televised invasions of Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In an Australian context, the arrest and trial in Bali of the Australian tourist Schapelle Corby provided a lengthy “real life melodrama” for the Australian viewing public, courtesy of the television networks. A combination of Corby’s photogenic appearance and apparent naiveté provided some of the key ingredients for an orgy of sensationalized media coverage. The lack of media and political savvy demonstrated by Corby and her family, along with the xenophobia that the media-saturated event provoked in Australia, provided constant “dramatic content”, while the sincerity and credibility of Corby’s “performances” both inside and outside of the courtroom often constituted the main topic of popular/media discourse relating to the case.

In all of the examples mentioned above, and many more besides, comments along the lines that these “real events” were like “watching a movie” have become very familiar. Clearly, there is a sense manifested in such statements that, due to the ubiquitous presence of cameras and screens in our lives, and the fact that actual experience seems increasingly to be replaced with mediated experience, everything we now see seems to evoke the sense of “watching a movie” (or, for that matter, “being in a movie”), whether it has emanated from a screen or not. According to some, it is this confusion of reality with mediated experience that has led some particularly disturbed individuals to perform acts of extreme violence in ways that replicate episodes of screen mayhem. In metaphorical if not literal terms, we could say that a form of “dissociative disorder” (that is, depersonalization/derealization), whereby subjects see themselves and others as performing in simulations rather than
participating in actuality, is now almost a condition of contemporary experience. But what is the process by which we seem to so readily conflate performances that occur on screen with our own performances in actuality? To some extent at least, it seems that the omnipresence of cameras and screens in our lives allows us — or perhaps even impels us — to equate our own sense of self with the images and performances we absorb from the exteriority of mediated experience, with the corollary that we use this imaginary storehouse as the basis for our own “self-presentation”.

The reasons for our captivation by, and connection to, images and performances are undoubtedly complex and ambiguous. In his often-cited book, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes had much to say on the topic of our relationship to images in the context of photography. For Barthes, the photographic image’s ontological link to reality — its “this-has-been” referentiality — connects a photograph both to the object photographed, and to the viewer. He writes that ‘a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze ….a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed’. Although Barthes was writing exclusively about photography, and although he believed that the photograph had certain qualities of presence that do not also exist in the cinematographic or televisual image, it seems reasonable to suggest that this sense of “sharing a skin” with the image of another is likely to apply in more or less equal measure to all camera-originated images.

The connections between image and reality, self and other, that camera technologies seem to evoke is clearly an important issue in the context of how we invest ourselves in images of the “performing other”, as well as how we validate ourselves through our own performances in front of cameras. These connections seem to resonate at a
deep psychic level: we see ourselves in the other; and we see the other in ourselves. And when these images of the other are perceived to exist in the realm of actuality rather than the realm of artifice, it can be argued that they possess their strongest effect. For Barthes, society attempts to “tame” the wildness of the image’s affect by using it for the purposes of art rather than for the representation of reality.\(^9\)

However, as we have been exploring in this thesis, binaries such as this are problematic, given the extent to which distinctions between the fictive and the real seem to have become corroded in contemporary experience.

**Documentary, Docu-soap and Reality TV**

A complex “dialogue” between fictive images and images of actuality has, in fact, existed since the earliest days of both photography and cinema.\(^{10}\) Similarly, this interdependent relationship between actuality and fiction has always been a significant component of television which has, throughout its history, blended the spectacle with the everyday, and the celebrity with the “ordinary person”. In this context, the proliferation of so-called “Reality TV” since the late 1990s can be seen as an evolution of television’s tradition of actuality programming, rather than a form which has spontaneously emerged. In some ways, aspects of reality television are not unlike (and indeed could be seen as developments of) the more traditional observational, or “direct cinema” documentary. In both instances, performance is a key strategy for engaging the audience. Documentary theorist, Bill Nicholls, has discussed the importance of performance to the observational documentary in the following way:

For the viewer, observational documentaries set up a frame of reference closely akin to that of the fiction film. …. We look in on and overhear social actors. … I use the term
“social actor” to stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance. The term is also meant to remind us that social actors, people, retain the capacity to act within the historical arena where they perform. The sense of aesthetic remove between an imaginary world in which actors perform and the historical world in which people live no longer obtains. The performance of social actors, though, is similar to the performance of fictional characters in many respects. Individuals present a more or less complex psychology, and we direct our attention towards their development or destiny. We identify and follow codes of actions and enigmas that advance the narrative. We attend to those semic or behaviourally descriptive moments that fold back over characters and give further density to their behaviour.11

The links between a range of more or less traditional documentaries, and television “docu-soaps” in which ongoing television series follow groups of people in particular domestic or social situations (such as in the family home, or in the workplace), are quite close. Indeed, Bill Nicholls cites the 1973 series, *An American Family*,12 as an example of observational documentary, whereas this same series could also be seen as a seminal instance of domestic “docu-soap”, spawning series in later decades such as Australia’s *Sylvania Waters*,13 as well as those series which replace the domestic situation with the workplace, beginning with *Cops*14 and then proliferating into numerous variants such as *Airport*,15 *Driving School*,16 and *Miami Ink*.17 Both observational documentaries and docu-soaps are based on capturing the performances of “real people” (as opposed to professional actors) in “real situations”.

Another strand of reality programming, however, places “real people” in contrived or simulated environments (for example, castaway on an island, in charge of a restaurant, thrust into a different historical era, or housed with a group of
strangers). In these instances, there is little prospect that the participants will ever forget that they are performing in front of a camera. Indeed, the process of auditioning to be cast in a reality TV show is now treated in a similar fashion to auditioning for any other acting part. Some “audition manuals” for actors now include advice about auditioning for reality TV, while other books have been specifically written to advise aspiring reality TV contestants how to maximize their chances of securing a part. It seems evident that reality TV participants remain acutely aware of producers’ (implicit or explicit) requirement for them to maintain interesting and dramatic performances in front of the camera. At the same time, it is also apparent that participants are equally concerned with the consequences of their portrayals in terms of public opinion and popularity (particularly in those programs which are interactive to the degree that viewers vote to decide whether a participant will remain in the show). In this context, such reality TV shows shift from being, in any sense, a reflection of reality, to becoming a self-referential exploration of performance. Annette Hill has noted how the performances of reality show contestants have rapidly become highly self-reflexive:

The problem is that contestants in reality gameshows learn how to behave from previous series, and there can be an element of parody to their performances. Thus, in Big Brother 3/4 in the UK, contestants talked endlessly about how they would be perceived by the public and the media, knowing that once out of the house they would be media stars, even if only for a day. Indeed some contestants have already appeared on other reality TV shows, and there is a danger of repeat performers flooding auditions for reality gameshows.

A sub-genre of reality TV – sometimes referred to as “celeb-reality” TV – promises access to the real/private self of the celebrity performer that lies beneath the façade
of their public persona. Some of these programs, such as *The Osbournes*,23 *Hogan Knows Best*,24 *Gene Simmons Family Jewells*,25 and *The Anna Nicole Show*,26 have tended to situate themselves somewhere between the domestic docu-soap and the sit-com. Other versions of celeb-reality TV, however, have reveled in the morbid fascination of seeing celebrities-in-decline humiliating themselves for public consumption. One such series was *Breaking Bonaduce*,27 which purported to chronicle the self-destructive behaviour of the one-time member of The Partridge Family, Danny Bonaduce, and is perhaps best characterized by the title that the series was given for UK television, *My Reality TV Breakdown*. Similarly, the series, *Shooting Sizemore*,28 followed the downward spiral of the actor, Tom Sizemore. The series included segments from Sizemore’s own “video camera diary” which he used to document his descent into psychosis as a result of addiction to crystal methamphetamine and heroin.

While observational documentaries and most forms of “docu-soap” tend to rely heavily on the performances of the “social actors” that are being observed in the film, a number of documentaries in recent years have taken a more self-reflexive turn in which performance becomes even further foregrounded. In these cases, the performances of the filmmakers themselves become a key element. The films of Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield are celebrated examples of this tendency;29 while other documentaries in this performative category such as *The Yes Men*,30 Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me*,31 and (to the extent that we may label them documentaries), Sacha Baron Cohen’s *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*32 and *Bruno*33 tip the scale even further towards the performance of the filmmaker(s) as the main focal point of the film.34
There is also a variant of this type of performative documentary in which the relationship between the filmmaker and the camera becomes a key factor. In films such as this, the main theme is the documentation of the filmmaker-subject’s life and/or the reinvention of his/her identity. Ross McElwee’s 1986 film, *Sherman’s March*,\(^{35}\) is a seminal work in these terms. In the wryly subjective exploration of his own life and relationships, we rarely see McElwee in the frame as he virtually makes the camera an extension of himself. Even more pertinent to an age where the “video handycam” is more-or-less omnipresent is Robert Gibson’s 1996 documentary, *Video Fool for Love*,\(^{36}\) in which Gibson literally turns his life into a soap opera as he uses a pre-digital camcorder to document his life experiences, including a series of failed relationships, over a ten year period.\(^{37}\) Another, somewhat different, example of a film that relies on the apparent compulsion felt by some to use a camera to document all that is around them, is Andrew Jarecki’s *Capturing the Friedmans*.\(^{38}\) The film could not have existed in its final form, and would certainly lack its undeniable narrative drive and fascination, without David Friedman’s apparently obsessive determination to document on video the breakdown of the family unit under the pressure of accusations and subsequent arrest of his father and brother on charges of paedophilia. In some ways, the use of domestic footage in films like *Capturing the Friedmans* takes us back to the earliest impulses of photography in terms of the urge to preserve a record of family and everyday life.\(^{39}\) In the case of David Friedman, however, one senses the existence of a more contemporary tendency in operation – an urge to render one’s life into media content in a vein that seems similar to the apparent seductiveness of reality TV programming.
A documentary that vividly encapsulates the belief that the camera can be used not only to validate oneself but, in effect, also to re-invent oneself via one’s performances in front of the lens is Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*. Herzog’s film tells the story of how an unsuccessful aspiring actor, Timothy Treadwell, reinvented himself as a quasi Steve Irwin-style protector of wildlife. Treadwell’s self-imposed “mission” was to save a population of grizzly bears (even though these particular bears were actually protected within a national park on the Alaskan peninsula). As it turned out, Treadwell and his companion at the time were eventually killed by the bears, and *Grizzly Man* was constructed by Herzog from over a hundred of hours of Treadwell’s own video footage that he shot in an attempt to create a television series based on his exploits. What emerges from the film is the story of a person who seems to believe it is possible to re-fashion himself principally by means of the screen performances he records on his camera. What we largely see in the film is a sadly ironic commentary on a character who yearned for a substantive and meaningful identity, but who became caught up in a network of invented identities cobbled together from the superficial stereotypes of popular culture. In Treadwell’s case, we see the importance that is placed upon the media, fame, recognition, and the validation that comes from being able to achieve an audience for one’s reinvention of self. Treadwell’s story also tells us much about the influence that the camera now has on our lives.

In all of its manifestations, the “media actualities” referred to above demonstrate that audiences have a growing fascination with certain facets of the real over the patently fictional. At the same time, however, most contemporary audience members are sufficiently media-sophisticated to be well aware that when they are watching a “reality show” they are, in fact, viewing a construction (whether this is explicit in the
particular form of program or not). In all cases, though, reality programming offers viewers the chance to see how people perform themselves to others. While sociologists and others have observed over a number of decades the fact that our assessments of our own attractiveness and self-worth are predicated to a large degree on how credibly we perform ourselves to others, it seems that the added dimension of having some kind of “media presence” and some kind of “media audience” is now becoming a significant criteria for how some of us measure our success as social subjects.

The Performing Subject in Cyberspace
While television has been (and in some respects remains) the most ubiquitous media influence on all of our lives, clearly the internet is rapidly taking over this position of centrality. Perhaps more to the point is the way that — by way of the much-vaunted “convergence” that is now occurring — sounds, images, and media performances which are recorded as digital information are increasingly treated as pieces of media that can be transferred seamlessly between the various channels of storage and dissemination such as television, computers, personal media devices, and digital servers.44

There has been much hyperbole over recent decades about the impact of the internet, a great deal of which can be linked directly to the flow of global capital.45 Regardless of whether one is inclined towards a utopian or dystopian stance in relation to the effects of our increasing fascination for, and reliance upon, the virtual and instantaneous experiences that cyberspace offers us,46 there can be little doubt that the interconnectivity and interactivity of the internet, along with the ever-improving
ability to store and/or circulate high resolution images, is, at the very least, changing
the way we relate to screen-based media. The important question, though, is whether
(and, if so, how) such changes have an effect on the way we understand ourselves as
subjects, and the way that we relate (and perform ourselves) to others and to the
world at large.

There are some respects in which the hypothesized dissolution of the singular,
phenomenological subject espoused by a number of poststructuralist/postmodernist
theorists seems to become practicable and realizable as a result of the possibilities
offered in cyberspace. To some degree at least, cyberspace allows us to construct
simulated identities and mutable lives in ways that would be unimaginable without
such media technology. Similarly, it seems we are also able to transcend our own
physical definitions and limitations, as well as the restrictions of time and space, as
we look for new ways to experience and perform these multiple subjectivities. The
question as to whether such possibilities are simply a “techno-delusion”, or whether
they do indeed constitute new subjectivities (new ways of becoming), is one that is
bound to be ongoing and important in the years to come. Clearly, though, the internet
is a screen-based medium that throws up a myriad of new possibilities in terms of
how we might relate to mediated performances (including our own performances),
just as it continues to make us question past presumptions about identity and
subjecthood.

Some of the more important and relevant theoretical insights to have emerged in
recent decades about the relationship between the developing technologies of
cyberspace, and our own constitution as contemporary subjects, have important
implications for the concerns of this thesis with the changing relationships between
the subject and screen-based media performance. While it is beyond the scope of this final chapter to adumbrate the relevance of such theories, it can be said that their implications fall into two interrelated categories. First, that the processes by which we have become intimately connected to the technologies of screen mediation are becoming dramatically intensified in the world of online experiences, and, second, that cyberspace has brought even more acute resonances to the notion that identity is something we can construct and thereby perform to the world. 47

There are a number of respects in which the phenomenon of online performance (in its various forms) brings together many of the major themes we have discussed so far in this thesis. Such themes include: an acute awareness by contemporary subjects of the processes of mediation and their own place within a hyper-mediated world; a continued corrosion of the distinctions between reality and the virtual universe of mediated performances; a predilection on the part of contemporary subjects to utilize forms of screen media to perform versions of their identity in a way that is fragmentary, multiple, and provisional rather than coherent, unified and permanent; an apparently ever-intensifying belief in the idea that one can only be “validated” as an individual to the extent that one has both a mediated screen presence and an audience of some description; a growing acceptance (and embrace) of the idea of commodifying and exhibiting oneself in the public domain, and, perhaps paradoxical to the notion that the real and the artificial can no longer be separated, a tendency to believe that performances within the sphere of actuality guarantee an authenticity not available through conventionally mediated narratives and performances.

These underlying implications of a growing trend towards performing oneself online are manifested in a number of different ways, ranging from “mainstream” social
networking and file-sharing sites to the prolific universe of internet erotica and pornography. In all of these cases, we can see a strong trend towards a culture of “DIY” participatory media production, and a privileging of the “amateur”, which underscores the notion that the contemporary individual can, increasingly, be considered to be a performing subject.

In just over a decade – approximately from the mid-to-late 1990s to the end of the first decade of the new century – there has been a proliferation in the use of audio-visual streaming (both of live webcam and pre-recorded material) that could be said to have created a new virtual universe of self-performances. Unsurprisingly, the mainstream media has continually focussed on the more extreme, lurid, and disturbing aspects of such online activities — a focus which has arguably encouraged contemporary subjects to ever more magnified theatricalizations of themselves in order to be noticed, and to an even greater belief in the significance of capturing their own behaviours and images on camera. Perhaps even more significant, though, is the rapidity and ease with which contemporary subjects have incorporated and normalized the new online capabilities of cyberspace into their lives. For example, while the first instances of self-surveillance via live video streaming from webcams in the middle of the 1990s was seen, variously, as scandalous or revolutionary, barely a decade later it has become a widespread practice which — for its practitioners at least — is now merely considered to be a part of everyday life.

A Brave New (Mediated) World on the Eve of the New Millennium
Towards the end of the 1990s the phenomena of transmitting images from domestic spaces into cyberspace seemed to have reached something of a crescendo. The first and most celebrated of the so-called “webcam girls”, Jennifer Ringley, established her Jennicam website in 1996. Now defunct, for eight years Ringley’s website continually disseminated images of her apartment (living room and bedroom) via permanently installed web cameras. In that time, Ringley became a minor celebrity and inspired many other people (mostly women) to establish similar webcam sites.\(^{49}\)

In 1998, *The Truman Show*\(^{50}\) — a feature film in which the eponymous protagonist is unwittingly subjected to continual audio-visual surveillance and conspiratorial manipulation in order for him to spend every waking (and sleeping) moment as the central subject of a daily soap opera — was released. *The Truman Show* is considered to have been partially inspired by the public awareness and interest in Ringley’s Jennicam site. *The Truman Show* was then followed in 1999 by *Edtv*,\(^{51}\) a film in which the protagonist — this time knowingly and, at first, willingly — is subjected to the 24-hour, seven day per week intrusions of a multiple-camera television crew for the similar purpose of making him the star of a reality-soap opera. In the same year as *Edtv*’s release, the information technology entrepreneur, Josh Harris, created a million dollar online reality programming experiment called “We Live in Public”.\(^{52}\) The project was a one hundred-day interactive art experiment set up in a Manhattan studio. The studio was fitted out with thirty-two heat sensitive, full motion video cameras designed to track the every move of Harris and his then girlfriend, Tanya Corrin.\(^{53}\) The year 1999 also saw the first screening of the surveillance-based *Big Brother* television series, produced by the Endemol Entertainment company in the Netherlands — a program that was quickly franchised world-wide to become a much publicized (and often vilified) phenomenon of mainstream television broadcasting in the early years of the new century.
Meanwhile, internet pornography was steadily growing into a multi-billion dollar per year industry.\textsuperscript{54} Within the first few years of the new decade, the term Web 2.0 started to be used to describe the enhanced interactivity and user-participation that the internet was able to offer in the form of social networking, media file-sharing, video blogging, and the like.\textsuperscript{55}

In an interesting variation on \textit{Time Magazine}’s tradition of publishing an annual “Person of the Year” edition, the cover of the magazine’s final edition for 2006 contained the image of a personal computer with the monitor screen replaced by a mirrored surface. The main text of the magazine cover announced: “Time Person of the Year. You.”, and on the contents page, the magazine stated that ‘[t]his was the year that people took control of the media. You changed the way we see ourselves, and the world we live in, forever’.\textsuperscript{56} The edition devoted considerable space to the “Web 2.0 revolution”, characterizing it as the medium for a new wave of participatory subjectivity. Indeed, the editorializing went as far as stating that ‘the creators and consumers of user-generated content are transforming art, politics and commerce’ and that they are ‘the engaged citizens of a new digital democracy’.\textsuperscript{57}

The image of a mirror, as utilized on the \textit{Time Magazine} cover, is a highly evocative one which implies that by looking at each other we are, in fact, always looking back at ourselves. As we have discussed, the conventional theoretical model of cinematic spectatorship characterizes our imaginary identifications as being of a more or less passive nature, rather like the barely mobile infant either staring at its own reflection, or staring into the face of its mother, as conceptualized in the Lacanian mirror-stage metaphor. However, this putatively new mode of “mirroring” suggests a far more active engagement between the images that we project of ourselves, and the images
of others that we not only introject but often also actively respond to. Nevertheless, we should proceed quite cautiously when considering claims that this more active process signals a new and more meaningful form of social engagement by the contemporary subject in an otherwise alienating world. That is to say, it could equally be argued that these new cyber-performances merely constitute yet more acute forms of self-commodification, self-subjugation, and narcotizing narcissism.\(^58\)

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Time Magazine* edition is an interview with an avid YouTube performer-viewer, “Leila”, who states that she, along with many of her contemporaries, have given up watching mainstream media altogether, preferring instead the lure of getting ‘caught up in watching other people’s videos’.\(^59\) There is no doubt, of course, that mainstream models of film and television drama are still dominant forms of entertainment. However, it seems clear that moves towards a variety of more interactive, interconnected, and subject-centred modes of performance — from the reality TV shows aired on broadcast television to the multiplicity of sites that comprise Web 2.0 — are indicative of changing energies and interests on the part of many individuals, and may even mark the beginnings of a significant momentum shift in terms of how we relate to mediated performances.

The fact that the history of transmitting and/or uploading video images into cyberspace spans less than two decades only adds to the sense that the nature of cyber-performance is changing before our eyes. There is, of course, no shortage of techno-enthusiasts who are ever ready to proclaim the arrival of new technological revolutions. Nevertheless, the fact that we have seen a movement from cyberspace perceived as a new and potentially significant medium of self-presentation to a situation in which the performance of one’s identity via web cameras, video
blogging, digital photo galleries, and “face books” has become a commonplace, indicates that the incorporation of the technologies of mediation and mediated imagery into the presentation/creation of contemporary identity has indeed entered a new (hyper-intensified) phase. Clearly, many issues and questions emerge from this apparently quantum leap into new forms of coalescence between subjectivity and mediation, and between the public and private spheres.

**Online Performances as Exhibition and/or Self-Surveillance**

It could be argued that the degree to which notions such as self-surveillance in the form of exhibiting one’s image in cyberspace have become naturalized into our contemporary society is part of a more broadly-based acquiescence regarding all forms of surveillance. The phenomenon of surveillance-based “reality-TV”, along with the increasingly widespread use of technologies such as web cameras and phone cameras, would appear to even more emphatically turn surveillance into a spectacular process. The notion of “sous-surveillance”, whereby cameras are turned back on authority figures — and, sometimes, also on other citizens — is one manifestation of the proliferation of video surveillance. Sous-surveillance is a phenomenon that is sometimes said to have begun with the 1991 videotaping of the Rodney King beating, but which now flourishes in many forms in the contemporary era of YouTube and the ubiquitous mobile phone camera.

However, it is those individuals who voluntarily make the performance of their own lives the object of scrutiny by others — a willing and active offering up of oneself to surveillance — who could be said to take the panoptic principle to its exhibitionist/performative extreme. The acceptability of notions of surveillance,
along with the sense that we believe ourselves to be validated as subjects only to the extent that we exist as publicly acknowledged self-simulations, seems to be becoming so integrated into our collective psyche that what might once have been perceived as extreme exercises in narcissism, radical identity politics, perversion, or transgression now proceed either without comment or — when they are sufficiently novel or outlandish to attract notice — are viewed as events of ephemeral interest in the cascade of performances and images that constitute our spectacular society.

Despite the relative equanimity with which we seem to view the increasing proliferation of images from the private sphere being circulated in the public domain of the World Wide Web, such a tendency suggests significant changes in our subjective sense of the relationship between self and (mediated) world. There are, of course, different interpretations available for such instances of self-documentation and self-performance. On the one hand, for example, we might consider them as indicative of a liberated and enhanced form of agency, in which the unencumbered play of multiplicity and polyvocality is enabled — freedom from constricting ideological and moral interdiction, and freedom to create and express identity. On the other hand, however, we could feel some apprehension about the degree to which we seem to willingly embrace and facilitate the transformation of ourselves into commodities of global capital. In either case (or, more likely, both cases), it seems evident that the virtuality of cyberspace, be it in the form of cyber-porn or less prurient forms of domestic “lifecasting” and video blogging, is changing some of the fundamental dynamics of our exhibitionist and voyeuristic relations to identity and image, our notions of public and private space, and the intimacy with which we embrace the ideology of the self as a (potentially) commodified spectacle.
The notion of living one’s life on the World Wide Web was (and, in some cases, is still) exemplified by the so-called “webcam girls” such as Jennifer Ringley, Ana Voog, and others. This phenomenon is perhaps most interesting here for the manner in which it blurs distinctions between public and private spaces, and, more specifically, for the way the mediation by cameras and screens could be said to change the “living of a life” into the “performance of living a life”. In Ringley’s case, the provision of a window into the private sphere — no matter how banal and lacking in narrative content it may often have been — clearly held its attractions for people; at its height, the Jennicam website claimed to have had up to five million hits per day. Webcam practitioners such as Ringley tended to emphasize the fact that they were documenting the quotidian nature of their lives. In a sense, the ordinariness and everyday-ness of the “content” was the point of the exercise: the fact that the site might be transmitting eight hours of a person sleeping in their bed, or a cat sleeping on a couch — or an empty couch, for that matter — was considered to be entirely valid as an aspect of continuous documentation and self-surveillance. Ringley wrote in her website journal, ‘I keep Jennicam alive not because I want to be watched, but because I simply don’t mind being watched’, while, in an interview, another webcam practitioner said ‘I’m not an exhibitionist, I’m an exhibit’.

According to Theresa Senft, such webcam practices can be considered as the self-creation of what she terms ‘micro-celebrity’ in the form of a mediatized mix of autobiography and presence. However, the notion of a virtual celebrity-inspired autobiographical practice raises a number of issues relating to the status of the self that is being documented — a notion perhaps best summarized as a kind of autobiographical performance. We could say, for example, that although there appears to be a process of self-validation inherent in any act of autobiography, the
online, instantaneous, camera-based context of the practices of webcam girls and their like seems to once again evoke something other than the conventional concept of the individual subject as a unitary and centred entity. Indeed, a virtual (that is, cyberspace-mediated) and image-based dissemination of the self might be seen as the perfect example of pure simulacra in operation. From the perspective of the viewer, the projection of the self of the webcam practitioner could be said to be perceived as pure image/pure surface — not a poor imitation of a corporeal presence, but an image-of-itself as a presence snugly encased beneath the surface of a computer screen.68

The Enigma of the Authentic Performance in the Virtuality of Cyberspace

One significant issue in the context of thinking of internet camera-based practices as “autobiographical performances” pertains to the question of truthfulness. Against the notion of pure simulacra — of identity-performances floating freely, independent of any existential link to real individuals — is the sense that, like any autobiographical practice, an ethics and an expectation of truthfulness and authenticity prevails as a form of contract between viewer and (camera-mediated) “autobiographer”. Unlike situations such as online gaming, in which identity-as-pure-invention is not only considered acceptable, but is almost requisite,69 the autobiographical context in which practitioners such as webcammers and video blogger/diarists operate seems to implicitly mandate a core of honest self-representation. Beneath even the most playful and imaginative practices in which life and art, reality and fantasy, coalesce on webcamming sites — such as the self-images created by Ana Voog on her “Anacam” website70 — there appears to be a minimum requirement for the “real self” of the person to reveal itself as an underlying presence. In this context, Andreas Kitzmann has noted, in his study of the autobiographical/diaristic impulses behind
certain aspects of internet activity, that the well-established pact between reader and writer in conventional autobiography also pertains in comparable online practices.

Kitzmann writes:

By violating the terms of the contract, writers who deliberately fictionalize their autobiographical accounts are said to have betrayed the trust of the reader, and in my interviews with diarists and Webcammers, a few acknowledge having been hurt and outraged by deliberate acts of deception. In fact, Web-based forms of self-documentation are so concerned about such violation that "reality" has been almost fetishized: proclaimed as a kind of value, especially in terms of "liveness".71

The question of authenticity/inauthenticity received widespread publicity due to the LonelyGirl15 controversy. In 2006, Bree, or LonelyGirl15 as she called herself on her YouTube video blogs, started to gain a large following for her apparently sincere and emotional postings. However, it was eventually revealed that Bree was in fact an actor, Jessica Rose, and that her video blogs were a form of marketing for a planned online TV series. While there was considerable anger expressed by many YouTube users, who felt they had been duped by LonelyGirl15, her video blogs continued to attract numerous viewers after the hoax was revealed. As Burgess and Green note, while LonelyGirl15 ‘violated the ideology of authenticity associated with DIY culture’, it is an example of how ‘the possibilities of inauthentic authenticity are now part of the cultural repertoire of YouTube’.72 In this sense, the notion of authenticity becomes ambiguous, providing yet another facet of the playfully performative nature of postmodern identity that seems to so often find expression in cyberspace.

Notwithstanding the notion that webcam practitioners and video bloggers might attempt to faithfully and authentically represent themselves or, alternatively, that ludic permutations such as “inauthentic authenticity” might apply, the relationship between the person who is performing themselves in front of a camera and the way...
that a cyber-viewer might perceive such performances seems to be quite ambiguous
and complex. If, for example, I watch the image of a “24/7 webcammer” sleeping in
their bedroom from my online computer screen, I might be convinced that I am not
observing an invented persona, nor an intentionally constructed performance, nor,
for that matter, a mere pretence of sleep. I might indeed be convinced that I am
looking at “the real thing.” I might well be taken in by the live-ness, the real-ness,
the facticity of the image; and yet I will unavoidably remain aware that I am viewing
a low-resolution transmission — a poor facsimile of that real thing. Indeed, it could
be said that my engagement is not with the “real person” lying asleep in their bed,
but with the image in front of me. In short, I am paradoxically aware that I am
watching a simulation that powerfully evokes a sense of authentic presence while,
*simultaneously*, reminding me of its virtuality and absence.

In some respects, this sense of viewing a facsimile might not seem all that dissimilar
to the sensation of present-absence that arguably inheres to all camera-based images.
However, the “aura” of live telepresence the internet can evoke tends to emphasize
the paradoxical nature of the perception that we are somehow looking at a “real
facsimile”. In this sense, then, we could say that the notion of the online performance
of self as simulacra is tied to the very nature of the internet which, as Jodi Dean
summarizes, can perhaps best be thought of in the slightly metaphoric terms of being
‘a web of repetitions, a web of copies without an original and creations without a
creator’.73

In terms of making sense of the (equally paradoxical) notion of *autobiographical
performances*, such as the webcam practices and video blogs we have been
exploring, it might be necessary to view the concept in terms of a shift from the
former to the latter — a movement away from autobiography and towards performance. Indeed, it could be argued that such a shift is in line with a trend which sees the once radically constructivist notion that we are who we perform ourselves to be becoming an increasingly manifest (and even commonplace) reality in our contemporary hyper-mediated society. In the context of our present discussion we could say that, although it is possible to find parallels between traditional and digital versions of autobiographical practice, it does seem clear that, in terms of the webcammers and video bloggers themselves, we can apprehend a transition from the conventional autobiographical notion of the expression of self to one which could more accurately be thought of as the performance of self. Alternatively, to take at face value comments such as those of the webcam practitioners cited previously, such practices could even be said — with only a trace of hyperbole — to signify a transition from the last vestiges of the central Cartesian subject, to the “exhibited” subject as a commodified object.  

Theresa Senft comments that much of the allure of internet celebrity — or micro-celebrity as she calls it — is ‘based on connections with, rather than separation from viewers’. It seems incontestable that for the cyber-performer the idea of audience is crucial. Indeed, it would seem that having an actual audience — evidenced by the recording of website “hits”, video responses, text comments, chat room discussions and, quite commonly, credit card payments — is the validating component of the phenomenon. Kitzmann argues that the webcam practitioner (along with the video diarist/blogger) tends to see their activity of ‘allowing public access to personal thoughts and personal space’ as the most significant factor enhancing a sense of agency, ‘a way to make one's life significant through the feedback and support’ of their readers or audience. In this sense, we are once again confronted with the
notion that identity seems increasingly viewed as valid only to the extent that it is
\textit{performed} to an audience.

\textbf{Cyberporn and the “Cult of the Amateur”}

The cyberporn industry has for some years utilized the webcam and the digital
“handycam” as its fundamental technological instruments, and has appropriated the
notion of the “ordinary person” performing themselves as a sexualized commodity
— the-amateur-as-porn-star — in a manner that reflects the influential effects of the
contemporary subject’s increasingly intimate relations with cameras, screens, and
audiences. Very many of the so-called “amateur” porn sites in fact engage in
financial transactions and consequently the terms “amateur” or “professional” are not
entirely meaningful.\textsuperscript{77} Nevertheless, there is a clear trend towards a kind of DIY
aesthetic in much of the porn that now proliferates on the internet – a trend that is
further accentuated by the recent enhancements of Web 2.0 capability.\textsuperscript{78}

This “cult of the amateur” is not, of course, exclusive to cyberporn; it is inherent in
all spheres of cyber-performance which are imbued with the increasingly prevalent
DIY spirit of user-generated content.\textsuperscript{79} To a considerable degree, this preference for
the amateur can be thought of as a rejection of unsatisfyingly slick and formula-
driven representations created by conventional media. Despite – or perhaps, more
accurately, because of – the perception that we now live in a hyperreal world where
everything is a simulation, it seems apparent that an attraction to the “amateur” is
underpinned by a yearning for some kind of real and authentic experience. This
desire for an engagement with the real — as opposed to the clearly manufactured and
fictive — is perhaps nowhere more vividly manifested than in the universe of the
“cyberporn amateur”.  

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As already suggested, the distinctions between pornography and exhibitionism in cyberspace are fuzzy. In fact, the relationships amongst erotica, pornography, exhibitionism, performance, art and commerce in cyberspace seem to intersect at many points. In the context of the contention of this thesis that the social subject can increasingly be thought of as a mediated and performing subject, it is interesting to consider the degree to which the idea of the amateur has become increasingly central to the universe of cyberporn. A great deal of cyberporn (whether it is truly “amateur” or, as is often the case, merely pretending to be so) attempts to create the sense of a spontaneous and intimate real in a way that clearly adds resonances to its voyeuristic appeal. Over recent years, porn sites such as X-Tube (and a variety of other similar sites) have utilized elements of Web 2.0 capability by providing free viewing, uploading and file-sharing facilities.\textsuperscript{80} Largely as a result of these recent developments — termed “Porn 2.0” by some — there is now a very real sense in which the once-hyped but mostly mythical idea of the amateur porn performer is now increasingly becoming an actual phenomenon.

Another cyberporn phenomenon — sometimes known as “indie porn”— also represents interesting intersections of the categories mentioned above. One such site — ishotmyself.com, or Project ISM as the site calls itself — is comprised of erotic photographic self-portraits of women who submit images of themselves in the hope of being exhibited by the curators of the site and remunerated by viewing “sponsors”. According to the website: ‘the artist presents herself in a bold statement about nudity, fame and the Internet’ and is rewarded by ‘earning a fee as well as ebullient adoration’ by way of what the site describes as “selfploitation”.\textsuperscript{81} In this example, then, we see yet another enthusiastic embrace of performance via the
public exhibition of an individual’s mediated images of self. Of course, it can be argued that sites such as Project_ISM are instances of self-empowerment (that is, of women taking control of their own images). Nevertheless, it is difficult not to see such practices as (also) being indicative of the degree to which many contemporary subjects have become narcissistically obsessed with the image-based performance of themselves.

One more “genre” of cyberporn — termed “realcore” by Sergio Messina — is also worthy of comment in the context of what clearly appears to be an increasingly prevalent yearning for a “mediated real” in contemporary culture. Messina defines realcore as ‘a new brand of sexual images that appeared in the late 1990s thanks to the then-new digital tools’ and which strives ‘to portray the reality of the (amateur) scene and the true desires of the participants’. Realcore, according to Messina, is usually produced by and for a range of fetishists, and often contains raw and transgressive content that has been shot in such a way that makes it incontestably real. Here again, it seems that it is not merely “realness” that is of value, but, rather, the fact that it has been turned into a “mediated real” — that is, that its value derives from having been documented as image and performance and exhibited to an audience.

Pornography is, of course, always a troublesome and subjective term. As researchers such as McKee, Albury, and Lumby have demonstrated, criteria pertaining to definitions of pornography shift dramatically from one historical period to the next. However, we can say with confidence that pornography always exists in some kind of relationship to the prevailing mores of society, and is always an expression of the fantasies and desires of the individuals that comprise that society. In this context, it
is evident that cyberspace has become the place for fantasy and desire to run free, often with abundant excess. The apparent urge of many individuals in contemporary society to exhibit themselves as the performers of their own pornography (in its variety of forms) clearly indicates the importance we place on image, performance, and media in our desire to experience some kind of jouissance in a culture which, as has often been noted, seems characterized by a diminution of affect. Indeed, as has been discussed in a number of different contexts in this thesis, many contemporary mediated performances appear as manifestations of a conflict between a self-reflexive and ironic attitude to the self as a free-floating (performing and “virtual”) subject on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for an assurance of one’s real identity and presence through media performance in an otherwise artificial world of simulations. Cyber-porn is a rapidly proliferating phenomenon which is now beginning to receive serious scholarly interest. In this context, considering cyber-porn through the lens of mediated performance is a potentially rich area of research which, as with the many other areas raised in this chapter, can only be touched upon here.

The Significance of our Cyber-Experiences

The internet is without doubt an extremely significant medium of information and communication that has many implications for the way we interrelate as social beings now and into the future. In the context of this thesis, the utilization of cyberspace as a venue for performance is in some ways quite distinct from the use of other media, such as film and television, especially in terms of the internet’s rhizomatic nature and instantaneous/interactive capacities. As well, with current and future digital developments — for example in the area of real-time, high-resolution
video streaming — the use to which cyberspace is put in the creation of image-based performances seems certain to continue to grow exponentially in importance over the next few years.

Internet theorist and researcher, Sherry Turkle, has made much of the significance of the creation of online identities in terms of turning rather abstruse poststructuralist theories of the multiple, decentred self into tangible practice. She has written that, in her own experience, theories of the fragmented subject – such as those posited by Deleuze and Guattari and Lacan – existed only as abstractions that were rather difficult to apply in the “common sense” light of everyday life, until she began to personally create new versions of herself on the internet. The same could be said for the increasing number of individuals who perform versions of themselves as images for the screen.

All such practices — from the anonymous creation of chat room characters and avatars to a constantly visible exhibition of one’s private life — are simulations in which identities are fluidly constructed and presented in a kind of performance praxis. As such, it could be argued that these practices exemplify a particular way of understanding identity that is not only in keeping with poststructuralist/postmodernist conceptions of the subject, but which is also indicative of a subjectivity principally characterized by an intimate relationship to mediated exteriority, and by a drive to perform versions of the self to real or imagined audiences. It is in this context, then, that we may well feel it is justified to think of the contemporary subject as a highly self-reflexive performing subject.
The Queen of YouTube and the Four Eyed Monsters: A New Breed of Filmmaker-Performers?

We have been looking in quite general terms at a variety of forms of cyber-performance, in the context of a trend towards merging the subject as media consumer and the subject as media performer. As this thesis draws to a close, however, it seems appropriate to return, by way of two brief examples, to the more specific realm of screen production in order to convey a sense of how some contemporary/emerging filmmakers are embracing new digital and online possibilities while, at the same time, exploring their own status as mediated and performing subjects.

Natalie Tran — YouTube Video Blogger, Filmmaker and Comedian

Natalie Tran is a media production student at an Australian university. In a Sydney Morning Herald newspaper article, she was referred to as “Australia’s Queen of YouTube” on the basis that she is the most subscribed YouTube contributor in Australia, and amongst the top 40 most subscribed internationally. Tran has been regularly posting video blogs since 2006, and her videos often receive more than one million views. Her video posts consist of wryly comic observations about her own experiences and about contemporary culture more generally. The videos all begin with Tran directly addressing the camera, but then often segue into short comedy sketches. In these sketches, Tran utilizes her comic performance skills, usually performing multiple characters. Her sketches are tightly edited, and she also demonstrates her ability with keying/compositing techniques by creating multiple images of herself performing different characters in the one shot. While Tran seems destined at some stage to utilize her performance and production skills in the more “conventional” arenas of cinema or television, there are certain elements of her
YouTube work which specifically fit within the notion of “cyber-celebrity” and the paradigm of “Web 2.0” creativity and participatory culture.

As Graeme Turner notes, the defining features of online “DIY celebrities” are that ‘they generate their own content and they design their own performances of themselves’. In Tran’s case, all of her productions take the form of video blogs or diaries which are anchored by the performance of her own identity. While Tran rarely delves very deeply into the details of her private life, her productions give the impression of being grounded in her “real self”; that of a down-to-earth university student who still lives at home with her parents and who has an unpretentious and self-deprecating sense of humour. Even though her sketches explore a range of different characters/types in various fictional situations, there is always the sense that we are being shown all of this by (and through the eyes of) the “real Natalie”.

Also characteristic of the mode of “DIY creativity” exemplified by online performances such as Tran’s, is the interactive nature of the relationship between performer and audience. Dovey and colleagues refer to a ‘seamless lattice of mediation’ as characterizing the interactive nature of Web 2.0 whereby, as John Hartley puts it, ‘everyone has the ability to contribute as well as consume’. A performer-producer such as Tran clearly maintains her status as a highly popular “cyber-celebrity” due to her incisive wit and performance ability. However, an important dimension of Tran’s continued popularity within the context of the YouTube “video blogosphere” is the way that her audience feels included in the process. Each of her videos receive numerous text comments as well as a number of video responses (including parodies of her productions), and she has recently begun showing and discussing selected viewer comments at the end of each of her video
posts, thus encouraging an even greater degree of interactivity. In this respect, Tran’s screen work is not only based on the performance of her own identity, but is also constructed as a form of dialogue with her audience.

Four Eyed Monsters — *A Mobius Strip of Reality and Screen Performance*

The film *Four Eyed Monsters* is much closer to the conventional paradigm of narrative filmmaking than are Natalie Tran’s videos. However, the film’s storyline, its stylistics, and the manner in which it was produced and distributed, resonates strongly with the contemporary zeitgeist in terms of how two young filmmakers (Susan Buice and Arin Crumley) engage with digital media, screen imagery, and screen performance as an integral part of their experience of being in the world. Buice and Crumley co-direct and co-star in this highly self-reflexive (digital) film, which makes much of its autobiographical status. At the same time, *Four Eyed Monsters* is also a love story, and it seems appropriate to conclude this thesis by citing an example of a performed and mediated version of “postmodern love”, given the degree to which the love story has always been at the heart of cinema.

The film’s storyline can be summarized as follows: Susan is a painter who is working in a café, and Arin is a video producer aspiring to create artistic work but reduced to making wedding videos and other corporate dross. They meet via an internet dating service. However, Arin is too shy to approach Susan in a “normal” manner for a face-to-face meeting, so he stalks her for a time, recording her movements with his ever-present video camera. He sends her an edited version of the video. Susan is flattered and/or turned on by the surveillance and is consequently persuaded to enter into a relationship with Arin. Due to his past experience of quickly aborted relationships, however, Arin insists that their relationship remains
virtual rather than corporeal for some time: For the first four months of the relationship, their only contact is by an exchange of emails, notes, pictures and videocassettes. (According to their own publicity, this series of events is more or less autobiographically accurate.) Eventually, Arin and Susan decide to make a film together, which is, of course, the film presently under discussion.

The storyline, then, is primarily about how (these two) young people’s lives are influenced by screen mediation in nearly every imaginable way. And, like a number of other screen examples we have examined in this thesis, we see reality, re-enactment, and invention merge in ways that cannot be easily disentangled. In the filmmaking practice of Buice and Crumley, we are once again confronted with a mobius-like relationship between the subject’s experience of being in the world and the operations of media. Their relationship is based upon their work as screen image producers and performers, and, at the same time, their creative work is based upon their (heavily mediated) interpersonal relationship. In fact, we are presented with the idea that these two aspects of their lives are almost inseparable. It would seem, from the way they represent themselves in the film and elsewhere, that Buice and Crumley conceive of their lives as thoroughly conditioned and controlled by mediation and mediated self-representation.

In terms of its textures and techniques, *Four Eyed Monsters* is very much a “digital film” — it constantly references its own “pro-sumer” production and post-production technology, it uses an array of digital effects throughout the film, and its storyline makes many references to both video and computer/online technology. Additionally, the filmmakers’ approach to the film’s distribution and exhibition also demonstrates new ways in which media-savvy young filmmakers are finding online
media solutions to the problem of transforming themselves from consumers to producers of media. Despite the film success at the Slamdance Film Festival, however, Buice and Crumley were not able to secure a distributor. Their solution was to build a following through their own website and podcasts of their film, along with an agreement with YouTube to show their entire film for a limited period of time in order to create publicity and build a market for the film. Their website/podcasts contains a number of short “episodes” which document aspects of what we might term Buice’s and Crumley’s ongoing real life/soap opera/filmmaking adventure, including an ongoing account of the aftermath of the film in terms of the effect it was having on their relationship.  

What we can see in these two brief examples are concise models of how many contemporary individuals are intimately connected to screen media, and how it seems almost natural and necessary to them to express identity as mediated performance. As we have previously seen in a number of other instances, the lives of these contemporary subjects — Tran, Buice and Crumley — are thoroughly enmeshed within the virtuality of image, performance, and (now increasingly) online media.

**Concluding Comments**

I began this thesis by suggesting that after more than a century of exposure to the cinema, and to the various screen media that have subsequently evolved and which now form such a ubiquitous part of all of our lives, we unavoidably carry a multiplicity of screen images, grabs of dialogue, bits of narrative, and fragments of performance inside our heads. Now, a vast databank of performances and other
audio-visual based material proliferates in an unstoppably “viral” form in cyberspace, and, perhaps most particularly, by way of the highly influential phenomenon of YouTube. While it remains to be seen whether, as some claim, the DIY culture that online sites such as YouTube exemplify will truly lead to a more engaged form of participatory citizenship, there can be no doubt that it already results in a vast number of individuals entering into a performative dialogue with other “cyber-performers”, and with an ever-expanding virtual universe of mediated images, sounds, and performances. In the time that I have been involved in the research and writing of this thesis, much has changed in the media landscape. My initial working hypothesis that screen-based media performances are becoming central to social experience appears to be increasingly borne out by the way that digital/online video capability is being embraced in such a performance-based manner. It now seems as though our world is almost literally becoming “one big media performance”.

Roland Barthes was just one of many theorists and social critics over past decades to have asserted that we live in a world of images — ‘everything is transformed into images: only images exist and are produced and consumed’. If one is to share this view, it could reasonably be suggested that the “tyranny of the image” that Barthes bemoaned — and the performances which fuel these images — now constitute an inescapable part of contemporary life. It seems that at the heart of the relationship between image, camera, and performance is a complex mixture of desires: the urge to interrogate and the urge to confess, the urge to surveil and the willingness to be surveilled, and, of course, the desire to express oneself to (and to be recognized by) an audience. The private is now dissolving into the public at an ever increasing rate. We exist in a “digital world” of stills and video, phone cams and webcams, in which
we are forever being captured by cameras. Generally speaking, we seem to embrace and/or accept this constant surveillance – indeed we seem to be becoming the facilitators of our own surveillance in, as Foucault put it, “a state of conscious and permanent visibility”. On the other hand, though, it can also be argued that we increasingly capitalize on our familiarity with the technologies of mediation by actively expressing ourselves rather than simply existing as passive consumers.

It is sometimes difficult not to feel inundated by a discordant chorus composed of Cassandra-like forecasts of dystopic inevitability on the one hand, and enthusiastic proclamations of the enabled and empowered “digital subject” on the other. I do not intend to conclude my thesis by attempting to definitively side with either of these positions. Given the complexities and ambiguities of the world in which we live, a productive view almost certainly contains elements of both perspectives. In this thesis, I have attempted to explore a number of facets of what it means to be a “performing subject” in our highly mediated world. While doing so, I have also attempted to identify a tension that seems to exist in the sub-text of many such performances, between the apparent impermanence, fragility, and mutability of all that surrounds us on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to believe that we still possess some kind of integrity in terms of understanding who we are as social individuals. I hope I have been able to shine some light on these matters.

Corby was arrested in October 2004 in Bali when her luggage was found to contain 4.1 kg of marijuana, and she was subsequently tried and convicted in May 2005.

Channel Nine’s extended live coverage of Corby’s trial demonstrates the degree to which the event became a mediated “real life drama.” The use of an “opinion worm” to demonstrate that a studio audience was convinced of Corby’s innocence during its broadcast of a program called Schapelle’s Nightmare: The Untold Story in the lead up to the trial shows even more vividly the degree to which her plight was turned into pure media theatre. (Schapelle’s Nightmare: The Untold Story was broadcast nationally in Australia on May 18, 2005)

The debate about the effects of screen violence has been ongoing for many decades and has focused much of its attention on the effects on children. For an overview of theories of the effects of media violence, see W. James Potter, On Media Violence (California: Sage Publications, 1999). For one example of a book which chronicles many instances of how so-called “copycat violence” mimics screen violence, see Loren Coleman, The Copycat Effect: How the Media and Popular Culture Trigger the Mayhem in Tomorrow’s Headlines (New York: Paraview, 2004). One of the most often quoted films in regard to copycat violence is Oliver Stone’s Natural Born Killers (1994). The film – and the controversy surrounding it – is fascinating for the fact that the film itself explores the links between media and the celebration of violence, for the number of reported copycat crimes that have been attributed to the film, and due to the vigorous debates between Oliver Stone and novelist, John Grisham, about the film’s social effects. See Mark Pizzuto, Theatres of Human Sacrifice: From Ancient Ritual to Screen Violence (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 77-80.

It is common for people suffering from the condition of depersonalization to describe feeling as if they were watching themselves and/or others performing in a film. For example, one person with depersonalization disorder writes: ‘I imagine myself seeing life as if it were played like a film in a cinema. But in that case where am I? Who is watching the film? What is the cinema? The worst part is that this seems as if it’s the truth, and the periods of my life in which I did not feel like this were delusions’. Quoted in Daphne Simeon and Jeffrey Abugel, Feeling Unreal: Depersonalization Disorder and the Loss of the Self (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006),15.

In a section of their opening chapter titled “The Madness of the New Millenium?”, Simeon and Abugel refer to the fact that increasing numbers of people are now reporting the symptoms of depersonalization disorder. They offer a range of explanations for this, including the widespread use of illicit drugs from the 1960s to the present (15). As we have been exploring throughout this thesis, however, it could also be argued that the trend towards the exteriorization of subjective experience which is perhaps due, amongst other factors in contemporary society, to the ubiquitous and saturation-level presence of media in our lives accounts for the sense that we now predominantly exist “outside of ourselves” as performers in a simulated/mediated representation.

To a large degree, this is the central issue to which Petkovic’s thesis addresses itself. As we discussed in Chapter Five, Petkovic argues that the diegetic quality of images seems to create an ontological blurring between the image and actuality. See Josko Petkovic, “The Rhizome and the Image: The Genealogy of Letter to Eros”, PhD thesis. Murdoch University: 1997.


Nevertheless, there is certainly a degree to which we have become sceptical about the “truthfulness” of all digital imagery due to the ease with which it can be (and often is) manipulated. See William J. Mitchell, The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

Barthes, Camera Lucida, 117.

The relationship between the camera and the performances of subjects in the registers of both reality and fiction has been a significant ingredient in the histories of photography and cinema. In her book, The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire, Anne Marsh argues that ‘photography is a performative medium and that the camera is a theatrical device’ (14). Marsh’s investigation of photography from its inception up until contemporary times includes a number of early examples of

In his book, *Acting in the Cinema*, James Naremore gives a detailed account of the first screen appearance of Charlie Chaplin’s tramp character in a relatively obscure film called *Kid’s Auto Race*. In this film, Chaplin’s performance is set against the backdrop of a real event populated by actual audience members/bystanders. Chaplin, himself, performs as a curious and “hammy” bystander who is entranced by the possibility of appearing before the camera and has to be escorted out of frame by the director. As Naremore notes, the actors and non-actors alike, are all giving a performance of sorts:

The paradox here is that the people in the background are performing, too – not only the soapbox drivers in the race, which is a performed event, but also the kids who scurry across the street and gawk at the camera, unwittingly providing a true version of Chaplin’s mock hamminess. Everybody plays a role, from the stolid men who stand with hands in their pockets, pretending the camera isn’t there, to the woman in a Victorian bonnet who sits in the reviewing stand and covers her face with a sheet of paper so as not to be photographed. The difference between Chaplin’s performance and that of the others is that his is a clever professional mimesis, staged for the camera, whereas theirs is an everyday response, provoked by the camera or caught unawares. Chaplin’s performance is theatrical, and theirs is aleatory.


15 *Airport*, reality television series. First episode broadcast by the BBC in 1996.


18 This scenario was first used in the MTV series *The Real World* which, like *Sylvania Waters*, commenced in 1992 and which, in turn, spawned a number of imitations such as *The Living Soap* (1993) and *Flatmates* (1999).

19 It is evident that documentary as a mode of exploration, interrogation, argumentation, etcetera is largely being overtaken by the imperative to entertain (in the form of “Reality TV, “infotainment”, etc.). Despite the critical (and occasionally popular) success of a number of feature documentaries which have had theatrical releases in recent years, most documentaries are produced primarily for television. And in the need to attract ratings and — related to this — the programming preference for series television instead of one-off factual programs, it is evident that many documentary makers are turning their attention towards various forms of reality tv/docu-soap/infotainment. Examples of this trend include *The Human Race* (1997), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2004), *Outback House* (2005), *The Farmer Wants a Wife* (2008).


22 Annette Hill, Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2005), 38.

23 The Osbournes, reality television series. First broadcast March 5, 2002.


29 Indeed, Stella Bruzzi considers the films of Broomfield to be perfect examples of a “performative” sub-genre that has invigorated the documentary form. See Stella Bruzzi, New Documentary: A Critical Introduction (London: Routledge, 2000).


34 “Borat” and Bruno have been highly contentious films in many ways, mostly pertaining to their apparently fraudulent misrepresentations of themselves as documentaries. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the films do indeed “document” a number of aspects of American culture. Furthermore, one could say that they perfectly characterize the blurred distinction between reality and fiction that we have been exploring.

It is also interesting to note that Morgan Spurlock’s TV series 30 Days (in which a person spends 30 days in a social milieu that is foreign to them) takes on the resemblance of reality TV format programming, while the “pranks” of The Yes Men are not unlike the satirical comedy of the popular Australian show The Chaser.


Like Sherman’s March, the narrative of Video Fool for Love centres around the filmmaker’s “love quest”. Both Video Fool for Love and Sherman’s March contain scenes in which the issue of the filmmakers’ manipulative and controlling use of the camera is highlighted, and both films are also characterized by the ways in which the camera is used – albeit in an ostensibly whimsical and ironic fashion - as an instrument for conducting interrogation and extracting confessions, as well as for autobiographical “diarizing”.

For a useful discussion of Video Fool for Love (along with other autobiographical documentaries including Sherman’s March), see Keith Beattie, Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 105-24. Beattie rightly contextualizes these films by placing them alongside “video diary” based television shows that became popular in the 1990s and which have influenced the “confessional/diaristic” components of much current reality television. In this context, he cites BBC series such as Video Diaries (1990), and Teenage Diaries (1992), along with the Australian series, First Person (1996).


In her famous collection of essays on photography, Susan Sontag argued that the act of photographing a person or an object in the real world seemed to confer upon it a significance that it somehow would have lacked had it been ignored by the camera. She wrote that:

Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera’s interventions. The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggest that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing. This, in turn, makes it easy to feel that any event, once underway, and whatever its moral character, should be allowed to complete itself – so that something else can be brought into the world, the photograph. After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed.


Herzog begins the documentary with one of Treadwell’s addresses to camera in which he sets up both the dramatic context for his encounters with the bears, and an attempted definition of his own persona. One of the character traits that Treadwell tries to create for himself is that of the gentle-yet-strong samurai warrior. (Though as we see as the film progresses, his screen persona is far from consistent and, in fact, he seems to create a number of different “Timothy Treadwells” for the camera).

In an ironic twist in the film’s exposition of Treadwell’s past, we are told that he went off the rails by turning to drugs and alcohol after he supposedly came second to Woody Harrelson in an audition for a part in the long running TV series, Cheers. We are then told by Treadwell’s friend — a fellow actor — that after Treadwell survived a near-fatal (and apparently epiphanous) drug overdose, ‘he was looking for a different persona’. And to this, Herzog adds:

Treadwell’s need to invent a new persona for himself led him to elaborate fabrications. He claimed to be an orphan from Australia, and even checked out details of a small town in the Australian outback in order to sound convincing.

Even though a successful media career eluded him, Treadwell did become something of a minor celebrity, appearing in a number of news/magazine stories and talk shows including David Letterman’s Late Show. As Herzog puts it: ‘It was as if he had become a star by virtue of his own invention’.
Herzog also tells us that Treadwell was a “methodical” filmmaker, often recording as many as fifteen re-takes of his monologues to camera. And it is clear from the footage Herzog includes that Treadwell readily moved between different “versions” of his persona from one take to the next. It seems as if Treadwell was not simply “documenting himself” but, rather, documenting a range of different personas, deferring a decision on which identity “worked best” until he could edit the footage of himself in post-production. The sense one gets when viewing Grizzly Man, however, was that by the end of his life, Treadwell was finding it difficult to distinguish between these different fictional personas on the one hand and any sense of a “real Timothy Treadwell” on the other.

44 For Jenkins, the notion of convergence should not be understood solely in technical terms of the capabilities of certain media devices and networks but, rather, as a ‘cultural shift’ in the way that contemporary media consumers locate, synthesize and utilize media content: ‘Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others’. Jenkins, Convergence Culture, 3.

45 Indeed, there are certain strains of cyberculture theorizing that seem to be little more than exercises in marketing cyberspace’s ability to facilitate the flow of capital. Sometimes, this enthusiastic promotion of the benefits of cyberspace manifests itself in romantic, quasi-spiritual assertions that the virtuality of cyberspace will allow us to transcend our material bodies and enter into a form of collective consciousness. According to sociologist and cyberculture theorist, Pierre Levy, for example, the ‘unfolding’ of cyberspace is part of a ‘meta-evolutionary process’ which is the ‘latest step of the cultural/biological evolution and the basis for future evolution’ in a universe that he conceptualizes as ‘a huge intelligence awakening to itself’. Or, in slightly less cosmological terms, Levy tells us that cyberspace will allow us to ‘think together, to concentrate our intellectual power, to multiply our imaginations and our experiences, to work out practical solutions for the complex problems affronting us in real time and on all levels’. However, as John Marks points out, Levy’s near-religious zeal for cyberspace is fundamentally a celebration of ‘a world in which consumption replaces production as the dominant paradigm’ by portraying the economy of global capitalism as ‘a continuous expansion of the “virtual”’.


46 While, as already suggested, there is no shortage of utopianism amongst the theorists of the internet (and cyberculture/technoculture more generally), there also exists a considerable degree of concern about its dystopian potential, ranging from dread about the possibilities for totally intrusive hyper-panopticism to fears about the fate of our existence as social beings – a fear that Slavoj Zizek expresses in the following straightforward terms: ‘The more cyberspace brings us together, enabling us to communicate in “real time” with anyone on the globe, the more it isolates as (sic), reducing us to individuals staring into computer screens’. See Slavoj Zizek, Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 187.

47 In this context, the following theorists have been particularly important to me in developing a theoretical underpinning for considering the phenomenon of online performance:

- **Marshall McLuhan**, particularly for the way that his notion of media as our “sensory extensions” resonates with the intimate relationship that now exists between contemporary individuals and the digital technologies of mediation that they use with such enthusiasm, as well as for the sense of implosion that this creates. (Even though, of course, his ideas were developed prior to the existence of the internet and digital technologies.)

- **Paul Virilio** for his (rather bleak) commentary on the consequences of our encounters with the virtuality of cyberspace whereby the ever-increasing speed of information, along with the
ever-decreasing size and visibility of technology, creates an ‘annihilation of time and space’ which has as its analogue the eventual disappearance of the subject.

- Deleuze and Guattari for their conception of the rhizome which, as many commentators have noted, provides a potent metaphor and model for the network of networks that is cyberspace and for our engagements with it. (Despite the fact that this theorization was developed before the internet had significantly captured our imaginations or, indeed, before it existed in the form that we know it today).

- Donna Haraway whose influential postmodern notion of the cyborg resonates strongly with the idea of a close alignment (if not a virtually symbiotic relationship) between the contemporary subject and the technologies of mediation.

- Sherry Turkle for her influential application of notions of multiple subjectivities specifically to the internet and to the way that people can invent, re-invent, adopt or discard a multiplicity of identities while being involved in online, interactive activities via MUDs, chat-rooms and the like as a form of “identity play”.


48 There are numerous examples that could be cited in this context. Instances of (mostly young, mostly male) people filming themselves committing crimes (and then uploading that vision to sites such as YouTube) are regularly reported in the media, as are instances of camera/internet-based “cyber-bullying”. For one discussion of so-called “media panics” about cyber-technology, participatory culture and, more specifically, YouTube, see Burgess and Green, YouTube, 17-21.

One particularly disturbing example of the degree to which it seems that some people require an audience for validation of their life (and death), and perhaps also the degree to which some people seem to have difficulty separating reality from virtuality, is the phenomenon of online suicide. In 2007, 42 year-old Kevin Whitrick was reported to have been the first “online suicide” when he hanged himself while logged onto a webcam-based chat room. It was reported that while some viewers attempted to talk him out of the act, others encouraged him to carry through with it. And then in 2008, a teenage male, Abraham Biggs, also killed himself while a reported 1,500 people watched via the website, Justin.tv (http://www.justin.tv). See Timesonline, November 22, 2008 located online at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article5203176.ece (accessed July 25, 2009).


The most comprehensive scholarly discussion of the webcam girl phenomenon comes from Theresa Senft whose PhD dissertation was titled: Camgirls: Webcams, Live Journals and the Personal as Political in the Age of the Global Brand, New York University, January 2005. Senft has also recently published a book based on this research: Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008).

Also see Webcam Girls, documentary. Directed and written by Aerlyn Weissman. 2004.


Harris’ experiment has recently been made into a documentary: We Live in Public, documentary. Directed and written by Ondi Timoner. 2009. At the time of writing, the film has yet to be released on DVD. For a report on the film, see David Carr, “Sundance Toasts and Early Online Life”, New York Times, January 25, 2009, located online at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/26/movies/26josh.html (accessed July 25, 2009).

By the sixtieth day of the planned one hundred days, however, Harris’s relationship with Corrin had fallen apart and she left him alone in the apartment to finish the experiment. Corrin wrote an article in the New York Observer documenting the experiment and the parallel decline in their relationship: Tanya Corrin, “The Harris Experiment”, The New York Observer, October 15, 2001 located online at http://www.observer.com/pages/story.asp?ID=3874 (accessed October 15, 2001).

Previously, Harris had created and hosted a month long millennium party and art installation in a Soho warehouse in December 1999. He invited artists to exhibit, sleep, eat, party and have their ablutions in a completely transparent pod-like environment. This installation – called Quiet – was the inspiration behind We Live in Public. For a report on this, see: Charles Platt, “Streaming Video”, Wired, November, 2000, located online at http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.11/luvvy.html (accessed October, 15 2001).


The term “web 2.0” is thought to have first been used by Darcy DiNucci in an article titled “Fragmented Future”, for Design and New Media magazine, published in April, 1999. For a transcript of the article, see DiNucci’s website located at http://www.cdinucci.com/Darcy2/articles/Print/Printarticle7.html (accessed July 25, 2009). The term has generally been said to have commenced gaining popular recognition when it was used by Tim O’Reilly at an internet conference in 2004. See Tim O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0?”, September 30, 2005, online at http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-2-0.html (accessed July 25, 2009).


Ibid., 4.

For Mark Andrejevic, those who participate in surveillance-based forms both in cyberspace (such as “webcam operators”) and in the broadcast realm of reality TV can be thought of as being ‘caught between the promise of an empowering form of interactivity and the potential of an increasingly exploitative one’. Mark Andrejevic, Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched, 7.


In his analysis of the themes and iconography of surveillance in popular cinema, John Turner suggests the degree to which the transformation of surveillance technologies into the commodified spectacular makes the practice of surveillance not only an acceptable activity but even a desirable one. Writing in 1998, Turner argued that:
By converting the technologies and practices of surveillance into highly seductive cinematic images, images that border on the fetishization of such technologies and practices, popular cinema effectively frames an uncritical celebration of panopticism.


61 For a detailed discussion of how webcam practices and (especially) reality TV have turned surveillance into ‘a form of mediated spectacle’(2), See Mark Andrejevic, Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched.

62 Steve Mann coined the term sous-surveillance in 1998. See Steve Mann, “‘Reflectionism’ and ‘diffusionism’: New Tactics for Deconstructing the Surveillance Superhighway”, in Leonardo, 31, no. 2 (1998): 93-102, located online at http://wearcam.org/leonardo/reflectionism.htm (accessed June 29, 2007). Mann was also one of the webcamming pioneers with his “wearable wireless webcam” which he experimented with from 1994 to 1996. (See http://wearcam.org/myview.htm). And, subsequently, the wearable webcam was used by Justin Kan who wore his camera “24/7” during 2007 and whose website (www.Justin.tv/) has become a network for other “lifecasting” sites, as has the site www.Stickam.com.


Also, for a critical discussion of a number of ways in which camera-based surveillance technology has been “pointed back” at authorities including not only Steve Mann, but also the “neo-Situationism” of the Surveillance Camera Players, see Gary Genokso, "(Im)Possible Exchanges: The Arts of Counter Surveillance”, in Canadian Cultural Poetics: Essays on Canadian Culture, eds., Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin, and Sheila Petty (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 31-50.

64 Some “webcam girls”, such as Ana Voog, still maintain websites and webcams. She tells us on her site that she was ‘the 1st one to use the webcam as art’ and ‘the 2nd webcam that was 24/7 to be put in the home’. She also tells us that she is ‘now the oldest homecam on the internet’. Ana Voog’s website is http://www.anacam.com.

65 See Theresa M. Senft, Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks, 24.

66 Ringley’s comment was taken from the “FAQ” section of her now-defunct website at http://www.jennicam.org/j2kr/concept.html (accessed October 19, 2001). The second quote is taken from an interview with “Amanda” who ran an “AmandaCAM” website which has now also ceased to operate. The interview was conducted between Amanda and Heather Corinna – located online at: http://www.leisuresuit.net/Wbzine/articles/amandacam-interview.shtml (accessed January 13, 2006).

67 Theresa Senft, interviewed in the documentary, Webcam Girls.

In her PhD Thesis, Senft writes that ‘camgirls combine theatrical authenticity, branding and celebrity in order to make names for themselves on the web’ (4) in the context of “the media driven ideology of publicity – that is, the belief that what matters, is what is known” (10).

68 Equating the virtual with the Baudrillardian hyperreal is one way to interpret the postmodern/digital universe that we inhabit. Robert Payne, for example, suggests that the virtual occupies an ‘indefinable and liminal space on the threshold between known and unknown, knowing and unknowing’ and that ‘it is this very imprecision that renders the virtual so compelling’. In a sense Payne is arguing that the internet provides immediate access to the hyperreal rather than the real when he writes that:

The seductive impetus of telepresence in this technology - to achieve mutual proximity with a remote body or location - becomes irrelevant in that the remote bodies of webcam operators are immutable. Rather,
simulated versions of their authentic identity are all that is available to viewers, and these exist solely on the interface that claims to make visible their reality.


69 For Sherry Turkle, it is precisely the anonymity of certain online practices which allows for playful – and relatively consequence-free experimentation with identity. See Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet.

70 Ana Voog commenced her website one year after Ringley in 1997. Her site – which, at the time of writing was still active - is quite a complex mixture of autobiography, performance and image creation. As Senft has observed, Voog operates in a tradition that is very common in performance art whereby the boundary between life and art is often blurred to the point of being almost indistinguishable. (Senft, “Camgirls”, PhD, 84.) Voog’s site also includes an extensive gallery of images which constitutes a complex, yet playful collage of vastly different image-versions of herself. See: http://www.anacam.com


72 Burgess and Green, 29.


74 As Kitzmann has noted, the history of autobiographical and diaristic practices is commonly associated with a modernist assertion of the self as the centre of all meaning. And further to this, Kitzmann also makes the connection between the development of diary writing and autobiography on the one hand, and the Christian traditions of confession and self-reflection on the other. His suggestion is that the earliest forms of diaries functioned as a form of spiritual self-surveillance before adapting ‘to the rhythms and demands of individualism, capitalism, nationality, and other hallmarks of modernity, making diaries the sites of self-construction, self-expression, and self-exploration—places where the “true self” can be both constructed, and observed by potential readers.’(52) In this view, autobiographical practices can be said to chart the course of the self’s increasing emphasis on its own agency and reflexivity in the transition into modern subjectivity. The very notion that an individual deems the act of communicating aspects of their self to an (implied or actual) audience to be a worthwhile activity, as distinct from notions of self-monitoring, self-reflection or self-containment for their own sake, could be said to be indicative of the notion of the centrally important Cartesian subject. As Kitzmann puts it, the place of the autobiographical page:

… becomes the place of the future, of the self made man or woman, of the isolated, focused and internally driven agent of history, will, and power. I write about myself, therefore I am (53).

As we move from autobiographical page to autobiographical/performative web-page, however, practices that turn the self into ‘the center of attention’(Kitzmann, 53) can be seen to shift gears yet again into a mode that is more akin to self-promotion and self-publicizing – or as Senft has put it, self-“branding” (Senft, Camgirls: Celebrity and Community, 26-8), in the digital/online realm. And, in this context, it also seems that the significance of the notional or actual reader/viewer/audience to which one is transmitting aspects of the self becomes increasingly central. Indeed, it could even be suggested that the notion of the subject-audience relationship becomes so crucial that Kitzmann’s quip, “I write about myself therefore I am”, could readily be replaced with that of: I perform myself to others, therefore I am.

75 Senft, “Camgirls”, PhD, 26.

76 Kitzmann, 56.
Andrejevic’s notes, for example, that the focus on the porn amateur has become so intense that it has created the “shamateurs” – professionals who pretend to be amateurs. Andrejevic, 59n. Andrejevic refers the reader to the following newspaper article: Nick Galvin, “The Porn Star Next Door,” Sydney Morning Herald, 10 January, 2003, 27.

Notwithstanding the notion of the “shamateur”, however, the internet seems to increasingly include “true” amateurs. In either case, though, as Michael Uebel argues, the overall effect of amateurism is significant in terms of offering fresh possibilities for fantasies of identification and spectatorship. Michael Uebel, “Toward a Symptomatology of Cyberporn”, Theory & Event, Volume 3, Issue 4 (2000). (Project Muse).

For a recent and detailed discussion of the phenomenon of amateur online porn, see Katrien Jacobs, Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 45-80. According to Jacobs, ‘Pornography is witnessing a return to one of its original meanings, as a representation of sex acts shared among peer communities’ (46).

It is also worth bearing in the mind the more general notion that, in recent decades, pornography has become far more integrated into our mediated society: Or, as Brian McNair has termed it, “the pornographefication of mainstream culture”. See Brian McNair, “Turned on to Porn; More Sex Please We’re British”, in The Sunday Herald, February 24, 2002. Also See Brian McNair, Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture (New York: Arnold, 1996).

As already suggested, some commentators and theorists see the so-called “DIY aesthetic” of participatory culture as ushering in a new era of social and cultural engagement. According to John Hartley for example, with ‘digital online media, there’s almost infinite scope for DIY (do-it-yourself) and DIWO (do-it-with-others) creative content produced by and for consumers and users, without the need for institutional filtering or control bureaucracies’. John Hartley, “Uses of YouTube: Digital Literacy and the Growth of Knowledge”, in Burgess and Green, 130-1. On the other hand, Andrew Keen has been one of the most vociferous critics of this trend, with the full title of his recent book providing a crystal-clear idea of his stance: The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today's User-Generated Media are Destroying our Economy, our Culture, and our Values (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

As the name “X-Tube” suggests, sites such as these are modelled as the porn equivalent of YouTube, highlighting the degree to which the trend towards “user generated content” is proliferating. Other sites which play on the name of YouTube include YouPorn and PornoTube, while other similar sites include PornCor, YouPornGay, and WatchMe. While commercial transactions for movie downloads and webcam interactions are available, there is also a considerable amount of free “amateur” content on these sites.

See www.ishotmyself.com


Quoted in Mark Dery, “Naked Lunch”, 17.

Messina provides a particularly Baudrillardian example of the mixing of the real and the virtual in his description of realcore “tributes”: ‘A woman posts her picture, some guy downloads its, prints it, cums on it, takes a photo of the results – the tribute – and posts it back into the newsgroups. She gets comments, requests to wear specific items – her home suddenly becomes public … Once the tributes are made, the person portrayed in them collects all these images and makes Photoshop collages that also end up online, on the person’s website on in the newsgroups. The more tributes she gets, the greater the glory’. Quoted in Mark Dery, “Naked Lunch”, 28-29.


Turkle tells us that, for her, it has only been through the praxis of online identity creation that postmodern theorizing about multiplicity and non-essentialized identity became more than a somewhat mystifying abstraction. In this context, she writes that ‘internet experiences help us develop models of psychological well-being that are in a meaningful sense postmodern: They admit multiplicity and flexibility. They acknowledge the constructed nature of reality, self and other’. Sherry Turkle, “Looking Toward Cyberspace: Beyond Grounded Sociology”, in *Contemporary Sociology*, 28, no. 6 (1999). (Proquest).

At the time of writing, Tran was studying digital media production at the University of New South Wales.


Tran had 427,423 subscribers and her combined video blogs had attracted over 21 million views at the time of writing. Tran goes by the name of “communitychannel” on YouTube, and can be found at http://www.youtube.com/user/communitychannel


From background information provided at http://foureyedmonsters.com (accessed 18th October, 2007).

See http://foureyedmonsters.com

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