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FOR MY FAMILY
IN MEMORY OF MY GRANDPARENTS

Cinema is the art of the little detail that does not call attention to itself.

—François Truffaut

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of the detail in film theory and criticism. I challenge the ways in which film theory usually understands the privileged sites of meaning in films, and foster my own theory of the filmic detail as an analytical and aesthetic concept that helps us rethink the theoretical conventions around mise-en-scène. I locate the singularity of our experience of film details in the features of motion and contingency, and propose my own method for film criticism centered around the particular. By turning to exemplary cases of what I consider evocative filmic details—including objects, animals, gestures, and freeze frames —I show how a theory of detail is a lens through which central puzzles of film theory can be examined in a new light. I trace the prominence of details in the discourse around love, and explore how love or desire can be generative categories for the way we understand film theory and analysis.

Each chapter joins particular details and a set of arguments or concepts from early and classical film theory, to propose its own interpretative model. The first chapter, "The Distinctive Marks," grounds the ways in which details grab attention in particular forms of viewer engagement and in relation to questions of medium and representation, ranging from literary analysis to art historical perspectives. The second chapter, "Tiny Private Scene: On the Particular Pleasures of Mise en Scéne," examines different models of detail-based film criticism and argues for the central role of affect in film theory's understanding of details. The third chapter, "The Accidental Detail: Rethinking Contingency on Film," explores the implications of film details on the concept of cinematic contingency, and the fourth chapter, "Details to Remember By," focuses on details of movement, and the emotional impressions that particular gestures make, in order to rethink questions of cinematic stasis and film memory. Each of these chapters thus argues that details are both part of film experience and a critical tool for film theory.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandparents. It is named after a detail from Proust, who was my grandmother's favorite. Her handwritten notes on the pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, mixing Hebrew, English, and French, astonished me as a child. I can still feel her love, folded into the letters of the little poems she wrote. My grandfather taught me to enjoy everything I do and explore all things beautiful. They are always with me.

Introduction

The Yellow Patch

> He now noticed for the first time little figures in blue, the pinkness of the sand, and finally the precious substance of the tiny area of wall. His head spun faster; he fixed his gaze, as a child does on a yellow butterfly he wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall.
>
> Marcel Proust, "The Prisoner", *In Search of Lost Time*[1]

One of the celebrated sections of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is dedicated to a tale of a single detail: a little patch of yellow wall in Vermeer's painting *View of Delft*. The writer Bergotte's final moments are spent in front of this painting, engaged in the sight of the minor detail: the yellow patch of wall, a beauty that was 'sufficient in itself'. The detail surprised him, as he had not noticed it before in the painting familiar to him. As Bergotte becomes more and more immersed in the detail, he begins to feel dizzy; he tries to fix his gaze on the patch of wall, that now resembles the fleeting yellow butterfly, until he collapses. The precious detail reflects his own failure as a writer to produce such a sample of his craft: *If only he could write like Vermeer paints this little patch of yellow*.

The fact that critics have failed to locate the yellow mark to correspond with Proust's description only reinforces the aptness of this tale as an allegory, in which life stops when one encounters a particular form of beauty.[2] And oddly, this beauty is not identified with the immersive experience of the painting as a whole, but located in one single patch of color. Bergotte wishes that

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[1] Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner: In Search of Lost Time, Volume 5*, trans. Carol Clark (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 173.

[2] Some critics have located the "petit pan de mur jaune" in the yellow roof at the left of the Rotterdam gate, others pointed to the yellow walls on the right. What is important about this detail, Ruth Yeazell argues, is not so much its locations but the unique texture or materiality of the patch. See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

his work could express the precision of Vermeer's detail, but the tale is not simply about the writer's envy of the techniques of visual representation.[3] It rather spells out the emergence of the minor detail from the totality of the painting as a singular aesthetic experience.

Proust was known to admire Vermeer's mastery,[4] and beyond the biographical anecdote, Vermeer's "private" conception of the pictorial scene is a fitting place for Proust's detail to be discovered in.[5] The space between Bergotte and the painting in a private scene, in which meaning is enclosed. The Proustian model shows that the viewer does not purposely seek the detail, but rather that it appears in the form of an involuntary event, that chance brings about. A possible model for such an experience is Walter Benjamin's account of involuntary memory in Proust. Spontaneous by nature, Benjamin reads the Proustian moment of remembrance as separated from any deliberate act.[6]

As John Ruskin argued, to be able to represent one detail is evidence of true mastery: "if you can paint *one* leaf, you can paint the world."[7] One perfectly executed detail can possibly stand for the entirety of the artistic achievement. However, I take Proust's tale to be a powerful reflection on the detail as a poignant point of interaction between viewer and image. The detail, in other words, is a

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[3] Kathryn Tuma suggests that it might be the desire to form an equivalence between linguistic forms and the visual field that has the overwhelming effect on the writer. See Kathryn A. Tuma, "'Une dentelle s'abolit': The Invisibilities of Vermilion in Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*," *Qui Parle*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1994), 23.

[4] In 1902, Proust visited the Netherlands, and it was on this trip that he saw *View of Delft* for the first time. On Proust's ideas on art, and particularly Dutch painting, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Proust's Genre Painting and the Rediscovery of Vermeer," *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 162-194. Yeazell points out that in the tale of the yellow patch, Proust references the critic Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, who wrote of Vermeer's "brick houses, painted in a material so precious, so heavy, so full, that if you isolate a small surface of it, forgetting the subject, you believe you have ceramic before your eyes as much as paint". Qtd. in Yeazell, 185.

[5] According to Daniel Arasse, what obscures the clarity of meaning in Vermeer's paintings has to do with a "private" use, distinct from the common visual language of his time. Daniel Arasse. "Vermeer's Private Allegories". *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 55, Symposium Papers XXXIII: Vermeer Studies (1998): 340-349.

[6] Benjamin emphasizes the concept of the dream world as key to his interpretation of Proust. See Walter Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2005), 237-247.

[7] John Ruskin, "Of Leaf Beauty." *Modern Painters: Volume V* (London, J.M. Dent; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1906), 34.

brief visual event in which we are seized by what we see. Still, the detail is nothing more and nothing less than a small area of yellow paint. By this reading, promoted by Georges Didi-Huberman,[8] Vermeer's patch shows the power of the detail to play with its own significance: the patch of wall that crystallizes Vermeer's craft is *also* nothing more than a few strokes of yellow. With this particular object, visual intensity and concealment somehow go together.

What does our look at the detail comprise of? one obvious answer would be that noticing details entails getting closer to the image, or put differently, it brings about a certain intimacy. When we move closer to the painting, we are also doing something else: shattering its unity for the sake of the part. For any analysis of detail, it must be possible to isolate and cut it away from the whole; I insist, however, that the detail as an interpretative tool constantly refers to this whole. Looking *in detail* is based on understanding the potential of each part to crystallize meaning.

The detail is therefore the part that may be separated from the whole while maintaining its connection to it, still embedded within the totality of the scene or the canvas. We can locate it within the frame and it has contours; it is defined spatially. The detail is discernable, and as such, nameable: "the yellow patch."[9] The patch of yellow perfectly captures the dichotomy at the heart of the detail, Didi-Huberman argues: the obvious, luminous part of the picture, which is also the enigmatic element, that is difficult to analyze. Put differently, even if details have a particular effect on the viewer, they do not impose preassigned meaning.

What comes to the fore of the picture is presumably the sudden burst of the color yellow;

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[8] See Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Art of Not Describing*:* Vermeer—the Detail and the Patch." *History of the Human Sciences* 2 (1989): 135-169.

[9] Didi-Huberman offers his concept of the "patch," that foregrounds the materiality of paint and transforms the descriptive function of the medium, and argues that Vermeer's patch of yellow is both a definable detail (an area of wall) but also a 'naked' patch of paint, which he demonstrates by the different implications of the word *pan*. See Didi-Huberman, "The Art of Not Describing*:* Vermeer—the Detail and the Patch," 148-149.

We can compare its appearance to the amorphic pattern of red paint in Vermeer's painting *Lacemaker*: the painting depicts a young woman in the task of making lace, and in front of her, at the center of our attention, an amorphous shape of the color red. The burst of paint in *Lacemaker* is easier to notice, compared to the patch of yellow wall from *View of Delft*: it effectively emerges from the canvas. The disruptive and expanding quality of the detail is vivid in this irregular use of color, depicting (or possibly, *not* depicting) the vermillion thread that the lacemaker's fingers are carefully attending to. For Didi-Huberman this patch is less a representation, and more "a run of red paint"; Kathryn Tuma calls the red thread "a vermilion fragment that imitates an accident", the detail to demonstrate that the local element can change meaning entirely and potentially overwhelm the canvas. To acknowledge this overwhelming quality does not mean to abandon the connection between part and whole. On the contrary; in this model of interpretation I assume that the detail participates in the possibility of making meaning of the whole.

The detail attracts our attention, but not as something already clear and obvious. This ambiguity is what allows it to hold attention for longer, and to distract from main events.[10] There is also something to be said about the possibility of doubt: details can be considered to be the result of a subtlety of observation, but alternatively they can be dismissed as purely incidental. For one viewer, they condense the entire meaning of a painting. For another, they are simply a patch of wall, or a red thread. The minute visual expression happens in what might be deemed by other viewers insignificant. This makes the task of adapting them into models for productive interpretation into a challenge, as they constantly walk the thin line between the meaningful and the arbitrary.[11]

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[10] See Eli Friedlander on nature's details in Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*: "the detail attracts, that is, it initially calls attention to itself, not as something already recognizable, but as something to be looked at attentively […] there is thus a certain "materiality" to the detail, attested by its capacity to make an impression without being immediately comprehended, to attract without being recognized." Eli Friedlander, *J.J. Rousseau: An Afterlife of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 80-81.

[11] I argue that this same challenge is central in the debates around cinephilia, see Chapter 2.

The yellow patch complicates things: not only detail, it is an event, an intrusion to the regular pace of life. Proust's detail is confusing, as it belongs to a particular space and time, but it also rejects our attempts to specify a spatial location on the canvas. The patch takes on significance beyond its modest size, which makes it a confusing object to define the limits for. This might be because the detail *happens* to the writer in front of the painting. Where does the detail end, and where does the viewer begin, especially when the surplus meaning we add to it transforms its original smallness? Its smallness, however, presents a sort of resistance to aesthetic hierarchies; details are often synonymous with the inessential, that which distracts from the general structure. In such a framework they are ornamental to the central aspirations of the work. I would not reject these claims entirely, as the oscillation between meaning and triviality is part of how I understand the detail. At times we must ask ourselves: does it even mean anything at all?

The path for understanding the peculiarity of the yellow patch departs from the usual iconographic methods. On the alternatives for iconography's models of reading we learn from the art historian Daniel Arasse, who challenged its methodological hold on the detail. The discrepancy between Arasse's model and traditional iconography primarily lies in the close examination of details in their singularity.[12] Arasse sees them as the painter's appeal to the viewer's gaze, that signals the invisible exchange between the gaze and the painting. Or, perhaps more provocatively, it marks the beholder's point of entry into the image, the place where something grabs us in what we see.[13] Even

[12] In his *Take a Closer Look,* for example, Arasse carefully examines the unexpected appearance of the snail on the edge of the Annunciation painting by Francesco del Cossa: "On the edge of the perspective construction, on its threshold, the anomaly of the snail waves to you; it calls for a conversion of the glance and lets you understand that you do not see anything in what you see, that you do not see what you're looking at, your goal, what you expect when you look: the invisible that has come into vision." Arasse claims that details like the snail *dislocate* meaning, pulling it in unexpected directions. Elsewhere, in a fictional dialogue between two viewers of Titian's *The Venus of Urbino*, one explains to the other: "No. I'm just trying to look at the painting. To forget iconography. To see how it functions.". Daniel Arasse. *Take a Closer Look* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 100. See also Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992).

[13] Arasse, *Take a Closer Look*, 29.

so, the detail does not necessarily determine what we should be looking at, but rather indicates how something in the painting suddenly captures attention. Arasse helps us define the detail by what I would call this double movement of displacement and crystallization: even when it departs from the main objectives of the work, the detail can also condensate, in this tiny, digressive swift, the meaning of the whole.

To approach the detail of a painting as a visual event, and consequently as a bearer of meaning, entails getting closer, what I call an intimacy. The proximity that brings details into view is not only the removal of physical distance, but an emotional connection of some sort. We 'get into detail' with the object that has become familiar. This familiarity is one that brings along the urge to revisit the film, or the painting, and its temporality is then not of absorption, but of repetition. we return to the detail to make sure it is actually there, as it sometimes seems to be nothing more than a coincidence; it is perhaps its smallness that can be easily mistaken for insignificance. To appreciate the detail by these terms constitutes what Didi-Huberman calls a close up form of knowledge,[14] in which I would emphasize not only the revelatory discovery (the suddenness of the yellow patch) but the way the detail invites us to come back to it, to decipher the peculiars ways in which the small is revealed to be so evocative.

The Film Detail

How can we imagine a cinematic equivalent for the intensity of the pictorial patch of yellow? And if so, where would we locate the immediacy of its appearance: in a shot, a scene, or perhaps an object? In this dissertation I explore the role of the detail in film theory and criticism. As I challenge and complicate the way we understand the privileged sites of meaning in films, I foster my own theory

[14] Didi-Huberman, "*The Art of Not Describing,*" 150.

of the filmic detail, and trace how and why the particular scene, object, or gesture, become the emblem of what a film is for us. In doing so, I propose my own method for practicing criticism centered around details. By referring to these particular moments from films, I do not wish to argue for the inherent significance of any part of any film, but to explore the specific instance or an individual feature which continue to produce meaning and commentary. The central aim of this dissertation, then, is to demonstrate how considering the detail as a critical category can motivate new ways of understanding both the cinematic experience and our response to this experience.

The particular features of the detail can be better seen by juxtaposing its multiple genres and forms. By first considering the filmic detail along with the literary, pictorial and photographic models of part and whole, and then singling out the particular qualities that distinguish its cinematic form, this dissertation realizes two inquiries. First, it places cinema as a privileged site for the wide-ranging questions surrounding the detail, and, second, reframes the detail's significance for the way we think and write about films, especially taking into account the flexible category of 'screen' and new viewing practices. By outlining the importance of details for film criticism, my project engages with recent scholarship that deals with related questions, such as cinematic stillness, cinephilia and theories of spectatorship, and to some extent affect theory. The meeting of moving images with the impulse at the heart of the detail, namely that of isolation and interruption, allows me to negotiate these questions in a new light. By pointing to the unrecognized centrality of details within film theory, I aim to introduce them as essential parts of the amorous discourse around films, following Roland Barthes's treatise of erotic language, *Lover's Discourse.* As an essentially affective phenomenon, tied to emotional intensity and the personal experience of the moving image, I propose the film detail as a dynamic concept, the starting point for a model of interpretation and attention to films.

With the film detail's deep connection to personal moments, contingency is inseparable from the way film details are spoken of; yet by acknowledging it we risk reducing them to nothing but

accidents, a move that would limit their impact and potential as an aesthetic tool. I respond to this problem by reframing them within the amorous language of the chance event, taken from Barthes. By this I shift the problem of contingency to an area in which the incidental and the meaningful intersect: love. In this project I emphasize the fortuitous sides of the film detail that lend it the appearance of an unexpected event, tracing the role of love or desire in the way we understand details. My interest is not exactly in Barthes's own ideas about cinema (although they do take part in my discussion of the filmic detail).[15] I rather take Barthes's account of the details we love to speak about cinema.

The conceptual model of this project is based on what I argue to be the contradictory nature of the detail. The detail exposes a certain weakness of both perception and our own acts of criticism, namely that we cannot see everything at once. In our perception of whole and detail, one will have a tendency to overshadow the other, causing it to momentarily disappear[16]; yet by the isolation of detail, I argue, we make the whole visible in a particular way.[17] By this the problem of the detail, so to speak, allows us to reflect on our habitual use of particular moments, shots or objects from films for making observations about them; but we still perceive these films as a unity or a whole. The tension between the film and its particular parts is therefore an essential question to film theory and

[15] For recent scholarship on Barthes and cinema see Philip Watts, *Roland Barthes' cinema* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Patrick Ffrench, *Roland Barthes and Film: Myth, Eroticism and Poetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

[16] See Tuma, "'Une dentelle s'abolit': The Invisibilities of Vermilion in Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*," 26. The problem obviously presents itself differently in the medium of painting, compared to the experience of the *moving* film detail.

[17] The problem I look into is to some extent unique to film criticism and its temporality, which John Gibbs articulates as the relationship between the experience of watching the film and engaging with detailed analysis, where the latter inevitably disrupts the former. John Gibbs. "Opening Movements in Ophuls: Long Takes, Leading Characters and Luxuries," in *The Long Take: Critical Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 101.

analysis.[18]

These contradictions are not figured in the familiar usage of "detail" in film scholarship, which usually refers to objects or particulars under the open category of 'mise-en-scène'.[19] We might cite the terminology we find in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art,* that defines film form as the overall set of relationships among *the parts of a film.*[20] These elements would respectively be the narrative or stylistic devices we usually refer to (for example, cinematography, lighting, or editing). While this terminology is certainly useful, it does not help us describe *our* privileged parts, what I call in Chapter 2 our *private scene*. These instances are not simply *parts* or *elements* of films, but rather the particular places that we return to for thinking about questions of film form and style. Still, the language of film analysis does not account for the questions posed by these evocative moments: *why* are we attached to certain parts, and *how* do they trigger a new understanding of what we see? These inquiries cannot be resolved only by pointing to our own personal or emotional investment in particular films. I propose that we treat these parts of films as film details. The category of the filmic detail is unique to the medium in that accounts not only for the role of objects or other elements of décor as visual motifs or thematic devises; it calls for us to recognize the types of magnified attention that certain film moments give rise to.

This definition of detail holds the organic unity of parts and whole as a feature of the medium. By this I differentiate my methods of analysis from Bellour's earlier work, that used

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[18] See Jonathan Bignell's related observations on the 'problem of detail' in film studies. "From Detail to Meaning: Badlands (Terence Malick, 1973) and Cinematic Articulation," in *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 52.

[19] A notable exception is Phillip Rosen's *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, in which he explores the theoretical implications of the reliance on details in narrative film, particularly in relation to historical questions. Phillip Rosen. "Detail, Document and Diegesis in Mainstream Film." *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 147-199.

[20] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction, 7th Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 49.

fragmentation as its primary mode of investigation,[21]along with Laura Mulvey's arguments for the transformative effect new viewing technologies have on forms of film analysis and film theory. Mulvey especially pointed to the unexcepted discovery of meaning in "some detail or previously unnoticed moment" made possible by these new forms of interactive spectatorship.[22] Bellour's methodology regards film fragments as indispensable tools for film criticism and analysis.[23] The key modification I bring forward in my definition of filmic detail lies in what is counted as a detail, namely an element isolated from the film that demonstrates an affinity between part and whole.[24] Put differently, I do not wish to emphasize the productive insights that lie in the practice of fragmentation, but to keep the detail and the film, the part and the whole, intact. In my account the detail can equally be conceived in spatial (an object, a section of filmic space) or temporal terms (a moment, a gesture, a freeze frame). However, my question is not limited to particular films or case studies. I consider the main motivation behind the isolation of the part to be the investment on the side of the viewer. The emphasis on detail is therefore the product of our attention to it.

As I treat it, this framing of film details understands the elements of film style, namely the significant details of the mise-en-scène, as forms of addressing the viewer. Details pertain to my own investment as a critic and a scholar, which only confirms how they solicit a sort of attention that constantly calls upon the personal; they leave a mark. Still, I would argue for a universal claim even

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[21]See for example Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

[22]Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 28.

[23] These methods proved productive with a particular case study, namely films by Alfred Hitchcock, in which the methodology matches the object perfectly. On this point see Tom Gunning, "The Work of Film Analysis: Systems, Fragments, Alternation". *Semiotica* 144 (2003), 343–357.

[24] Another perceptive on fragmentation is the careful treatment of the single frame, which we find for example in the work of Garrett Stewart, who reclaims the theoretical possibilities of the frame, or in Hannah Frank's frame-by-frame method. Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

within these sites of personal experience. By this I am indebted to Barthes's writing style, in which the singular detail becomes the center of gravity from which the writing unfolds, as Réda Bensmaia has noted[25]; the reader interacts with the detail and obtains access to both the writer and the object of writing.[26] Bensmaia locates a shift in Barthes's thinking that is relevant to my own perspective on the role of details within this project: by moving from the film fragment to the film detail as the key aesthetic category, the 'part' and the 'whole' are no longer interchangeable terms.[27] I understand this relation between detail and theory not as a problem to be solved or an obstacle to overcome, but rather as introducing a model of engagement based on the mutual dependency between the two.

The sensitivity to the viewer's engagement with visual details has been evoked primarily in regards to photography, particularly in Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, though it can equally be a principle of pictorial details, as we have seen with the Proustian yellow patch. The areas of film theory that look into the detail's unique appeal are usually the ones to address personal modes of film criticism and analysis, as in the work of Stanley Cavell, or the more recent discourse around the connections between cinephilia and the history of film theory.[28] Cavell's film theory stands out as it is personal

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[25] Bensmaia, Réda. *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 43-44.

[26] In *The Deaths of Roland Barthes* Jacques Derrida writes: "Yes, it was from a detail that I asked for the ecstasy of revelation, the instantaneous access to Roland Barthes (to him and him alone) […] Like him, I searched for the *freshness* of a reading in relation to detail." Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes." *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 38.

[27] I clearly distinguish my interest in the detail from scholarship on the concept of fragment, especially in the context of German Romanticism. The Romantic use of fragments constitutes its own genre of part *as* whole; each fragment when considered for itself aspires for an indefinite power of expansion. While I do evoke the Romantic sensitivity in relation to the question of part and whole, particularly by using organic terms, I argue that we should read the filmic detail as one the finds expression mainly within the film as a whole, and not when separated from it. On the possibilities of the Romantic fragment collection, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, translated with an introduction and additional notes by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) and Christopher Kubiak, "Sowing Chaos: Discontinuity and the Form of Autonomy in the Fragment Collections of the Early German Romantics," *Studies in Romanticism*. Vol. 33, No. 3 (Fall, 1994): 411-449.

[28] This has been pointed out by Christian Keathley in relation to the personal nature of film experience. Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and history, or, The wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

almost by definition (even if he makes serious and universal claims about the ontology of the medium). Cavell writes about films by way of reveries, and often points to cinematic moments that he finds particularly evocative. In accordance with how details usually work, these moments are not only discovered in a singular viewing, but revisited repeatedly: "I knew afresh each time I viewed the film," Cavell writes, "that this moment played something like an epitomizing role in the film's effect upon me, but I remained unable to find words for it sufficient to include in my critical account of the effect."[29] His interest in the cinematic moment is not only evident in the choice of subject matter, but in his way of asking *why* this or that moment matters. Beyond an account of our private experience of films, lies another truth: details are personal, but they can also be a way of making general claims. To make them intelligible would mean to make room for the private experience without letting go of our claim for universal meaning.

The detail's personal nature, I would argue, is tied in essence to film's affinity with the accidental, that is, the medium's capacity to capture contingent events.[30] The film camera records the profilmic events that are more or less planned, and also those that *just happen*, as René Thoreau Bruckner, James Cahill, and Greg Siegel put it in their introduction to *Cinema and Accident.* Cinematography, they continue, is a writing, most of the time, of accidents.[31] I would approach this idea about the medium from a different angle: our interaction with moving images includes the

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[29] Stanley Cavell, "A Capra Moment," in *Cavell on Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 136.

[30] The accidental aspects of the encounter with the memorable detail have been emphasized in Keathley's *Cinephilia and history, or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). In Keathley's account the engagement with filmic details challenges the dominant discourses of historicism and conventional models of interpretation.

[31] René Thoreau Bruckner, James Leo Cahill, and Greg Siegel. "Introduction: Cinema and Accident." *Discourse*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2008): 279-288. The introduction uses the metaphor of writing to further elaborate on ways of imposing order or structure on cinema's 'accidents': "If this […] fundamental capacity has tended to guide both cinema's historical development and its critical study, it has not, for all that, succeeded in abolishing the accidental." René Thoreau Bruckner, James Leo Cahill, and Greg Siegel, "Introduction: Cinema and Accident," 280.

experience of fortuitous discoveries, which often takes the shape of a detail.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is structured around the dialectical oppositions that model my understanding of film details: part against whole, motion and stasis, and the chance event as opposed to the necessary rule. Each chapter draws key theoretical observations based on these sets of oppositions, that allow me to trace the detail as a critical category across its manifestations in literary theory, aesthetics and film theory.

Each chapter explores an interpretative model focused on details. While each of them attends to different theoretical possibilities, they examine similar tensions the detail is defined by, namely the dynamic relation of part and whole, the interweaving of stasis and motion, and the emotional imprint of details. What sets these readings in motion, so to speak, is the singling-out of significant details for each work in question. Aiming to establish my own concept of detail as the base of a critical model of reading films, I begin with questions of method and representation particular to the detail ('The Distinctive Marks'), and move to a more focused analysis of the filmic detail, starting from the discourse around mise-en-scène ('Tiny Private Scene') followed by its implications on the concept of cinematic contingency ('The Accidental Detail'). The last chapter ('Details to Remember By') develops the affinity between details, cinema, and memory in relation to questions of movement and stasis. A thread that runs along this project concerns the prominence of details in the amorous discourse, as the particulars tied with moments of love and desire. I revisit films and media objects that center on love or the erotic not only for their subject matter, but in an attempt to treat these feelings as their own generative category of criticism. Each of these chapters thus provides a mode of reading and interpretation that takes the detail as its starting point.

Chapter 1 grounds the ways in which details grab attention in particular forms of viewer

engagement. These forms are both medium specific—and unique to the conditions of painting, literature, photography and film— and based on shared motifs of expansion, intimacy, proximity and affect. The question of detail is one that brings together different sources, ranging from literary analysis to art historical perspectives.

Different impulses or forces come to the surface in the pictorial, literary or photographic detail. Nonetheless, placing them in conversation with each other allows me to uncover recurring motifs and configurations that support my definition of the detail as a distinct aesthetic category. A special focus of this first chapter will be the portrait and the details of epidermis that take part in the representation of the human subject; this motif will provide a useful tool for reviewing the concept of the detail across media.

The turning point of this chapter will be Barthes's *punctum*, which articulates the piercing effect the detail has as part of the ontology of the photograph. Beyond its deep influence on the discourse around details (and to a certain extent, *punctum* is now virtually synonymous with the concept of the photographic detail), it allows me to shift the focus of my discussion from stasis to motion, as it leads me to the details that I consider essential to the project: moving details. These details are those of the lover's body, central to the event of falling in love. Taken from an earlier text of Barthes*, Lover's Discourse* (1973)*,* they are central to my argument in two ways: they signify that the amorous discourse is a productive site for exploring the detail as a critical category, and moreover they show the prominence of stasis and motion to my inquiry. The writer/viewer's investment in bodily details comes along with the activation of emotion, that will guide my way of looking at details in the chapters to come.

Importantly, the particular gestures of the body are not only animated, but they play with our distinctions between an intentional act and an accidental one. The history of writing about detail has generated a similar recurring interest in the areas of accidental or involuntary expressivity. I open

these methodological questions by comparing the work of two figures from different areas of art history: Giovanni Morelli and Aby Warburg. This does not mean only to imply similarity, but to point to the distinctive motivations behind their interest in the marginal particulars of the artwork. Still, I read Morelli's connoisseurship as more practical in its intentions, and focused on inadvertent details as the little accidents that allow us to trace the artwork to a particular master. Warburg, on the other hand, tied details to the representation of emotion and movement. Based on recent work by Philippe-Alain Michaud and Georges Didi-Huberman, I aim to show his unique contribution to the study of details in motion as one that goes well beyond art history.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus to film details in particular. In this chapter I examine models or moods of detail-based film criticism to reveal a set of underlying assumptions concerning both the role of particulars and the practice of fragmentation. I critically assess the interpretive moves that motivate recent scholarship on cinephilia, based on what is often referred to as 'cinematic excess'. I do not wish to simply reproduce the affirmative appreciation of particular directors, but to consider how details can be the starting point for ways of reading and modes of attention that are not limited to certain films or filmmakers. The discourse around cinephilia is one discernable area of film theory that constantly addresses details' centrality for the cinematic experience, which is tied primarily to the emotional register (evident even in the way it refers to itself).

I trace the key sensitivities of these recent works to a set of principles that were used to account for the cinematic experience in earlier modes of criticism. Looking at the writings of both early French critics of the 1920s and André Bazin, I consider their treatment of the cinematic detail as both a rhetoric device, that can stand for the novelty of cinematic event, and a constructive element in the formation of criticism based on emotional responses to the moving image. I show how the detail takes its place in broader debates about the dynamic interaction of part and whole in the cinematic medium, particularly in regard to the ever-flexible concept of mise-en-scène. The

chapter is built around the stories that details tell: as elements of narration and visual storytelling, or more personal stories of the cinematic event that are set to their own temporality.

A key aspect in this chapter is the delicate balance between details and narrative: they can be immersive aspects of filmic space or narrative devices, or alternatively push us out of the narrative and disrupt its flow. Either way, they confirm the dependence of cinematic forms of storytelling on singular acts of looking. I demonstrate a path of interpretation attuned to details in the final section of this chapter, dedicated to Max Ophuls' film *Caught* (1949). By comparing two types of details in *Caught*, I examine their double role in film style, as both formal devices for the purposes of narrative strategies and as moments that elude cohesive and unified meaning.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the role filmic details play in the concept of cinematic contingency. In this chapter I try and capture the impact that the accidental—the chance, or spontaneous event—has on our sensitivity to details in films. I review the fundamental concepts and inherent contradictions surrounding these questions in prominent works of film theory, specifically in what we might call the discourse around contingency. This chapter explores details' affinity with the conditions of contingency particular to the cinema, with special focus on the centrality of the concept of nature in these debates. I demonstrate how the general terms 'nature' or 'natural contingency' conceal an underlying ambiguity in the way film theory interprets the beautiful accidents of nature. My reading is structured around Kantian aesthetics, and particularly its understanding of the shared features of nature and art in our acts of judgement.

The first part of this chapter allows me to single out the cinematic contingencies that complicate our solid distinctions between the intentional and the arbitrary, as what separates style and 'natural' forms of expression. I take these insights to the second part of the chapter, that looks into the suggestive details in the films of Ernst Lubitsch, and primarily engages with the implications of invoking the famous 'Lubitsch Touch' to illustrate the *natural* qualities of his style. By carefully

following the use of objects in his film *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), I promote a new and elaborate reading of touch and tactility in the film detail.

Chapter 4 explores the return or continuation of visual motifs centered around a particular gesture in three central objects: Warburg's nymph figure, Freud's interpretation of Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*, and François Truffaut's 1962 film *Jules et Jim*. The isolation of gesture mirrors the activation of emotion or affect that takes place in these stories, in which desire is inseparable from the making and evaluation of images. By placing them side by side, they provide a case study for the theoretical possibilities of a comparative analysis invested in detail. Moreover, they examine the stilled details of motion as a unique temporal phenomenon that takes place in the cinema.

Chapter 1
Distinctive Marks: A Methodology of Detail

> My adversaries are pleased to call me someone who has no understanding of the spiritual content of a work of art, and who therefore gives particular importance to external details such as the form of the hands, the ear, and even, horribile dictu [how shocking], to such rude things as fingernails.
>
> Giovanni Morelli[1]

> A small foreground detail can attain such size that it dominates everything else in the painting.
>
> Sergei Eisenstein[2]

The detail attracts the eye in a particular way. While partial in essence, it is not incomplete. When details hold our attention, they insinuate isolation and removal from the 'big picture' or the entirety of a scene. Looking at details therefore goes along with a set of contradictory aspects: they are small, and counter the unity of sspace, yet they appear significant for this very space. The particular also stands out by its ability to evoke feeling; the way we can dwell on details speaks to the emotional impact they have. By these affective afternotes, the active nature of the detail starts to come to the surface, making it an integral part of the whole to which they belong to. It is somewhat perplexing to try and attribute a methodology to details, as they seem to push against systematic readings by holding two opposed moments. On the one hand, the gathering and realization of meaning in the part, and on the other, the seeking of meaning in the whole. To fix our eye on the detail thus modifies our own methodology and animates the interaction of part and whole. In response to the

[1] Giovanni Morelli, *Della Pittura Italiana*. Qtd. in Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method". *History Workshop*, No. 9 (Spring, 1980), 11.

[2] Sergei Eisenstein, "The History of the Close-Up," *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1995), 462.

methodological puzzle of the detail, my analysis will leave open the possibility of the part to destabilize the whole, by eventually forming my own understanding of what I would term the methodology of the *moving* detail. No longer the allegorical detail, one of the scattered, lifeless fragments, but the detail as a dynamic aesthetic concept, that *moves* the artwork from within and stirs the viewer.

By drawing on both literary and aesthetic theory, in this chapter I reflect on the centrality of details for conditions of viewing and reception, both as a mode of reading and a form of experience. Starting with different models of detail (pictorial, photographic, and literary) will allow me to formulate a few organizing observations and propose different ways in which we become invested in details. Details are used to illustrate principles of expansion, or the part taking over the whole, or alternatively to attest to the realism of an environment. They also function as diagnostic tools, as in the methods of Giovanni Morelli, and in a different way in Aby Warburg's. The first part of my chapter will illustrate that the detail is a useful and effective tool for mobilizing the interaction of part in whole, both on the pictorial level of the image and in the literary construction of environment.

However, in the history of writing on detail the methodological questions also coincide with an attentiveness to the emotional or affective register, and especially the role of desire and love as the driving force in our isolation of detail. The second half of this chapter will be devoted to this unique category of details, that bridge contingency and affect, stillness and moving gestures, by closely reviewing the details of Roland Barthes's oeuvre. The usual suspects for this analysis are the details of photography, and to a lesser extent, film (drawing on Barthes's *Camera Lucida and The Third Meaning* respectively*).* From a discussion of these punctual and excessive details, I will put forward a third kind: the moving details of the lover's body. These amorous details bring together the isolation of part object and the expansion principle prominent across the works reviewed in the chapter, in

the context of details that are essentially *in motion*. By this the amorous detail allows me to introduce the moving details of film, for which desire is similarly a form of making meaning.

Details of Skin and Hair: Hegel's Portraits

How do details grab our attention? One plausible way to answer would simply rely on the fact that the part effectively *overcomes* the whole. As a counter argument, I would suggest that the detail's force is not to be limited to the part grasped in isolation but rather, that they are gathering points for a whole field of meaning. What happens when we study the detail as the point of entry, not strictly the element that overwhelms the whole but a means of experiencing it? I will explore this possibility by questions of representation that address an object that is itself *part* of our body: the human face. The discrete parts of the portrait can render the general idea of personality. To zoom into the details of the epidermis, however, works differently than expected; there we find that details pull away us from the ideal and immerse the viewer in the materiality of the flesh.

One exemplary case of the meeting of materiality and the spiritual in the human face is Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. In André Bazin's two-part essay 'Theater and Cinema', the bare faces of Dreyer's film are used to illustrate the role of nature in cinema, which is more subtle and complex than what appears at first. The décor, along with the film's excessive use of close-ups, gives the impression that nature plays "a nonexistent role" in the film. Bazin, however, directs our attention to something else: the lack of makeup, which actually holds the secret of the entire film. By *not* applying makeup to the skin, its texture is exposed, and the camera documents it with all its imperfections. In this *documentary of faces,* the acting is of little importance, whereas "the pockmarks on Bishop Cauchon's face and the red patches of Jean D'Arc are an integral part of the action."[3]

[3] André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part Two," in *What is Cinema? Volume 1* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 110.

By this exposure of bare skin, the details are made expressive, as if magnified (and Bazin does calls it the drama through the microscope.)[4] The human epidermis is where action takes place. This is not merely stating that our reactions are registered, expressively, on the face, but that the film *happens* in the natural textures of human skin. Bazin's remarks on the lack of makeup to support his observations on the paradox of décor and realism in the film. Even if the settings are far removed from realist representation, the "secondary details" – the light of the sun, the lumps of real earth thrown into a hole in the ground—give it the cinematic quality or texture.

The face and the texture of skin come forward in a film like *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, that marks "the haptic appeal of skin texture, wetness of cheeks, dryness of lips," Noa Steimatsky writes. The "fleshy faces" that enter the screen are bare not only due to the absence of makeup, but given that they have an impact of "raw being,"[5] the very impact evoked in Bazin's claims that in this film "the whole of nature palpitates beneath every pore."[6] The most esoteric details of skin penetrate reality in this highly artificial film, giving access to the spiritual and, eventually, to revelation.

One notable example to contradict the effects of the bare texture of Maria Falconetti's skin is the face of Garbo in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, its features removed from materiality by the erasure of particular details of skin by the skillful makeup artist.[7] By virtue of the absence of contingent details, her face incarnates Essence, the Ideal and never the particular: "her nickname, Divine*,* probably intended to suggest less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her

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[4] Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part Two," 110.

[5] Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 57-58.

[6] Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part Two," 110.

[7] In the context of Barthes's *Mythologies*, the face of Garbo stands out as the remains of the sacred in everyday life and mass culture. See Noami Schor's argument for reading Barthes as refuting Hegel's claims in "Desublimation: Roland Barthes's Aesthetics," *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 93-117.

corporal person, descended from a heaven where things are formed and finished with the greatest clarity."[8] Garbo's face therefore represents a turning point in cinema, and her 'classical' face is set against the modern, and more importantly *mobile* face of Audrey Hepburn. As the mark of increased specification, Hepburn's face is no longer essential but is constituted by "an infinite complexity of morphological functions,"[9] bringing her closer, one could claim, to the material substance of filmic faces that Bazin's remarks refer to.

Against the materiality of film that seizes its subjects 'with skin and hair,'[10]we find contradictory expectations from painterly details. The portrait is expected to give us an idealized image, as we see for example in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, where he calls for the *removal* of skin impurities in order to grasp the ideal of the soul. The clear distinction to be made between natural details and the act of representation is key in a noteworthy passage:

> In the human face nature's drawing is the bone structure or the hard parts around which the softer ones are laid, developed into *a variety of accidental detail*; but however important those hard parts are for the character drawing of portraiture, it consists in other fixed traits, i.e. the countenance transformed by the spirit. In this sense we may say of a portrait that it not only may but must flatter, because it renounces what belongs to the mere chance of nature and accepts only what makes a contribution to characterizing the individual himself in his most personal inmost being [sic].[11]

Natural details are individual and distinct, yet they are merely accidental, Hegel claims, and therefore should be rejected in favor of the latent *concept* hiding in the flesh. What reveals individuality within the natural features is the aesthetic representation of the spirit. Susan Stewart discusses the miniature

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[8] Roland Barthes. *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 74.

[9] Barthes, *Mythologies,* 75.

[10] Miriam Hansen refers to Kracauer's discussion of the material elements of cinema, and particularly the ways in which the medium addresses the viewer 'with skin and hair', that is as a corporal-material being: "resuming his earlier comparison with the 'subject assigned to theater' […] Kracauer reiterates that film by contrast addresses its viewer as a 'corporeal-material being'; it captures the 'human being with skin and hair.'" Miriam Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair': Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993), 458.

[11] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 867.

portrait in relation to Hegel's passage, and shows that by contrasting the arbitrary in the portrait (the actuality of flesh and skin) and the idea, the depiction of individuality *within* nature comes forward, and the touch of the artist is made visible. The personality emerging from the portrait signifies the artist's presence, even if the details of the face are credited to the 'mere chance' of natural, similar to the way Bazin reads the faces in *Joan of Arc* as expressions of nature's participation in the cinema. In Hegel, the origin of facial details in nature is synonymous with their categorization as accidental. The artist lets nature become a portrait by overcoming it to some extent. Unexpectedly, even in such an Idealistic concept of representation one cannot escape the details. As Hegel emphasizes the inevitability of rejecting the natural, he spends quite some time on those accidental details:

> [E]ven the portrait-painter, who has least of all to do with the Ideal of art, *must* flatter, in the sense that all the externals in shape and expression, in form, colour, features, the purely natural side of imperfect existence, *little hairs, pores, little scars, warts,* all these he must let go, and grasp and reproduce the subject in his universal character and enduring personality. It is one thing for the artist simply to imitate the face of the sitter, its surface and external form, confronting him in repose, and quite another to be able to portray the true features which express the inmost soul of the subject.[12]

Elsewhere Hegel argues that the portrait painter ought to omit "folds of skin and, still more, freckles, pimples, pock-marks, warts."[13]In her *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, Naomi Schor elegantly points to what is striking about these treatments of the portrait: the elaborate description and extraordinary fascination with the very details of the epidermis that are to be rejected by the artist.[14] Hegel lingers on the particulars, giving them personality and texture, as he calls for them to be erased in favor of the universality of character. Hegel's natural details are namely

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[12] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 155, emphasis mine.

[13] Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume 1,* 165.

[14] In the context of Barthes's *Mythologies*, the face of Garbo stands out as the remains of the sacred in everyday life and mass culture. See Noami Schor's argument for reading Barthes as refuting Hegel's claims in "Desublimation: Roland Barthes's Aesthetics", *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 93-117.

those of the skin, and he highlights this in another passage dedicated to the human body: "However far the human, in distinction from the animal, body makes its life appear outwardly, still nevertheless the poverty of nature equally finds expression on this surface by the non-uniformity of the skin, in *indentions, wrinkles, pores, small hairs, little veins* etc. The skin itself, which permits the inner life to shine through it, is an external covering for self-preservation, merely a purposeful means in the service of the natural needs."[15] The axiom of Hegel's lectures in the *Aesthetics*, that the beauty of art is *higher* than that of nature, is certainly made clear (and points to his separation from the role of natural beauty in Kant's aesthetics).

Literary models of realism are similarly captivated by the particularities of skin, used to lend an authenticity to the fictional space, and contribute to the representation of the larger environment or the particular character. In these models, the curious effect recurs: details that are meant to serve descriptive purposes strangely stand out, and draw excessive attention well beyond their actual smallness. One explanation for this overly dedicated investment in details is that they primarily speak visually, that is, activate the reader's figurative imagination. Theories of realism effectively draw their relevance and authority from visual models of representation, namely painting and later photography, which shows that the detail emerges as a visual aid for the viewer's imagination and perception even with the written text. The detail can thus serve to illustrate the dynamic interrelationship between the arts.

These visual-literary details, and again the distinct marks of the skin's texture, play a particularly important role in Diderot's theory of literary realism, where they make fictional characters appear true to life. When the reader bumps into the casual mention of a wart on the face of the literary heroine, Diderot claims, they cannot avoid concluding that the author could not have

[15] Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Volume 1,* 146, emphasis mine.

fabricated such unremarkble details. This conviction will bring the effect of reality into being.

The literary tradition generally thinks of details in complex ways in relation to the representation of reality. The prevailing approach, however, celebrates the value of the effective use of details in creating the realistic effect; the multitude of small things woven into the literary text gives the impression that we are dealing with the 'real world'.[16] This model of detail is usually attributed to Balzac, even if its theoretical groundwork had been laid in Diderot's work, where the realistic tale follows the paradigm of details that *authenticate* events. Importantly, the tangible concept of touch is used to illustrate details' mark on the fabric of the narrative, and consequently on the reader's impression of reality:

> How, then, will the storyteller go about deceiving you? In the following way. He will scatter throughout his story *so many little details intimately connected with the subject in hand, so many touches that are so simple and so natural*, and above all so difficult to make up out of whole cloth, that you will be compelled to say to yourself: Upon my word, this is the truth – such things can't be invented.[17]

The detail emphasizes the mediated contact points, left as marks of the surface of fiction, thus providing us with an almost tactile model for the correspondence of media and reality. Realism's rendering of the multitude of unexpected detail will later intersect with the visual quality attributed to early photography.[18] William Henry Fox Talbot reported that the lens can magnify and thus reveal a multitude of minute detail previously unobserved, and moreover that

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[16] For an example of a discussion of Diderot's theory of detail, particularly in relation to photography, see Guido Isekenmeier. "Visual Event Realism," in *Realisms in Contemporary Culture: Theories, Politics, and Medial Configurations*, eds. Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 214-226.

[17] Denis Diderot, "The Two Friends from Bourbonne," in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 244.

[18] It is worth noting that before the advent of photography, Dutch Painting had a similar symbolic function, and was often evoked as the visual metaphor for the truth claims of writing. On this model for faithful mimesis before the advent of photography, and how the idiom "Dutch Painting" slowly disappeared from the 19th century rethoric on the novel, see the preface in Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008). Svetlana Alpers explores the descriptive role of detail in Dutch painting in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Murray, 1983).

> It frequently happens […] that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls: sometimes a distant dial-plate is seen, and upon it – unconsciously recorded – the hour of the day at which the view was taken.[19]

The camera captures the details of the world, but while it records accidentally, or *unconsciously* by Talbot's terms, the literary depiction depends on the writer's mindful deployment of details, and inserting them into the literary text is a *formal* device of authenticating the fictive 'reality'. Diderot's concept of the 'little wart' is the perfect example: not exactly a detail of aesthetic pleasure, the scar or the mole instead *validates* the identity of the subject, and affirms the writer's skill.[20]Diderot explicitly borrows from the visual arts to explain the deployment of details for literary representation:

> An example borrowed from another field of art will perhaps make my meaning easier to grasp. A painter executes a head on his canvas. The outlines are all strong, bold and regular; it is a collection of the most rare and most perfect traits. Looking at it, I feel respect, admiration and awe. I seek its model in nature, and do not find it there; in comparison with the picture everything natural seems weak, petty and mediocre. This, I feel, and I tell myself, is an imaginary head. But let the artist show me a small scar on the forehead of this portrait, a mole on one of the temples, a barely perceptible cut on the lower lip, and although it seemed an imaginary portrait only a moment before, now it becomes the likeness of a real person. Add a pockmark at the corner of the eye, or beside the nose, and this woman's face is no longer that of Venus; it is the portrait of one of my neighbors.[21]

When the painter creates an ideal portrait, one which does not have any (direct) model in nature, the viewer nevertheless asks for the model, only to discover that it does not exist, making reality appear trivial compared to the pure work of imagination. However, when the artist 'marks' this face by a slight scar or a wart, the imaginary is brought closer to the everyday, and to the actual representation of a particular individual. The fictional warts are the 'embellishments' that validate the illusion of reality by disrupting the impression of perfection. Whereas the perfect features represent the

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[19] William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1844), 62-63.

[20] The 'little wart' is often cited as an illustration of Diderot's theory of art. See for example Herbert Dieckmann, "The Presentation of Reality in Diderot's Tales," *Diderot Studies*, Vol. 3 (1961): 101-128.

[21] Diderot, "The Two Friends from Bourbonne," 244.

imagination, the details in fiction should appear natural, or in other words, accidental.

"The little wart", Diderot's term for this effect,[22] *counters* the impression of the ideal (represented by Venus in the passage cited). The skin detail grounds the realistic representation, establishing that the writer is able to capture the subject truthfully (this effect mimics the visual accuracy of the painter, and later, of photography).[23] On this Kittler writes convincingly that "it is precisely such warts that Denis Diderot, the first literary theorist of realism, must use as an excuse to make characters that the writer invented out of nothing nonetheless appear perfectly believable and true-to-life for readers."[24] The textual form of realism plays with the reader's feeling that the writer could not have *invented* these inconspicuous details, something as banal as a wart, and must have described them according to so-called life. In this model the visual field efficiently illustrates how the detail can grant veracity to fictional events, yet photography was a true paradigm shift; it records automatically, and indiscriminately. And as Gunning writes, it is the 'nearly inexhaustible visual richness' of photography, combined with the photograph's lack of selection, that makes it capture *in excess* of what we intend it to.[25] The technical production of the image captures *more*, beyond intentions and naked sight.[26]

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[22] A good example of the use of the wart as a means of reality verification is taken from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and cited in Guido Isekenmeier's "Visual Event Realism": "Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose." Qtd. in Guido Isekenmeier's "Visual Event Realism", 218.

[23] The aesthetic model that praises the precision of detail in validating the representation of reality does have early pictorial equivalents. Vasari's *Lives of the Painters,* for example, praises the details of texture given to the tablecloth in Leonardo's Last Supper, surely a peripheral detail in sight of the main events depicted: "All their faces are expressive of love, fear, wrath or grief at not being able to grasp the meaning of Christ, in contrast to the obstinacy, hatred and treason of Judas, while the whole work, down to the smallest details, displays incredible diligence, even the texture of the tablecloth being clearly visible so that actual cambric would not look more real." Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, & Architects Volume II* (London, 1927), 161.

[24] Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 92.

[25] Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," *Nordicom Review* 25, no. 1-2 (2004), 47.

[26] Commenting on the centrality of indexicality that is usually attached to Bazin's reading of the photographic image, Gunning argues that "while the importance of, as Bazin puts it, the absence of man remains an issue in need of continued exploration, I would rather emphasize the sense of a nearly inexhaustible visual richness to the photograph,

Curiously, the expression 'warts and all' does not clearly refer to Diderot's wart, even if, as Guido Isekenmeier points out, its etymology leads to an anticipation of Diderot's model[27]. Christine Ammer writes in *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* that the expression supposedly refers to Oliver's Cromwell's instructions to his portrait painter, Sir Peter Lely, to "remark all these roughness, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it."[28] The emphasis on the particular directs the writer and the painter to reveal the "warts", the details to verify and vivify the portrayal of life. For Kittler, photography plays an opposite role to Diderot's warts as it is a *technical* model for registering society. The photographic metaphor would be valid, he claims, for figures like Balzac, who compared his cycle of novels to the daguerreotype in the introduction to *The Human Comedy*; photography epitomizes the search after "objective, and consistent visual motifs". Technical imaging changes both the function and *the truth claim* of detail.[29]

The camera suggests to the viewer that it is not the artist's hand that is responsible for the details, but nature's own imprint, the same arbitrary touches Hegel was suspicious of. The details scattered throughout the text are thus considered *recordings* of a given reality, with the visual effect that brings to mind Barthes's claims about the photograph's testimony to *being there*. By 'noticing' details, almost by accident, the writer is like the camera, recording reality with all its warts and blemishes.

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combined with a sense of the photograph's lack of selection. The photograph appears to share the complexity of its subject, to capture all its details, even those we might not ordinarily notice." Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," 47.

[27] Guido Isekenmeier, "Visual Event Realism," 218.

[28] Christine Ammer, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 487.

[29] This point is elaborated in Kittler, *Optical Media,* 139.

'Inadvertent Little Gestures': The Case of Morelli

In the literary and pictorial models of representation we looked over, details testify to the particular and to the real. The way peripheral details turn into sites of meaning similarly sets apart the aesthetic-diagnostic practice of the Italian connoisseur Giovanni Morelli, carefully studied in Carlo Ginzburg's seminal essay *Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method*.[30] Morelli, a physician by training and expert in comparative anatomy, developed his system to detect and distinguish fake art from originals based on the details, which validated the true identity of the artist (and not of the *subject,* as in Diderot's wart). His methods call attention to the unremarkable parts of the body, like the shape of the ear or the fingernail, where he discovered the particular imprint of the artist's personality, an identity that made its mark by a singular detail. The fingernail, as we will see, is a curious recurring motif for accounts of the photographic and filmic detail.

Morelli is not claiming that these details are important for aesthetic appreciation (that is, as visual points of interest) but rather that they serve pragmatic reasons of telling the original from the fake. Even if they usually go unnoticed when we examine a painting, the ear lobes and fingernails are, in fact, potential clues for the connoisseur. As these fragments of the body are inexpressive parts of the human figure, Edgar Wind explains, the artist is likely to pay less attention to their execution; and imitators or plagiarists will probably focus on the more famous traits of the artist (copying a feature like the smile of Leonardo De Vinci's women figures).

[30] Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop*, No. 9 (Spring, 1980): 5-36. Ginzburg starts with Morelli to establish a methodology of clue based on looking at the margins, rather than the main and obvious theme: "Let us take a look at the method itself […] distinguishing copies from originals (though essential) is very hard. To do it, said Morelli, one should abandon the convention of concentrating on the most obvious characteristics of the paintings, for these could most easily be imitated […] Instead one should concentrate on minor details, especially those least significant in the style typical of the painter's own school: earlobes, fingernails, shapes of fingers and toes". Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 7.

These marginal details are useful for the assignment of identity, and moreover for feeling "the authentic *touch*, for which the name is merely an index."[31] Wind describes Wöfflin's approach in very similar terms: "[H]e was never satisfied with tracing a master's style in the design of a human figure or head. 'In the drawing of a mere nostril', he wrote defiantly, 'the essentials of style should be recognized'. His ideal was what he called 'an art history of the smallest particles.'"[32] Morelli, however, puts the emphasis on the identification of the creative personality, established by looking at the *incidental* imprints of style. The touche—the tactile metaphor for the artist's unmistakable presence — is detectible precisely in the details that are executed with little attention.[33]

As Morelli's methods imply, the fine details can lay bare the painter's touch in the more *accidental* areas of the painting. Thus the connoisseur, Wind argues, knows how to point to the particular traits that reveal authenticity as new points of reference.[34] Morelli's details are peripheral on several levels: they are small, not representative of any school of painting or style, and even, with the example of fingernails, simply outrageous. The tiny parts of the painting however prove to be valuable only given the unintentionality, the lack of awareness, which Morelli attributes to the process of their creation. The peculiarities located at the margins of the body are signs which the artist makes use of without noticing. The details are thus particular not by signifying a form of style,

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[31] Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 22. Morelli's attention to the mark of the artist's hand is evident in preferring sketches over paintings, the former being those in which "the master's hand vibrates and flickers," as Wind puts it.

[32] Wind points to the fact that while Wöfflin used the small detail for putting together a larger structure, Morelli cherished the 'discovered' fragment as the trace of the original. Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 39. See Hubert Damisch, "The Part and the Whole," *Art in Translation,* Volume 4, Issue 2 (2012): 245–266 for a discussion of Morelli and Wöfflin.

[33] Ginzburg's study locates the origin of these diagnostic practices in the work of the Italian physician Giulio Mancini, who wrote that "whether the hand of the master can be detected, especially where it would take much effort to sustain the imitation, as in hair, beards or eyes. And these parts of a painting are like strokes of the pen and flourishes in handwriting, which need the master's sure and resolute touch." Qtd. in Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 18.

[34] Wind, *Art and Anarchy,* 32.

but on the contrary, they stem from the more instinctive or inadvertent parts of the practice of painting. What I take to be most productive in Morelli's interest in details is that these minute traces of individual style are where the artist leaves a mark *unintentionally,* by the mere force of habit. What is ordinarily the least significant parts of the body, and even its abject parts, is made, by looking differently at details, into the starting point of a new form of attention to images, one that starts from the accidental marks.

The 'Morelli method' gained new interest with Wind's attention to his work, suggesting it as an example of an aesthetic appreciation of the detail *along* with the whole. Ginzburg however argues that Morelli was not exactly tackling aesthetic issues, and that his methodology is closer to philology.[35] Even so, the meeting point of aesthetic aspirations with what Ginzburg terms the 'diagnostic' motivations og Morelli's methods is possible, and they are not mutually exclusive. As the base for an aesthetic paradigm of details, Morelli calls to include the incidental parts within our appreciation of the work as a whole. Wind poses valuable insights on this exact matter:

> Morelli's books look different from those of any other writer on art. They are sprinkled with illustrations of fingers and ears, careful records of the characteristic trifles by which an artist gives himself a way, as a criminal might be spotted by a fingerprint […] To some of Morelli's critics it has seemed odd 'that personality should be found where personal effort is weakest.' But on this point modern psychology would certainly support Morelli: our inadvertent little gestures reveal our character far more authentically than any formal posture that we may carefully prepare.[36]

Wind proposes a helpful insight on the suggestive nature of our *unconscious* gestures, and Ginzburg affirms this reading when he compares Morelli's interpretative model, and its emphasis on trivial details as revealing sites, to the methods of both Sherlock Holmes and Freud. Ginzburg elaborately

[35] Ginzburg examines these methodologies in relation to broader epistemological models, especially in the field of scientific generalization doctrines and the role of the particular in them. "Reality is opaque", he writes, "but there are certain points—clues, signs—which allow us to decipher it." Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 27.

[36] Wind, *Art and Anarchy,* 38.

develops the similarities between the three on the ground of the affinity between the symptom and the clue: "In all three cases tiny details provide the key to a deeper reality, inaccessible by other methods. These details may be symptoms, for Freud, or clues, for Holmes, or features of paintings, for Morelli."[37] The method is one of turning from the obvious, central themes and dwelling, instead, in what we could describe as unintentional signs (symptoms, or clues).

The detective's eye for details, exemplified in Holmes's methods, is typical of the modern world in which forces of everyday life leave an imprint on people, as Gunning observes; Conan Doyle modeled Holmes on his professor of medicine Dr. Joesph Bell, who could not only diagnose diseases from symptoms but read a person's background by means of "their little trivial impressions", the details of body, gait, and clothing.[38] To single out one key methodological principle, I would claim that the details speak truth in a way that the general and obvious theme cannot, as they refer to parts that are uniquely revealing given the lack of awareness in their execution. These parts can be the particulars of handwriting, the shape of an ear, or a bodily gesture. We might compare this principle of discovery based on the accidental to what Freud calls *symptomatic acts*, the gestures that people perform "automatically, unconsciously, without attending to them, or as if in a moment of distraction" (I analyze these gestures in depth in Chapter 3).[39] Freud himself notes

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[37] Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 11.

[38] Tom Gunning. "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15-45. According to Gunning, the photograph was "the imprint of the indivial body it images," and with the rise of both criminology and detective fiction, it could also be used a guarantor of identity or a means of establishing guilt or innocence. Within systems of power and authority, the circulatory possibilities of photography could also play a regulatory role. See Gunning, *Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema*, 19. Put differently, the photographic image becomes *information*. The meeting point of the aesthetic paradigms of photographic details and political violence is similarly pointed out in Benjamin's analysis of August Sander's portraits: "sudden shifts of power such as are now overdue in our society can make the ability to read facial types a matter of vital importance. […] Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual." Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography", in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 287.

[39] Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 68.

on Morelli's technique in his essay *The Moses of Michelangelo* (1914) by describing its diversion of attention from "the general impression and main features of a picture […] by laying stress on the significance of minor details"[40]. By this we can compare the Morelli method to psychoanalysis, as Ginzburg does, as they share an approach that regards the unnoticed features as productive sites of meaning. These previously overlooked elements are notably the ones we pay little attention to, that is, this methodology treats the *accidental* details as portals for meaning, symptomatic of the tendencies concealed by our 'formal posture'. On the visual register, this entails looking differently at parts that appear of little significance, those that could just as well be accidents, in what is essentially the conversion of our usual concepts of being invested in an image. These areas, in a methodology centered around details, are the objects of the critic's attention.

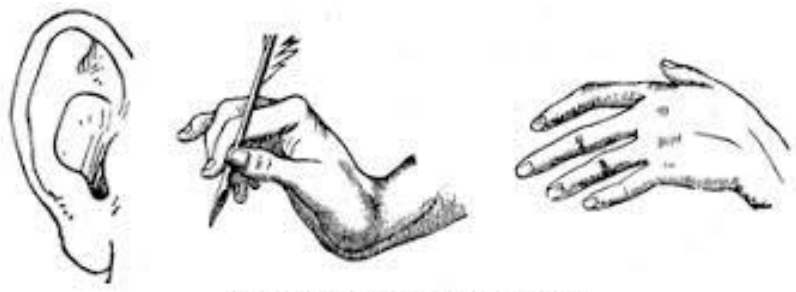

Figure 1.1 Typical ear and hands of Botticelli (Woodcut illustrations from Giovanni Morelli)

The example of Morelli sets forth the pragmatic version of diagnostic practices, not necessarily one of aesthetic aspirations. The art historian Aby Warburg is arguably an alternative figure who aspired to bridge the aesthetic and the diagnostic by tying particular graphic formulations to the general strokes of cultural memory. As early as his dissertation Warburg exhibits his particular (and at times peculiar) methods, which typically begin with a series of isolated details; in the case of his dissertation, the plasticity of movement he finds in hair blowing in the wind, fluttering garments,

[40] Qtd. in Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 10.

folds and drapes, in which he attempted to trace the *signs* of Antiquity in the works of later Florentine masters, who sought to capture "the body striding in motion". The truly fine details—the way the wind plays with the edges of hair and garments— are the places to reveal the effect an external force of movement has on images of bodies in rest. Warburg's favored axiom, cited in his notes for his 1925 seminar in Hamburg, "The good Lord dwells in the detail" (*der liebe Gott stecktim Detail*), shows that for Warburg and Morelli certain truths are hidden in the details, or rather revealed in them.[41]

Elaborating on the connection between Warburg and Morelli in the notes to his essay, Ginzburg writes of the former's interest in the flowing robes of Florentine paintings that are made to be the *small yet significant clues* to more general phenomena.[42] Warburg's details do aspire to testify to general cultural paradigm shifts, and he was not invested in identification for its own sake as Morelli was, and in fact disapproved of his methods, a fact which Didi-Huberman emphasizes: "[Warburg] liked to tease the 'connoisseurs' and 'attributionists'", Morelli among them, "for being 'hero worshipers' inspired merely by the 'temperament of a gourmand.'"[43] Even if the two figures similarly direct our attention to peripheral details, they do so for different reasons. One of Warburg's main points of interest were details of moving bodies, that he treated as sites for understanding the artists' motivations and inspirations. Alternatively, we might say that Warburg's interests lie in the way details reflect the way an image is formed. The two are looking at the same things, but for different purposes.

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[41] Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms, Aby Warburg's History of Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 324. Curiously, this phrase appears in Warburg's notes next to a formula concerned with not knowing: "we are seeking to find our own ignorance, and where we find it, we fight it". Qtd. in Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 324. As Didi-Huberman asks, "why not simply be satisfies with *knowing*, as all scholars are supposed to be?" Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 324.

[42] Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 35.

[43] Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image,* 202.

Warburg's discoveries focus on particular gestures and expressions that speak to the sympathy between Antique imagery and later pictorial representation of bodies. These parts of the image work by means of intensification, and the imperative is one of displacement—something (movement, or personality) appears explicitly only in the marginal:

> It is possible to trace, step by step, how the artist and their advisers recognized "the antique" as a model that demanded an intensification of outward movement and how they turned to antique sources whenever accessory forms – those of garments and hair – were to be represented in motion.[44]

Warburg will later publish his studies of "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie" and "Flemish Art and the Florentine Early Renaissance", devoted to the *living art* of portraiture, this time figures and faces without any obvious gestural expressivity. With this study Warburg turns, according to Philippe-Alain Michaud, from bodies agitated by an external force (the wind) to bodies animated from within, in other words, personalities. In such living art he recognized the affirmation of the patron's wish to be *present* in the image.[45] When the details of the human face are the stamp of the living in the represented body, they are traceable to actual Florentine models.

In his studies of portraiture Warburg moves to an engagement with *identifying* details, which indicate the psychical presence of an actual subject (and sketch a slightly different model of the detail as clue). The tendency to highlight identifying features is already detectible in the study of Botticelli, where Warburg noted that the lower lip of the nymph Flora "droops very slightly" and this detail leads him to presume the presence of an actual model; he similarly notes in later projects on the marks of Lorenzo de' Medici's "flattened nose' and its features of a "bulbous, drooping

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[44] Aby Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring*: An Examination of Concepts of Antiquity in the Italian Early Renaissance," *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 89.

[45] See Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Florence II: The Painted Space," in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 93-147. Photographs of artworks were important for the historian's method in this context, and allow unprecedented methods of study that move the art of interpretation forward. These discoveries are especially notable in the comparative aspects of Warburg's later work, which I do not address here.

tip."[46].Warburg makes such accidental features into the key for tracing the original life line of portraits, in a move that is contrary to Hegel's views on the portrait; in Warburg it is necessarily *one* human life, and the natural distinctive features, that speak to the subject's personality and persona.

Warburg's final incomplete project, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, maps his methodology of detail on the layout of image fragments, visually tracing the survival of the *pathos formulas*, the gestures of antiquity. Created between the years 1924-1929, the atlas brings together a variety of objects: reproductions, clippings from newspapers, photographs, and ads.[47] Warburg initially made use of his panels for the background stage in his lecture, where they could show the "migration" (*Wanderung*) of symbols, motifs, figures, and gestures. Sigrid Weigel speaks of the *Mnemosyne* project in terms of a *projection* of Warburg's methodology into a spatial constellation, the plates effectively constructing a common space for thinking about images.[48] The Atlas is an instrument for experimenting with the study of multiple details, in which the internal movement of thought parallels the composition of still images and the gathering of detail into a new, *moving* whole.

As a tool for the study of image fragments, Warburg's work on the Atlas demonstrates the detail's power as an animating force within images and amongst them. By isolating parts of images and placing them side by side, we can move within one singular artwork and also explore affinities between different forms of representations; with Warburg's practice, details also allow the viewer to move through time.

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[46] Qtd. in Michaud, 116. On the implications of pictorial figures copied from the living and the dead, see Michuad, Florence II: The Painted Space", 116-137.

[47] Warburg's *Mnemosyne* project is made up of approximately one thousand images pinned over seventy-nine panels covered in black fabric. The *Mnemosyne-Atlas* was initially designed as a three-volume publication, one volume with images and two volumes of text. In the Vienna exhibition of 1993, the plates of his picture-atlas were displayed on a full exhibition scale for the first time. See Sigrid Weigel, "Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy: The System Figure in Warburg's Mnemosyne Project Within the History of Cartographic and Encyclopedic Knowledge," *Images Re-vues Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art* 4 (2013): 1-20.

[48] Weigel, "Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy," 4.

Questions of Scale, or The Expanding Detail

When shifting our attention to details, the discourse around them often evokes the magnification of the small. The shift in scale and the sudden expansion is not entirely metaphorical. At times the detail can lead to an experience of disorientation, as if getting too close to the image leads to losing our focus, and losing our grasp of the big picture.

To speak of our perception of details in terms of scale would mean that we are in proximity to the image, in contact with its texture almost. In a different constellation, this proximity can also make a familiar object strange, and reveal unknown aspects of everyday materials. Both of these moments—intimacy, and defamiliarization—have to do with the affective marks of the detail, that move between pleasure, fascination, horror or discomfort. The isolation of one detail, the part that takes over the entire picture, is of emotional significance. Feeling magnifies the detail, which effects the viewer in contradictory ways.

One way to understand the emotive response that goes along with this shift of attention is by closely examining the *perceptual* experience of the expansion of the part. A revealing moment appears in Eisenstein's late text, "History of the Close-Up,"[49] where his experience of an object in front of him destabilizes our possible distinctions between part and whole and foreground and background, Steimatsky remarks.[50] Eisenstein notes on the impression of being close to a detail as he evokes the image of a branch of lilac, in what reads as part hallucination and part memory.[51] Writing on the principle of close up in this sudden visual 'emergence', he locates the technique's

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[49] Sergei Eisenstein, "The History of the Close-Up," *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1995), 461-478.

[50] Steimatsky, *The Face on Film,* 48.

[51] In the fragment "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together" (1929) Benjamin relatedly writes of "the mysterious power of memory—the power to generate nearness. A room we inhabit whose walls are *closer* to us than to a visitor." Walter Benjamin, "The Great Art of Making Things Seem Closer Together," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 Part 1*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2005), 248.

predecessors in the history of pictorial representation, in works which were able to achieve the effect of an individual element that gradually moves *forward*, from "the general make up and into the foreground"; the tendency culminated in El Greco's paintings, where some of the elements approach the end of canvas, partly cut by the edge.[52] Eisenstein is not simply pointing to the close up's effectiveness in making the object larger, namely perceptually closer, but rather observing the peculiar mixture of foreground and background in the event of the close up, and how it is both perception and *emotion* that transform background details into near objects of the foreground.[53] He explains this phenomenon by eluding to Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Sphinx* (1846),[54] that takes place during the cholera epidemic in New York. The narrator's fear of impending death makes him believe, in error yet with utter conviction, that a tiny insect is, in fact, a massive monster moving towards him.[55] The detail's expansion in the story testifies to the viewer's participation in the image, that goes hand in hand with affective intensity.

The monster of Poe's tale, one "of hideous conformation", appears in narrator's view of the distant hills as it gradually makes way from the head of the mountain to the forest bellow, in an embodiment of Eisenstein's vivid description of the detail *moving* to the foreground of the image. Poe certainly emphasizes the impact of scale in this story, especially when the narrator tries to

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[52] Eisenstein, "The History of the Close-Up," 461-462.

[53] Kracauer considered magnification, and the renewed attention to what is normally left unseen, as elements made possible by the close up: "the many material phenomena which elude observation under normal circumstances can be divided into three groups. The first includes objects too small to be readily noticed or even perceived by the naked eye and objects so big that they will not be fully taken in either […] The small is conveyed in the form of close-ups." Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*: *The Redemption of Psychical Reality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47.

[54] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Sphinx," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas O. Mabbot (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), III, 1245-1251.

[55] The insect Eisenstein refers to in Poe's story is "a little cricket crawling upon the pane." Eisenstein, "The History of the Close-Up," 462. The original story actually features a death head moth. Curiously, Eisenstein later turns to describe Poe's influence on his compositions in *Que Viva Mexico!* (1931), and particularly on those featuring skulls, alluding to the pattern of the said moth's wings.

estimate the size of the creature: "by comparison with the diameter of the large trees near which it passed — the few giants of the forest which had escaped the fury of the land-slide —I concluded it to be far larger than any ship of the line in existence."[56] The approximation of scale and distance is set against the tone of the narrator's host, who insists on the human tendency to overestimate or undervalue an object, and the mistaken assumptions of the object's proximity that follow. When the narrator ultimately matches the features of the monster's appearance with an insect from a volume of Natural History, he affirms the host's hypothesis, and they come to realize that the monster was neither large, nor distant, but simply the insect placed right next to him, the death-head moth, magnified by his fear.

The steady progress of the monster in the protagonist's hallucination fits Poe's depiction of the spread of Cholera, and the steady increase of threat: "as the fatality increased, we learned to expect daily the loss of some friend. At length we trembled at the approach of every messenger. The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death." The narrator's fear of death rendered the small gigantic by using the death head pattern, visually prominent in both the fictional monster and the insect. One of the scenes from Buñuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) draws on the striking visual features of this same creature: with a series of dissolves, the first shot of the tiny insect gradually swells, effectively expressing the proximity to the detail by means of scale; finally, an extreme close up of the moth's death mask texture fills the frame.[57]

The host concludes his visitor's perceptual mistake by saying that the creature "is by no

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[56] Poe, "The Sphinx," 1248.

[57] The death head pattern is juxtaposed with the face of the man that appears to wipe his mouth away, leaving a blank space on the bottom of his face; the woman, agitated, applies lipstick only to witness her missing armpit hair placed on the man's mouth. The moth is not only the symbol for impending danger, but signifies what James Lastra calls "erotically interchangeable parts." James Lastra, "Buñuel, Bataille, and Buster, or, the Surrealist Life of Things", *Critical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2009): 34. As James Ramey remarks in this context, moths can be indicators of gender ambiguity. See James Ramey, "Baroque Buñuel: The Hidden Culteranismo in Un Chien Andalou," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 93.4 (2016): 575–606.

means so large or so distant as you imagined it […] I find it to be about the sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length, and also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye."[58]

The narrator in Poe's tale had thus *overvalued* the role of the creature, and his feelings made the small enormous by turning the insect's proximity into distance. In such a reversal the object becomes effective *emotionally*, not based on its actual size or location, but in relation to its impact on the viewer, and the significance it carries. By the power of fear, the small detail in Poe's tale is displaced into a different constellation while generating a new image. This is how this particular detail expands; not necessarily by the literal magnification of the part (namely, the mechanism of the close-up) but by the power of its emotional mark, which gives the impression of substance to what is actually small, while blurring this very distinction.

[58] Poe, "The Sphinx," 1250-1251.

Figure 1.2 Still from *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel, 1929)

All these aspects come together in Barthes's photographic details, specifically in his concept of *punctum*. These details, which are the workings of both attention and pain, effectively pierce the viewer (as though coming out of the image). The emotional effect partially explains the paradox of *punctum*, the part of the photograph that has the power to expand, and take over the viewer.[59] This effect occurs when looking at a photograph makes one detail "fill the whole picture." In the portrait of Andy Warhol by Duane Michals (1958) for example, Warhol covers his face with his hands; Barthes singles out not the gesture but Warhol's fingernails, the "slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails, at once soft and hard-edged."[60] The fingernails are facts of corporeal reality, that fill the picture given that the *viewer's* attention is for some reason directed to them, making them into the trivial part that overcomes the whole.

The *punctum* is in fact often a *postponed* detail, categorically different from the *studium*, the type of details that accentuate and promote meaning. The *punctum* is *one* detail that touches the viewer

[59] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 45.

[60] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 45.

from within that whole and instantly makes them feel: "occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a 'detail' attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eye with a higher value."[61] The *punctum* draws the eye by virtue of its prickliness. Against the mild effect of *studium*, the eccentric detail takes hold of the viewer, and the erotization of the image is definitely at play when Barthes describes it by the metaphors of "sting, speck, cut, little hole". The emotional turbulence occurs accidentally, an unforeseen event produced on top of what is seen in 'plain sight', and in Michael Fried's formulation the pure artifact of the encounter of the particular beholder and the photograph.[62]

Warhol's picture unsettles the very idea of a portrait: the face is obscured, and the absurd parts of the body are to replace it. By this gesture of concealment, the fingernails are endowed with an eccentric expressivity, that originally takes place in the human face. In his explorations of photographic and filmic details, Barthes emphasizes these peripheral parts of the body, particularly hair and nails, partly indebted to Georges Bataille's essay "The Big Toe" (1929), published in the surrealist journal *Documents* along with Jacques-André Boiffard's series of 'Big Toes' photographs, enlarged to cover a full page.[63] Barthes notes on Bataille's "Big Toe" in passing in his essay *The Third Meaning* as situating "one of the possible regions of [third] meaning."[64]

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[61] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 42.

[62] Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 546.

[63] Georges Bataille, "Gros orteil," *Documents* I/6, 1929, 298-299. Bataille ordered the photos from Boiffard; interestingly, he does not reflect on the role of these photographs, but they are simply *inserted*, Ines Lindner writes, "as playing cards are tossed onto a table." Ines Lindner, "Picture Policies in *Documents*: Visual Display and Epistemic Practices", *Intermédialités/Intermediality* 15 (2010): 43.

[64] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 60.

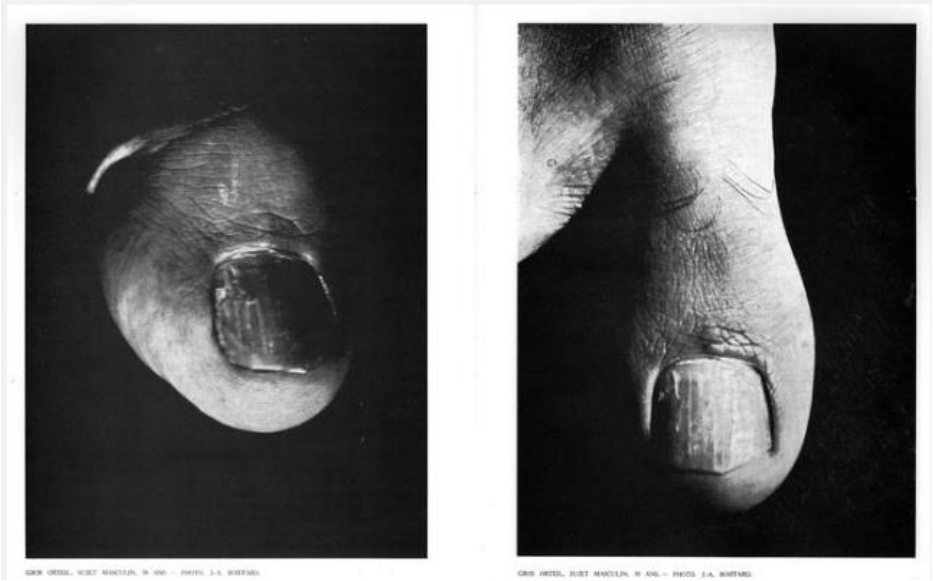

Figure 1.3 Jacques-André Boiffard, Photographs of toes to illustrate Georges Bataille's article "Le Gros Orteil" in *Documents* 6, 1929

Bataille states in his essay that "the big toe is the most human part of the human body", the rarely noticed part that nonetheless sets the human apart from animal ancestors. On the aesthetic claim that Bataille is making Adam Lowenstein writes that "the big toe's often grotesque and hilariously absurd appearance, its absolute necessity for standing upright coupled with its inevitable filthiness and embarrassing inelegance, captures for Bataille the truth of the body that humankind so often wishes to shield itself from."[65] Our visceral response to Boiffard's photographs of human toes, the "hideously cadaverous and at the same time loud and proud appearance of the big toe,"[66] oscillates between disgust and visual pleasure, and its strange appeal to the eye is based on this affective play, similar to that of Julia Kristeva's concept of abject as theorized in her *Powers of Horror.*[67] Boiffard's images isolate the toe from the rest of the body in a conscious fetishistic gesture,

[65] Adam Lowenstein, "The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital Sweet Hereafter," *Cinema Journal*, 46, Number 3 (Spring 2007): 65.

[66] Georges Bataille, "The Big Toe," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 23.

[67] The aptness of Kristeva's concept of abject is especially apparent when Bataille writes that "Man's secret horror of his foot is one of the explanations for the tendency to conceal its length and form as much as possible." Georges Bataille, *The Big Toe* (1929), trans. by Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings,*

to occupy the full length of the page. The toe takes over the frame with uncomfortable intimacy. Barthes credits Bataille's "Big Toe" as a possible influence, but the details of photography and film that interest me here must be distinguished from the surrealist treatment of the fragmented body. While it is practically impossible to speak of a whole for Boiffard's toes, Barthes prickly details are effective as *part of the picture*, indicative of the emotional principle of visual expansion perfected in Poe's story.

The *punctum* does not treat details as simply byproducts of the photographic process, produced by the camera's capturing of the "chance events" neither controlled nor anticipated by the photographer; Barthes is more interested in the tactile traces of the detail, expressed by the *punctum*'s touching, or pricking, of the viewer. The *punctum* is first and foremost the result of one act of looking, and is never selected or willed for; as with Morelli's details, it escapes intentionality all together, both of the photographer and the spectator: "hence the detail that interests me is not, or at least not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful."[68] The details that do *not* 'prick' the viewer are precisely the ones that efficiently create the more 'general' meaning.[69] Whatever any particular photograph contains that engages a particular viewer makes the photograph in question *singularly* arresting to her. "He or she who glimpses, *desires*, is wounded," Didi-Huberman wrote

1927-1939 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 21. The photographs, Lowenstein argues, "reveal all of those bodily imperfections that Bataille associates with humiliation, absurdity, and the cadaverous" yet a strong fascination is at play, that revels the absurd detail in all "its stunning capacity to unmask the human body surprisingly and truthfully, to see ourselves in a shocking new light." Lowenstein, "The Surrealism of the Photographic Image," 66.

[68] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 47.

[69] In his notes on an exhibition of 'shock-photos,' intended to stir the viewers, Barthes comments on the prominence of the viewer's reception in understanding what these photographs are. The photographer of these *intentionally* shocking objects, he argues, is trying to replace the viewer and program affect into their response; reception, however, is something very different, and none of these photos actually 'touch us'. See Roland Barthes, "Shock Photos", in *The Eiffel Tower, and Other Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 71-75.

elsewhere of this play of the image: desire is part of the game.[70] By giving rise to the emotional response, be it fascination, agitation or excitement, the *punctum* becomes the point of contact between viewer and image (and between the reader and Barthes's text).

Barthes's first step towards a distinct category of the filmic detail takes place in his analysis of the stilled image extracted from movement in *The Third Meaning* (his preference for stilled details is important for, and somewhat transformed in *Lover's Discourse,* which I explore in depth in the next section). The film still is an encounter with the moving image that produces sites of *obtuse meaning,* the enigmatic, and inexplicable quality of areas in the frame. The term "meaning" is misleading, since Barthes points precisely to elements in films which do *not* participate in the creation of narrative or thematic significance. These 'punctual' details of film are inevitably medium specific: while the obtuse medium is exclusively of the filmic, the *punctum* is "the point of inscription of the photographic"[71], the mark of contingency and ephemerality typical of photography.[72]

With the obtuse meaning, set in frames from Eisenstein films, Barthes evokes the shift of authorial intention that is so often tied to the detail, as he directs our attention to areas that escape the central themes of each frame (even though one might argue, following Yuri Tsivian, that Eisenstein carefully planned the beard's strange visual presence).[73] Another familiar trope reenacted

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[70] Georges Didi-Huberman, "Glimpses: Between Appearance and Disappearance." *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 7.1 (2016): 109–24.

[71] Schor argues that to each artistic medium there corresponds a particular use, or status of the detail. Not only, for example, is the obtuse meaning a specifically filmic detail, it is the very locus of the emergence of the filmic. Similarly, the punctum is the photographic detail per excellence. Schor, *Reading in Detail,* 110.

[72] These 'punctual' details can appear elsewhere, for example in a piece of handwriting. Barthes writes in his notes on the art of Cy Twombly: "there are also other opaque and insignificant elements—or rather elements of a different significance—that capture our attention and what can already be called our desire: the nervous turn of the letters, the flow of the ink, the cast of the strokes, a whole series of accidents that are not necessary for the functioning of the graphic code." Roland Barthes, "Non Multa Sed Multum," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, ed. Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002), 96.

[73] See Yuri Tsivian, "What is Wrong with the Beard: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible as an Eccentric Tragedy," *Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, 11 no. 2-3 (2001): 255–270.

here is the focus on the lifeless things that take part in the living body – hair, nails, clothing, and teeth. Such eccentric filmic details are not reducible to traditional modes of signification, which all fail to explain why we are held by the image by the force of its *erratic* meaning. Barthes does not convey exactly what is implied by this third meaning ("I cannot manage to describe, only to designate a location"), but he does point to the tiny events of which it is composed:

> [A] certain compactness of the courtiers' make-up, thick and insistent for the one, smooth and distinguished for the other; the former's 'stupid' nose, the latter's finely traced eyebrows, his lank blondness, his faded, pale complexion, the affected flatness of his hairstyle suggestive of a wig, the touching-up with chalky foundation talc, with face powder.[74]

By signaling the excessive in the image, these details expand beyond the "perpendicular of the narrative", to repeat Barthes's language. The obtuse meaning, or the *punctum* for that matter, sticks to the addendums to the body; and if the *punctum* can elicit "almost a kind of tenderness", the obtuse meaning similarly stirs emotion which is "never sticky, it is an emotion which simply designates what one loves, what one wants to defend."[75] The obtuse meaning exceeds any obvious meaning, the one that "comes to seek out" the viewer, and the lack of greater meaning only reinforces the detail's strange and sudden emergence. Such peculiar meaning is located, for example, in Ivan's beard from Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan The Terrible* I (1944)[76]; in another image, taken from *Ordinary Fascism* (Mikhail Romm, 1965, known in the United States in the title "Triumph over Violence", and mainly composed of archival footage depicting the rise and fall of fascism, especially Nazi Germany),

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[74] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning", in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 53.

[75]Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 43; "The Third Meaning", 59.

[76] Buñuel writes in "Variations on Adolphe Menjou's Mustache" that "it is often said that the eyes are the windows into the soul. A mustache like his can be as well." Luis Buñuel, "Variations on Adolphe Menjou's Mustache", in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 112.

Barthes finds it in Goering's thick nails and his cheap looking ring. [77] Indeed, Eisenstein does use the beard detail *eccentrically* (and Tsivian defines the genre of Ivan the Terrible as an 'eccentric tragedy'), which caught the attention of another critic, Orson Welles, who was both impressed and taken aback by what he termed "Eisenstein's uninhibited preoccupation with pictorial effect".[78]

The peculiar points of the image that obtuse meaning *sticks to* appear to be broken signs, signifiers without the signified, that occupy the realm of *significance* rather than signification. And significance, Barthes tells us in *Pleasure of the Text*, is "meaning insofar as it is sensually produced."[79] For example, in the still of a woman crying from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, the significance of the image arises unexpectedly in a location "somewhere in the region of her forehead." By pointing to a vague spatial reference, the language of the detail is suddenly made awkward: what room does the image even take in these descriptions? What both the *punctum* and the *obtuse meaning* make clear is that the rise of emotion is precisely what interrupts the conventional practice of signification in language, following Elena Oxman's trajectory.[80] The detail spreads out by the force of feeling, but our emotional state is an unstable ground for any critical practice, threatening to reduce meaning to nothing but subjective and idiosyncratic impressions. And indeed, "what else is there to say about

[77] The dirty fingernails are mentioned twice in *Camera Lucida*, both with Warhol's portrait cited above and in Brathes's remarks on André Kertész's portrait of the young Tzara. Barthes notices her hand resting on the door frame, "a large hand whose nails are anything but clean." Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 45.

[78] Tsivian quotes from Welles's 1945 review of *Ivan the Terrible*: "The Tsar's beard, for instance, cutting like a mighty sickle through the hammer blows of the drama, isn't nearly as entertaining to the audience as it was to the director." Yuri Tsivian, "What is Wrong with the Beard: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible as an Eccentric Tragedy," 266.

[79] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 61.

[80] See Elena Oxman. "Sensing the Image: Roland Barthes and the Affect of the Visual," *SubStance*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Issue 122 (2010): 71-90. Oxman argues that the immediacy of Barthes's moods and desires in his later writings, that celebrate the elements of the image that elude signification (the punctum of the photograph, the "obtuse meaning of the film) appear at first to contradict the "early Barthes" and his semiological texts. Oxman provides an insightful account of what links the 'early' Barthes with his later interests in image and affect: "Barthes's later writings must be viewed in the light of this critical practice of forgetting, and, what's more, as a critique of the scientific assumptions that had driven his early work." Oxman, "Sensing the Image", 72.

what one loves except, I love it?" Barthes asks elsewhere[81]; for details, then, the personal is both the starting point and the central challenge. How does one give value to an image that moves you without reducing it to personal pleasure? one possible answer would be—by means of progress: "I wanted to explore [photography] not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think."[82]Seeing and feeling therefore *lead* our observation of details.[83]

Emotional impact is one way to explain why the detail is consistently described by using the motif of expansion. Fernand Léger, however, gives the expanding aspect a literal meaning, and once again evokes the unexpected object of attention: the fingernail. Writing on the innovation of *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) and the plastic possibilities of the medium, Léger points to the "plastic event" that is beautiful by its own right. To exemplify this type of plastic beauty, Léger conducts an experiment in the form of a visual trick performed on a group of viewers:

> I filmed a woman's polished fingernail and blew it up a hundred times. I showed it. The surprised audience thought that they recognized a photograph of some planetary surface. I let them go on believing that, and after they had marveled at this planetary effect and were talking about it, I told them: '*It is the thumbnail of the lady next to me'*. They went off feeling angry.[84]

In his experiment, that resonates with the way Warhol's portrait is seen in *Camera Lucida*, the fingernail *actually* fills the frame beyond its modest size, drawing the viewer's focus to its texture. The little story 'proves', for Léger, that the object captured by the photograph is 'nothing', and what

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[81] Roland Barthes, *Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 286.

[82] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 21.

[83] And yet, while the punctum plays a vital role in the first half of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes abandons it when he deems it inadequate to his search after the essence of photography: "I had to grant that my pleasure was an imperfect mediator, and that subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognize the universal." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 70. Curiously, his solution is to "descend deeper into myself," which appears counterintuitive. Eventually, he concluded that the essence of photography has less to do with the ontology of the photograph, and is in fact inseparable from our point of view, with the grasp of affective intensity captured in the *punctum.*

[84] Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting* (New York, Viking Press, 1973), 48-49.

should count for aesthetic purposes is merely 'the effect'. The joke is, obviously, that the viewer participated in the genuine appreciation of something as ridiculous as a fingernail. The trick, carried out by blowing up the tiny object, is complex. Primarily, the change in scale allows access to what the viewer first perceived as the surface of remote planets; but what the fragment is actually doing is magnifying the materials of everyday life, and providing a new perspective, so to speak, on the ordinary. We are not seeing the 'planetary effect', but moving *closer* to the human body. The texture of the detail pierced by the photograph in Léger's experiment is not beyond this world, but is on the contrary the smallest and perhaps the most insignificant one could imagine, thus bringing together the familiar, or even the intimate, with the distant.

The small is made strange by enlargement and removal from context, stretched by the photographic process to give rise to the uncanny sensation of an image with no clear origin that the viewer is invited to explore: a new visual territory for the eye to travel on. By this the technê of photography reinvents the detail, from the grain of the fingernail to the surface of a star. Léger reveals technology to be fundamentally defamiliarizing by making the unjustified detail visually fascinating, even for a moment, before the trick is exposed. Lowenstein writes in similar terms about the Surrealist process of 'enlargement', focusing on parts of Bazin's *Ontology* essay that resonate with Léger's experiment, as in the following excerpt:

> Photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it. The Surrealists had an inkling of this when they looked to the photographic plate to provide them with their monstrosities and for this reason: the Surrealist does not consider his aesthetic purpose and the mechanical effect of the image on our imaginations as things apart.[85]

By exposing the materials of everyday life, the Surrealist photographer *disrupts* of the coherence of our world, always aware of "the unexpected detail that will release a marvelous and compelling

[85] Qtd. in Lowenstein, "The Surrealism of the Photographic Image," 61.

reality just beneath the banal surface of ordinary experience," as Peter Galassi writes of the early work of Henri-Cartier Bresson.[86] When the fingernail is recontextualized in the technical manipulation of the image, the change in size is, at the same time, a change in our own response to the image: the detail becomes landscape. What is enlarged is not only the body part, but, as Lowenstein emphasizes, the network of relations connecting the viewer and her world, which are suddenly expanded and opened.

A similar mechanism of magnification is often attributed to the close up, and aerial metaphors are similarly at work. Kracauer detects in the face "new and unsuspected formations of matter; skin textures are reminiscent of aerial photographs, eyes turn into lakes or volcanic craters,"[87] and Jean Epstein points to the topographies in miniature of the face: "the orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them away."[88] It is not simply that the details of the face take over the screen, enlarged to reveal emotional extremities in wrinkles and tics of the lip; the magnification referred to here is one of a new access to texture, that is, the tiny areas of the face in which the familiar and the peculiar become one. The cinema enables, in these examples, a type of perception that stands in contrast to the translucence of technological mediation in literary realism. Early film theorists rather point to an intimate experience of distance, that goes along with a defamiliarizing, or shocking effect. And particularly Epstein's view, Jennifer Wild shows, signals the overcoming of both physical and *psychical* distance from the object; technology can both mediate the experience of distance and *overcome* it.[89]

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[86] Peter Galassi, *Henri-Cartier Bresson: The Early Work* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987), 15.

[87] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 48.

[88] Jean Epstein, "Magnification," in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology: Volume I, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 235.

[89] See Jennifer Wild, "Distance Is [Im]material: Epstein Versus Etna," in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, eds. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 115-142. In Wild's account, Epstein's apparition of nearness, however far the image may be to the viewer (also taking into account the distance from

The cinematic image in these descriptions takes over the visual field not only by filling the screen but by seizing the viewer with a startling impact. This perceptual 'enlargement' that results in the displacement of ordinary meaning is compared by Louis Aragon in "On Décor" to the child's 'poetic' perception, that can transform the familiarity of ordinary objects: "poets without being artists, children sometimes fix their attention on an object to the point where their concentration makes it grow larger, grow so much it completely occupies their visual field, assumes a mysterious aspect and loses all relation to its purpose."[90] As Wild explains, Aragon sees these elements of mise en scène, particularly in Chaplin's films, as based on *inverted values*, that transform objects to 'living things' and resist the usual, circumscribed forms of meaning.[91] We might say that these objects spread out not simply by means of the close up, but by the *unexpected* spectatorial response, and its spontaneous or instinctive nature.[92]

Léger generally thinks of cinema in analogous terms: the abrupt shift of attention, with the power to make us see and *feel* what before has merely been noticed. Cinema's power lies in the possibility to *vivify* perception, to make the viewer see with more intensity, not by merely reproducing everyday life or 'imitating the movements of nature'.[93] Celebrating Abel Gance's *La*

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the screen), inverts Benjamin's later formulations of aura and distance, as in the following quote: "an auditorium of three hundred people groaned out loud upon seeing a kernel of wheat germinate on the screen." See Wild, "Distance Is [Im]material: Epstein Versus Etna," 120.

[90] Louis Aragon, "On Décor," in Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 166.

[91] See Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015). Wild shows that these objects and gestures then "elicited spectatorial shock that was uttered in the audience's expressive cries"—those of shock, thrill and also unfamiliarity in front of habits they did not understand. See Wild, *The Parisian Avant-garde in the Age of Cinema,* 211-214.

[92] Amad claims that Aragon's comments describe a model of spectatorship that entails "the liberation of sensuous correspondences between perceiver and perceived," that seem to be triggered "when the spectator's visual field is occupied […] to saturation point." Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive*: *Film*, *the Everyday*, *and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 252.

[93] Léger, *La Roue: Its Plastic Qualities*, in Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 272.

Roue (1923), Léger articulates the film's triumph by stating that it makes the viewer *see* and *move* with the personified machine. As this happens, the viewer will see the fragments of the locomotive as if for the first time: "his eye, his hand, his finger, *his fingernail*."[94] These fragments set the stage for a new type of *moving* image.

The Lover's Body, or Details in Motion

To briefly summarize, the expansion of the part calls for the language of affect, a semantic network epitomized in Barthes's *punctum*. The *punctum* is Barthes's most known detail; but in an earlier text, *A Lover's Discourse,* he turns to contemplate the way lovers speak, and the reader unexpectedly comes across a different type of detail: the amorous details of the lover's moving body.[95] The amorous detail has one distinctive feature that separates it from the prickly detail of photography: it moves. Absorbed in the lover's little gestures, we turn them into signs of our desire. These signs are what we use to speak of love. As the erotic fragment is *taken* from the body in motion, it brings us closer to questions exclusive to the filmic detail, especially in its fluctuation between animated and fixed form. In this context, details are a way for looking at desire as activated by images and particularly by details.

Barthes's treatise goes through love's figures of speech, attending to the amorous condition by fragmentation of its discourse. These bits of language are to be understood in correlation with "the body's gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose." As a result, the opening of desire, that is, falling in love, refers to the same animated parts of the body. Barthes describes the

[94] Léger, *La Roue: Its Plastic Qualities*, 273.

[95] The *figures* of speech, Barthes explains, are arranged alphabetically "to discourage the temptation of meaning"; for this purpose, it was necessary to choose "an *absolutely insignificant* order." Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 8.

impact this event has as one of *magnification*, and explains it by using photographic terms: "the body *which will be loved* is in advance selected and manipulated by the lens, subjected to a kind of zoom effect which magnifies it, brings it closer, and leads the subject to press his nose to the glass."[96] The effect is one of nearness that reflects the emotional stir.

The subtle bodily details are the first to draw this attention; throughout *Lover's Discourse* the reader encounters numerous lists of such details, citing "the voice, the line of the shoulders, the slenderness of the silhouette, the warmth of the hand, the curve of a smile."[97] What activates the sudden event of desiring the other? Barthes asks himself this question repeatedly, intrigued by the exact vantage point:

> Why is it that I desire so-and-so? Is it the whole of so-and-so I desire (a silhouette, a shape, a mood [un air])? And, in that case, what is it in this loved body which has the vocation of fetish to me? What perhaps incredibly tenuous portion—*what accident*? The way *a nail is cut*, a tooth broken slightly aslant, a lock of hair, a way of spreading the fingers while smoking?[98]

The first examples Barthes specifies—the way the nail is cut, the chipped tooth, the lock of hair—gesture to the visual displacement of the *punctum* and the *obtuse meaning*, that is able to distract the eye from the central theme (the face, for example) to the edges of the body, the limits of its exterior form; the fingernails are very much emblematic of this tendency. The fragment to conclude this list is not, however, of the same category; the way of spreading the fingers when smoking is part of the way we naturally move. At no point is beauty declared, yet the small gesticulations signal *gracefulness*.

The details of love are of extreme precision and specification, with all the mechanisms of the close up: notice that it is not the moving hand he is after, but the particular *spread of fingers*, carried out instinctively in the trivial act of holding a cigarette. This "incredibly tenuous portion" is set apart

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[96] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 136.

[97] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 191.

[98] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 20.

from the whole, and feeling directly responds to "this or that inflection", the fleeting *singular* detail (as opposed to saying: the *sum* of details captured my eye). What we notice rather is the parts we *isolate* from the ways in which the body moves. In this slight opening of fingers, something unusual occurs: for the first time, movement is introduced into Barthes's punctual details. Amorous details are by no means synonymous with the details from *The Third Meaning,* that appear in the single frame extracted from the flow of cinematic movement; this new detail is observed *in passing*. In this aesthetics of Eros, we often find, as Schor aptly puts it, that the erotic resides in the detail.[99] An analogous sentiment guides Barthes's remarks on the theatre in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*:

> The theater (the particularized scene) is the very site of what used to be called venusty, charm, comeliness of form, i.e., of Eros observed, illuminated (by Psyche and her lamp). Enough that a secondary, episodic character offer some reason to be desired (this reason can be perverse, not attached to beauty but to a detail of the body, to the texture of the voice, to a way of breathing, even to some clumsiness), for a whole performance to be saved.[100]

The fragments of the body on stage, namely its ways of being alive (or simply breathing) are *thresholds* for desire, not by providing us with any truths about this particular individual, or the human body in general; they are simply the sites attention attaches itself to. The bodily movements he points to are usually performed with a loose sense of awareness, in the manner of habit; the particularities of gesture stand out when they appear ignorant of the one observing them (yet they awaken desire as if they were shaped for us). Is the gesture of holding a cigarette a willed action? Certainly; yet something participates in these gestures that registers in excess, seemingly without evoking the will, that is, the *subject* behind the action.

These gestures are not, however, disconnected from the self entirely, but rather they casually

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[99] Schor, *Reading in Detail,* 115.

[100] Roland Barthes, "Eros and the Theatre," in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 83. Schor remarks that the detail of the theatre, taken from a "real body," should thus be separated from the filmic detail, which belongs to the realm of representation. In this chapter, I take a different approach. See Schor, *Reading in Detail,* 115-116.

participate in what we might call subjectivity. As they play with this ambiguity of chance and intention present in our bodily actions, these unique details can *radiate* the self, a term that I take from Merleau-Ponty, who writes in *Eye and Mind* that "I say of a thing that it is moved; but my body moves itself; my movement is self-moved. It is not ignorance of self, blind to itself; it radiates from a self."[101] Our spontaneous, most ordinary gestures, are nonetheless obscured to some extent, given that they are fleeting signs that blend into our experience of the ordinary.

Benjamin claims these bodily expressions are in fact made visible only by the intervention of the camera, and it is worth noting one of his examples, related again to the habitual act of smoking: we are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, Benjamin claims, "but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods."[102] The strange blending of intentionality and the instinctive or the automatic makes these acts especially photogenic, even if what they reveal exactly is far from clarified. We are definitely familiar with our own movements, but the exact level of awareness *behind* them remains, to the large part, unknown[103]. For Cavell the presence of the body on camera, particularly its fidgetiness or what he calls its "metaphysical restlessness", similarly reflects on subjectivity and self-knowledge, even if what the camera tells us about our body is indecisive: we

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[101] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 124.

[102] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 37. Benjamin argues that particular forms of experience are made visible by the camera's unveiling of the 'optical unconscious'.

[103] Bazin's reading of the actors' movements in De Sica's *Umberto D* similarly points to areas of loose awareness captured by the camera, as Italian New Realism "calls upon the actor to *be* before expressing himself." André Bazin, "*Umberto D:* A Great Work," in *What is Cinema?: Vol. 2,* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of California, Press, 2005), 65. For an insightful account of the affinity between Benjamin and Bazin on this particular point see Jordan Schonig, *Cinema's Motion Forms: Film Theory, the Digital Turn, and the Possibilities of Cinematic Movement.* PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2017.

might frame our relation to it either as obliviousness, or as a new mode of certainty.[104]

The camera's access to areas of expressivity that blur the distinctions between intentional and accidental events has led many commentators to join Benjamin and Barthes, and as Miriam Hansen puts it, "it is no coincidence that Benjamin's particular staging of the optical unconscious has invited comparison with Roland Barthes's notion of the 'punctum', the accidental mark or detail of the photograph."[105] Barthes's amorous details, however, are likewise derived from visual events that bear the impression of chance:

> There are subtle, evanescent trivialities which swiftly pass over the other's body: a brief (but excessive) way of parting the fingers, of spreading the legs, of moving the fleshy part of the lips in eating, of going about some very prosaic occupation, of making one's body utterly idiotic for an instant, to keep oneself in countenance […] The feature which touches me refers to a fragment of behavior, to the fugitive moment of an attitude, a posture, in short to a *scheme* (*schema* is the body in movement, in situation, in life).[106]

The brief yet excessive trivialities exemplify the sudden displacement of the viewer's attention: everything in the outside world (besides desire) is deemed irrelevant and pointless, yet everything in the other person, no matter how small, appears to overflow with significance. A close up. The amorous gaze makes details important, in contrast to their actual smallness and triviality; yet they are still, somehow, small. The act of falling in love, Ginzburg writes, means to overvalue the *tiny* ways in which the beloved is different from others.[107]

It is worth noting that the slight parting of fingers is already present in the opening image of *A Lover's Discourse*, the pictorial detail that appears on the cover of the French edition, a fact Schor uses

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[104] See Stanley Cavell, "What Photography Calls Thinking," in *Cavell on Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 130-131.

[105] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (Summer 2004): 39.

[106] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 191.

[107] See Ginzburg's discussion of similar forms of knowledge that rely on intuition and details in Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," 28.

to tie together image and text.[108] Before the book was published, Barthes asked his colleague Antoine Compagnon for an image for the cover and Compagnon sent in reply a reproduction of the painting from Andrea Del Verrocchio's workshop, *Tobias and the Angel*, from which Barthes *picked out a detail*.[109] The cover predicts the details that will later fill the text, zooming into the part of the angel's arm that is tenderly holding on to the hand of Tobias (the original cover was not reproduced in the English translation).

Looking at the magnified detail of the painting, we notice several things. The tactile element of the image captures the sense of a brief touch, the gentle caress or even more so, the featherlike gesture of tickling. It almost seems as if the fingers are slightly moving, or about to move (which makes the singular detail of this painting very different from the *punctum)*. Schor poses that this particular gesture emblemizes Barthes's aesthetic/erotic project, to which I would add that the relationship between viewer and image is exemplified in this cover image, in which the selection of detail is also the *creation* of one. Making a detail would then be selecting a fragment to be magnified, an act that reflects the viewer's own investment in the image. The small gesture is, in this case, the piercing detail of the painting, the one that grabs attention (and not exactly a marginal element of the image, given its locations at the center in terms of the visual field). To look at details, we learn, entails particular practices: to notice, to isolate, and to magnify. All this can sometimes make our

[108] In her analysis of this cover image, she emphasizes the letter implied by the spread of fingers, a V, in relation to what she terms "the erotic gap" in Barthes. See Schor, *Reading in Detail,* 113-115.

[109] See Roland Barthes, *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts by Roland Barthes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 346. Randolph Runyon cites the cover image and the motif of the hand in particular in *Fowles/Irving/Barthes: Canonical Variations on an Apocryphal Theme* (Ohio State University Press, 1981), 77.

object strange or new. Within the amorous realm, however, these fragments draw us closer, to examine the image in depth. And on top of everything, they make us feel.

Figure 1.4 Andrea Del Verrocchio, *Tobias and the Angel* (National Gallery, London, 1470-75)

Barthes writes that these trivial moments, the 'fragments of behavior' that fascinate us, are brief yet excessive: the *moving* punctual detail is a fleeting one, yet it exemplifies the agility of desire as an affective state. The ephemeral details of lover's body reflect some of Barthes's perceptions on the cinema, that are interwoven with his remarks on photography in *Camera Lucida*. Whereas the photograph is the scene where someone has posed in front of the camera, the cinema frames someone who has similarly passed in front of the camera, their pose immediately swept away by the continuous flow of images. When photography is often joined with fetish in their shared tendency to

immobilize, the filmic detail is, conversely, harder to fasten, as it belongs to what Christian Metz described as a stream of temporality where "nothing can be *kept,* nothing stopped."[110]

The details we love share their sense of unpredictability with the *punctum*. The latter obviously speaks to the event of being grasped by the detail, but in injuring terms of the cut, the wound, and the puncture. In the discourse of lovers, things are slightly different, and the simultaneity of pleasure and pain defines this visual event: "what fascinates, what ravishes me is the image of a body *in situation*. What excites me is an outline in action, *which pays no attention to me*."[111] Barthes speaks in terms of *Ravishment,* the "supposedly initial episode (though it may be reconstructed after the fact) during which the amorous subject is 'ravished' (captured and enchanted) by the image of the loved object" (in *Leaving the Movie Theatre* he similarly speaks of the lure of the film image in our "being confined" to it).[112] As a beholder, he is in passion, that is *passive,* and desire happens *to* him. The "this or that" in the image that grabs attention does so with immediacy and accuracy. The forces that simultaneously take over the viewer are the animated body and the turmoil of emotion; this is also one way to describe cinematic space and time.

The lover's position as beholder shares the paradox of attention Michael Fried describes in his *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot.* Only by negating the beholder's presence by the absence of the viewer the painting, Fried shows, can the location of the beholder and the enthrallment by the painting be secured.[113]The image therefore appears to pay no attention to the beholder. Cavell makes a similar observation on the movie spectator in *The World*

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[110] Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 83.

[111] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 193.

[112] Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," in *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 347.

[113] See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 103.

Viewed, in which the viewer is defined by being *mechanically absent* from the events unfolding on screen.[114] In Cavell this absence has both aesthetic and ethical implications. The viewer's absence from the projected images resonates well with Barthes's description of the erotic image, in which his absence is *reflected* as in a mirror. Absorbed in the tiny gestures, we thus consume the other *as* image.

The involuntary takes part in love as an *aesthetic* event, and falling in love is often articulated by contradictory terms of contingency and determination (importantly, this is also the visual paradox of the body on camera cited above). Robert Pippin reads this perplexing duality into the psychological complexity of love; those we love must be lovable in our understanding, yet we do not think of the erotic attachment as the product of any deliberate evaluation, one dependent on a list of worthy qualities. The amorous event is, therefore, not exactly something that happens to us, nor is it something we decide to do or feel.[115] Barthes addresses this complexity directly: "I never fall in love unless I have wanted to; […] yet the myth of 'love at first sight' is so powerful (something that falls over me, without my expecting it, without my wanting it, without my taking the least part in it) that we are astonished if we hear of someone's deciding to fall in love."[116]

We might say that this duality is best reflected in the instinctive gestures of the body, which are the result of free will even when they appear to be casual or unintentional. Schiller's philosophical essay *On Grace and Dignity* (1793) gathers these types of movements under the term grace, and asks to distinguish them from the appearance of beautiful objects. Schiller opens his essay with a myth:

> Greek fable portrays the goddess of beauty wearing a girdle that has the power to impart *grace* and love to the wearer. She is the divinity who has the *Graces* for companions. The Greeks still *maintained a distinction*, then, between grace, or the Graces and beauty, since they

[114] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 25.

[115] Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 15.

[116] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 190.

> attached attributes to them that do not apply to the goddess of beauty. All grace is beautiful, since the girdle of charm is *a possession* of the goddess of Cnidus; but not all beauty is graceful, because Venus remains as she is, even without the girdle.[117]

A question is posed by the Greek myth, namely what attributes endow the goddess of beauty with grace yet are distinguishable from her essential beauty, which is itself never changing; the answer is the girdle, the removable article that does not belong to the essence of Venus's beauty. Still, grace does not appear exclusively in the beautiful; the one who is not beautiful still can be graceful. Venus represents the ideal of beauty, but that which is graceful in her appearance has to do with something contingent: the way she moves. Schiller writes that "grace is a *movable* beauty, a beauty that can appear in a subject by chance and disappear in the same way."[118]

Schiller insists that natural beauty is formed solely by laws of *necessity*: "Well-coordinated limbs, flowing outlines, a pleasing complexion, delicate skin, a fine and independent bearing, a mellifluous voice, and so forth, are the advantages one owes simply to nature and good fortune."[119] Venus rises from the foam of the sea perfectly formed, to imply that each of her characteristics is completely determined by the concept of beauty. Grace is something else entirely, that appears in actions performed under the influence of freedom, that is human will, and are not exclusively the product of nature.

All of this leads Schiller to conclude that grace joins will and nature in the movements of the body that appear involuntary. In a parallel move we see in Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre,* we could say that natural grace is not an aspect of our movement that we can consciously try to create or

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[117] Friedrich Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity" in Jane Veronica Curran and Christophe Fricker, eds., *Schiller's On Grace and Dignity in its Cultural Context: Essays and a New Translation* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 123-124.

[118] Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 125.

[119] Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 127.

imitate.[120] Schiller's description of the hand's movements brings out this complexity in the finest way:

> In stretching out my arm to receive an object, I am fulfilling a purpose, and the movement I make is prescribed by the indented goal. But the path my arm takes to reach the object and the extent to which the rest of my body follows —how fast or slowly, and how much or how little effort I out into the movement, these exact calculations are not my concern at the moment, but are left up to my *natural* element.[121]

Even though grace is not granted to the subject by nature, the *how* of movement evokes the natural *and* the free determination of the will. This can help explain Schiller's definition of grace as "beauty of form under freedom's influence."[122] While beauty is natural, that is a predetermined and static concept, the "influence" of will lends our movements the quality of subjective intention, even if something in the appeal of movement still belongs, essentially, to nature. These gestures of the body appear involuntary despite being freely determined, and this paradox of the moving body allows them to appear both necessary and contingent.

Corresponding with Barthes's amorous details, grace appears natural, that is accidental, even when it stems from the subject's will (and we would not claim that such movements are performed *against* the will). Schiller emphasizes the role of nature in these graceful gestures to make clear that the subject must appear slightly unaware of their own grace. Schiller's concept helps us set apart the appeal of this particular form of bodily expression, that becomes the "release switch" of falling in love: gestures that do not necessarily stand out, and are often simply our way of inhabiting the world with our body, are those that exhibit free will by way of accidental movement.

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[120] See the anecdote of the boy who failed to recreate his original graceful gesture (that *accidentally* resembled the statue): "an invisible and inexplicable power like an iron net seemed to seize upon the spontaneity of his bearing, and after a year there was no trace of the charm that had so delighted those who knew him." Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," trans. Thomas G. Neumiller. *The Drama Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 1972): 25.

[121] Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 136, emphasis mine.

[122] Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 134.

Schiller attributes grace only to human locomotion, given that natural objects, including animals, have no part in the beauty of their movement (among them he mentions branches of a tree, the ripples of a stream, and the limbs of an animal).[123] With the movement observed in nature we cannot find any expression of freedom or will.[124] Thus grace is a *human* feature that belongs only to the realm of willful actions (when animals move, for example, Schiller claims that it is nature that speaks, never freedom).

Instances of graceful movement appear in the play of the eyes and mouth, the gait, or the posture of the body, insofar as it is performed freely (the gait in particular brings Jensen's *Gradiva* and her lifted heel to mind, a figure I explore in depth in Chapter 4). Schiller is well aware of the contradictory nature of claiming that gestures appear involuntary *and* willful, as he argues that we should look for it "in what happens unintentionally when intentional movements are carried out."[125] This last phrase is conceivably the key to what makes someone's bodily movements appealing to the eye; the paradox is a visual one, that must remain unsolved.

Schiller's concept of grace is separated from the beautiful on grounds of its instability: what is graceful can pass, it *essentially* passes. In a comparable move, Barthes is not asserting that the lover's beauty had captured his eye; he rather points to contingent movements, part of our *changeable* appearance (and ones opposed to static beauty). To illustrate this discrepancy Schiller compares grace to the mythical girdle of Venus mentioned above, the emblem of her appeal to the eye (yet not

[123] Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 126.

[124] Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement* actually refers to animals in relation to our aesthetic judgement, citing "the delicacy of animal formations of all sorts of species, which is unnecessary for their own use but as if selected for our own taste." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 222.

[125] Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 140.

the source of her beauty as such).[126] As the article that can possibly be removed from her body without altering her essential nature, grace is likewise nothing other than the beauty of movement, seeing as it is the only change which can occur without dissolving a subject's identity. All this makes movement into the fortuitous ornament of our appearance.

One possible challenge to this would be the sleeping body; when Barthes looks at his lover asleep, for example, something changes. With eyes that scan the body in rest, he observes everything in the face and body, but this time, *coldly*. All of a sudden, he has the power of the calm and attentive spectator, who can single out the particular parts especially fitting for this act of looking: "eyelashes, nails, roots of the hair, the *incomplete* objects."[127] Among the details that he gathers together, "toenails, thin eyebrows, thin lips, the luster of the eyes, a mole," he searches for the cause of his desire; the scrutinizing gaze puts different areas of the body in close up. An example worth mentioning in relation to Barthes's details is the experimental short film *Geography of the Body* (George Barker, Willard Maas, Marie Menken*,* 1943), similarly engaged with the fragmented body. Gunning reads the film's radical treatment of corporal details—not of one but of three bodies—as one that does not ask for the viewer to put together a coherent body but rather imagine a new whole, "like none we have ever known."[128] An even closer example is Warhol's film *Sleep* (1963), which places the lover's body at the center, and allows its 'incomplete objects' to be inspected carefully. Warhol's visual study reintroduces the body, now detached from the subject's waking mobility.

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[126] Schiller explains the myth by these principles: Venus can take off her belt for a moment and give it to Juno, but she can surrender her beauty only with her person: "without her girdle she is no longer the charming Venus; without beauty she is no longer Venus." Schiller, "On Grace and Dignity," 125.

[127] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 72.

[128] Tom Gunning, "The Desire and Pursuit of the Hole: Cinema's Obscure Object of Desire," in *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern,* eds. Shadi Baretech and Thomas Bartescherer (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 275.

Warhol's *Sleep* records the lover, poet John Giorno, sleeping nude for almost five and a half hours, filmed from varying angles and in slight slow motion[129]. According to Giorno, "Andy got around homophobia by making the movie *Sleep* into an abstract painting: the body of a man as a field of light and shadow."[130] As with Warhol's most notorious film, *Empire*, the film is often perceived merely as a formalist exploration of boredom. Consider, for example, the comments made by A. R. Warwick: "these are not films to be watched, but endured […] the cultural cachet of watching [them] comes from one's ability to sit through the entire screening, to endure the inevitable tedium of watching a virtually unchanging image for hours at a time."[131] Against this reductive tendency, Justin Remes suggests that Warhol also plays with conventions of cinematic reception by inviting distracted glances rather than focused gazes.[132] Warhol's *Sleep,* then, is not necessarily a film to be watched or *endured* from beginning to end. In a 1963 interview Warhol described the (then-untitled) *Sleep*: "it's a movie where you can come in at any time. And you can walk around and dance and sing. It just starts, you know, like when people call up and say 'What time does the movie start?' you can just say 'Any time.'"[133] A few years later, Warhol promotes this dynamic reception again:

> my first films using the stationary objects were also made to help the audiences get more acquainted with themselves. You could do more things watching my movies than with other

[129] *Sleep* is not a film in 'real time', even if this idea might be part of its legend; some shots are repeated. Warhol also changed the projection speed from twenty-four to sixteen frames per second. See Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol Films and Paintings: The Factory Years* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 1991), 80–84.

[130] John Giorno*, You Got to Burn to Shine: New and Selected Writings* (New York: High Risk Books, 1994), 133. Giorno declares his love for sleeping and writes: "I love to sleep to this day. I want to stay asleep for as long as I can. I go down deep and stay there. Down deep into the underworld relishing the opiates of delusion. Of my many luxuries, sleep is the luxury I love best. The most rewarding! The ignorance of the god worlds, resting in the lower realms." *You Got to Burn to Shine*, 163-164.

[131] A. R. Warwick, "Spending Time/Wasting Time: In Praise of Boredom and Confusion (Part I)," *Artwrit* 7 (Summer 2011): www.artwrit.com/article/spending-time-wasting-time/. Qtd. in Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (Chichester, England: Columbia University Press, 2015), 37.

[132] Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures*, 32.

[133] Qtd. in in Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures*, 37.

> kinds of movies: you could eat and drink and smoke and cough and look away and then look back and they'd still be there.[134]

Barthes's gaze at the sleeping lover is reflected in the ways one can watch Warhol's film, engaged in active *and* passive observation, detachment and intimacy. The experience of duration can immerse the viewer in "the very texture of the image", as Steimatsky writes[135]: the lumpy texture of Giorno's skin, his body hair, the precise details of the curve of his nose. With distracted, fragmentary viewing in particular, our freedom to drift in and out of focus still allows for certain parts of the body to grab attention momentarily.

Showing "nothing but a man sleeping", as Jonas Mekas reports in his "Movie Journal" column in the *Village Voice* in September 1963[136], makes room for boredom; yet boredom moves the viewer into doing *something,* be it walking around, talking, or eating, as Warhol suggests, or, at times, finding parts of the frame intriguing to look at, in an unpredictable response to the film's stagnation. "Is it cinema?" Mekas asks after the first public screening of *Sleep*. "The slowing down, stretching a detail to its limit, to what maximum effect?" One could easily dismiss Warhol's experiment as nothing more than a joke[137], but a different possibility can be put forward: "doesn't it remind us of the secret, almost unnoticeable motions, variations?"[138]

Mekas makes a subtle point. By making the viewers aware, *challenging* them to be aware, of the secret variations—that is, the intimate, private, overlooked micro-motions of the sleeping body,

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[134] Qtd. in in Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures*, 37.

[135] Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, 203n25.

[136] Jonas Mekas, "On Andy Warhol," *Village Voice*, September 19, 1963, reprinted in Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Collier, 1972), 103.

[137] In Mekas's account, the dismissal of Warhol's filmmaking practices appears to be part of their original reception: "is Andy Warhol really making movies, or is he playing a joke on us? —this is the talk of the town." Jonas Mekas, "On Andy Warhol," *Village Voice*, December 5, 1963.

[138] Jonas Mekas, "On Andy Warhol's *Sleep*," *Village Voice*, January 30, 1964, reprinted in Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Collier, 1972), 123.

the slights shift of position or the twitch of muscles—Warhol is suggesting something profound to his audience. At points, his film can be compared to Léger's fingernail experiment, as they both make attempts at what Mekas describes as 'stretching a detail to its limit to a maximum effect.'[139] I would argue that the stationary nature of sleep, and the close visual contact with Giorno's nude body, activate different acts of looking, making this film into more than an experiment in cinematic temporality or form. The sleeping lover no longer shows signs of the graceful gestures that capture the eye; now the overlooked details of the body can be examined in leisure (and in the case of Warhol, for more than five hours). Even if, as Rudolf Arnheim has argued, "motion is the strongest visual appeal to attention,"[140] the viewer can *choose* to pay attention to *Sleep*, to sporadically fix our wandering gaze at the body in rest, on the screen which is itself at rest, and accidentally come across little things to look at.

When the lover wakes and the body in inertia suddenly starts moving, the inspecting eye loosens its grip. We return to the image of the lover as a whole, and subjectivity is reclaimed. Awakening is notably the only event, and the only moment to persuade the film to move in Chris Marker's still experiment in *La Jetée* (1962) (the film's opening lines, referring to the protagonist, can easily fit Barthes's tone in *Camera Lucida*: "this man was selected for his obsession with an image from the past.") By treating the filmic by the terms of the photographic, the film puts pressure on immobility as the sign of death, on which Raymond Bellour remarks that "if there are so many stilled images composing an entire film, even a short one, it is because they all come together around a single image, the image of the main's character's death."[141]

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[139] Mekas, "On Andy Warhol's *Sleep*," 122.

[140] Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 372. Qtd. in Remes, 40. Remes argues that static films encourage viewers to direct their attention *elsewhere*, which is what Warhol's audience usually did. See Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures*, 40.

[141] Raymond Bellour, "The Film Stilled," *Camera Obscura* 24 (September 1990): 118.

Of the film's series of immobile frames, one scene gently flutters: the woman awakens from the paralysis of sleep, and of photography. The image of the woman in bed is grainy, yet softer in tone from the rest of the film. As the scene begins a series of dream-like dissolves shift from one still of her sleepling to the other, and we begin to hear the sound of birds, as one does in the morning; the woman softly opens her eyes, and the film awakenes. The temporal abruptness of awakening corresponds with the formal transition from the sleeping body to the moving one. These two cinematic gazes on the sleeping lover show that cinematic stasis can participate in bringing forward the dynamic aspects of the other as image.

Figure 1.5 John Giorno in Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963)

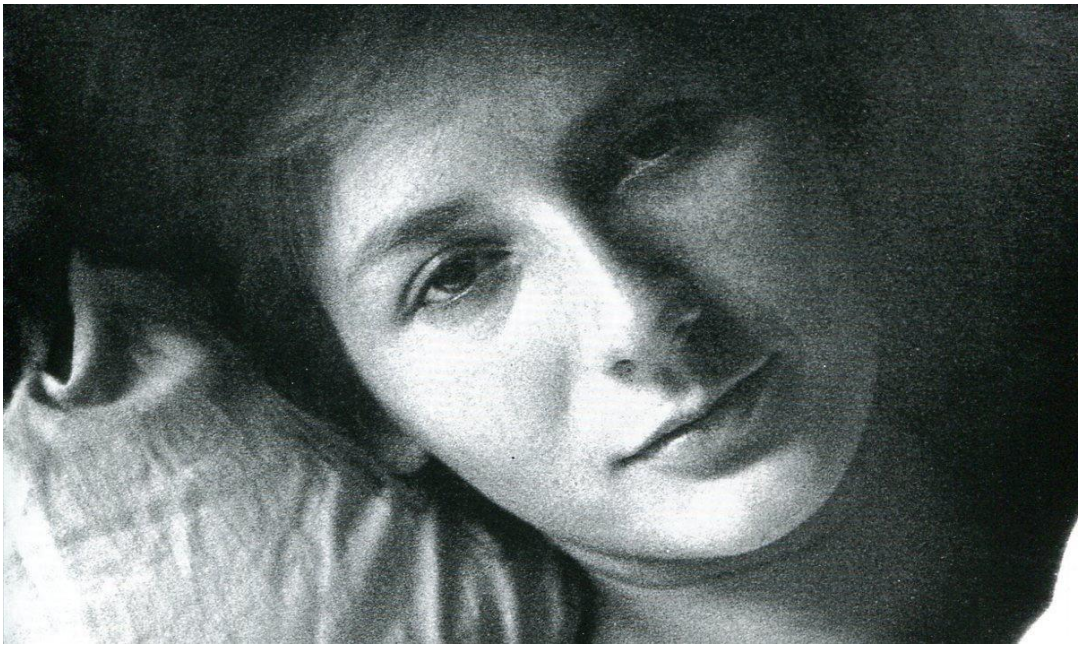

Figure 1.6 Still from Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962)

Chapter 2

'Tiny Private Scene':

On the Particular Pleasures of Mise en Scéne

> We admire only that naturalist who knows how to describe and present for us the strangest and most unusual objects in their proper locality and environment.
>
> Goethe, *Elective Affinities*[1]

> Why do *some people*, including myself, enjoy in certain novels, biographies, and historical works the representation of the "daily life" of an epoch, of a character? Why this curiosity about petty details: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing, etc.? Is it the hallucinatory relish of "reality" (the very materiality of "that once existed")? And is it not the fantasy itself which invokes the "detail," the tiny private scene, in which I can easily take my place?
>
> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*[2]

One of the key methodological principles to take from Chapter 1 is that details invite and stimulate certain types of displaced attention. The eye wanders, and stops not at the obvious thing we *should* be looking at, but at an utterly different place: that which is small, and could easily be assumed superfluous, peripheral, or ornamental. This wandering from the center to the margins makes use of parts of the image that would be rejected by other models of interpretation; as in Warhol's fingernails in Duane Michals's portrait, details can be dismissed as merely supplemental, to the body or to the image. To make them entry points for our reading of the moving image means to place pleasure at its center, and to engage in criticism that is *radically* private. The lens of detail connects these questions of interpretation to the cinematic medium in particular by reflecting on the dynamic forms of part and whole relations. I understand this dynamic field to be constituted by the

[1] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1963), 213 (translation modified).

[2] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 53.

interaction between viewer and detail, and specifically by the particular nature of details in the cinematic space and the different types of stories they tell. As little events of meaning they have a bearing on spectatorial points of interest, and they also illustrate what we *choose* to pay attention to, and how.

The love of cinema comfortably takes its place in the tiny, private scenes circumscribed around details. The parts we respond to in films, and choose to reflect on are not necessarily the details that move the narrative forward or partake in the portrayal of an environment. The details we love do not necessarily have any obvious purpose, and Barthes's *The Reality Effect* (1968) sets the stage for arguing for the interpretative potential of these 'pointless' details. There he insists that it is precisely the details that have no narrative function—the parasitical, *useless* details— that produce the illusion or the effect of realism, that is the reference to a given reality.[3] This type of superfluous detail has no distinct teleology, as it neither advances the story nor contributes to the reader's familiarity with the fictional atmosphere. Against the possibility of reading such details to be signs of textual 'decadence', Barthes provocatively argues that they take part in making the text whole.

Barthes's assertion is outrageous, as he admits himself; in otherwise realist texts he glorifies the *decadent* details, that contribute nothing to the plot or to the portrayal of the characters or the surroundings (and a long literary tradition certainly disapproved of them). To focus on useless details is therefore to endorse the practice of *decedent* criticism.[4]

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[3] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in Richard Howard, trans., *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[4] Noami Schor, "Desublimation: Roland Barthes's Aesthetics," in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 93-117. Lukács, for example, considered narrative preferable to description. In his "Narrate or Describe?" he codified the aesthetic superiority of narration: "[a]n arbitrary detail, a chance similarity, a fortuitous attitude, an accidental meeting," typical of the novels of a naturalist writer like Zola, are supposed to express social relationships directly; but narrative legibility is countered by the endless descriptions of arbitrary details. "Understanding the social necessity that has produced a certain style," he writes, "is something quite different from evaluating the aesthetic results of the style." See Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in *Writer and Critic, and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 115.

The 'useless' details Barthes points to as participants in the realist effect would usually be omitted from any structural analysis, either excluded from accounts of narrative or alternatively treated as 'fillers'. For example, Lukács in his "Narrate or Describe?" (1936) argues that narrative legibility is *threatened* by the infinity of the "arbitrary detail, a chance similarity, a fortuitous attitude, an accidental meeting" typical of the novels of writers like Zola or Flaubert. Speaking of such "bad details", he typifies the "bourgeois" or "trivial" details of Western realism, which are superficial and irrelevant for the purposes of the novel. Fredric Jameson provides a useful summary of this critique of aesthetic decadence:

> The concept of 'decadence' is the equivalent in the aesthetic realm of that of 'false consciousness' in the domain of traditional ideology analysis. Both suffer from the same defect: the common presupposition that in the world of culture and society, such a thing as pure error is possible. They imply, in other words, that works of art or systems of philosophy are conceivable which have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the 'serious' issues of the day, indeed distracting from them.[5]

What I take from Barthes is that when the textual or visual fabric is examined closely, the trivial details turn out to be essential parts of the text's aspirations. By this they constitute one paradox of details, namely that particulars with no defined function can in fact participate in structures of meaning and more importantly, deeply effect the reader, and the latter is more the case with Barthes's later details in *The Third Meaning* and *Camera Lucida*. The detail is *The Reality Effect* is however described as supplemental to events, by this predicting the language of the later *punctum*. These details, either of texts or of images, might appear prosaic, but we make use of them in fruitful acts of interpretation and reflection.

The experience of realism is, however, not part of the category of the *punctum,* which I regard to be closer to our investment in filmic detail. Phillip Rosen contrasts Barthes's early reflections on

[5] Fredric Jameson, "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate," in *The Ideologies of Theory* (Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2008), 439.

realism and literary structure with his later engagement with photography in similar terms, arguing that only photography can grant the option of the radically private image. The photographic detail results in a "subjectively intensive, even absolute and hence *disruptive*, experience of realism."[6] His analysis of Barthes does not, however, account for the private pleasures of cinema itself.[7] In this chapter I aim to show that the category of the excessive, 'useless' detail is actually key to one of the familiar versions of appreciation of the filmic detail, namely that of cinephilia, with its emphasis on the viewer's isolation of the alluring part. By speaking of filmic details as useless, I mean to propose a closer look at the intricacies of a type of criticism that is not narrative focused, but rather attends to the emotional of affective activation of the viewer. The category of the 'useless detail' might appear counterintuitive, as I press on the rich implications of our response to these details. However, I believe that their 'uselessness', particularly in the context of film narrative, is in fact a discrete feature of the pleasure we take in them. The engagement with details therefore sets the aesthetic possibilities of the seemingly purposeless aspects of our object.

These private details are consistently defined in contrast to the 'concrete' details of the narrative, as they are named in *The Reality Effect* (or objects of *neutral affect,* as is the *studium).* We can see a shift in the terms of reading details reflected in Barthes's own thinking, as he went from the earlier details that aspire to realism to the ones closer to affect and desire, and from the literary structure to the visual immediacy of the photograph. This shift is also, importantly, a change of object and medium. The details that he refers to as the 'excessive' areas of the film experience are often endorsed by cinephilic language. The 'useless' detail in cinematic terms is marginal in

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[6] Philip Rosen, "Detail, Document, and Diegesis in Mainstream Film," in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 173, emphasis mine.

[7] Rosen follows Barthes's own inclination in *Camera Lucida* to dismiss the private aspects of the film detail. "Any configuration of detail on screen", Rosen writes, "is available for a restricted period of time," and continues: "but a film, with its kinetic and durational limitations on the spectatorial gaze, diminishes the privatization of the purely photographic spectator." Rosen, "Detail, Document, and Diegesis in Mainstream Film," 173.

comparison to key narrative events, and thus generates a new focal point for the film, at the peripheral rather than the center. All of this establishes a mode of interpretation and experience of films that stems from the personal, the esoteric and to some extent, the arbitrary. As such, this path of criticism dictates what we might call decentered reading. We might compare this to the value of prized objects for Benjamin's collector, who does not emphasize the objects' functional value, that is their *usefulness*, but as Benjamin puts it, the collector studies and loves her objects as the scene, or the stage, of their own fate.[8]

One way to understand when the detail can be considered 'useless' or 'decadent' in filmic terms is by exploring its twofold relation to narrative. On the one hand, details of mise en scène participate in the moves of narrative and set up the cinematic space. However, certain personal modes of criticism will bring the detail to the foreground *against* narrative expectations. By naming the cinephile's details useless I do not imply that they call for the erasure of meaning, but on the contrary: they locate meaning in the viewer's affective response to the film, however removed from the intentions of the narrative it might be. Against the relevance that details might have for stories, for these details pleasure is what leads the way.

This chapter looks into filmic details' 'usefulness', or lack thereof. I follow Barthes in that I begin with useless details in terms of narrative coherence or cinematic space, and examine their role in recent accounts of cinephilic practices. Fleshing out what is implicit in these practices shows that this particular type of criticism is moved and motivated by the eccentric details that do not exactly fit into other modes of criticism (and at times, for good reasons). I go on to mobilize the different ways in which details participate in visual storytelling and particularly how they constantly reposition the relations of part and whole in the moving image. From examining the role of particulars in Bazin's

[8] Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Collecting," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 Part* 2, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2005), 487.

film criticism, especially in the context of his writing on Italian Neo Realism, I move to what I call the *decadent details* of Max Ophuls, to show how details of mise en scène can be useless and useful at the same time. By singling out the detail as a critical category for film criticism, I look at the ways in which the cinematic experience can facilitate new models of reading the part against the whole.

The Traps of Cinematic Excess

The value of what I would term excessive filmic details is stressed in recent scholarship on cinephilia, flourishing at this specific point of rapid changes in the nature of cinema and exhibition practices. As Sarah Keller observes, asking what it means to love cinema has functioned as a coping strategy in face of shifts in the media environment, destabilizing, once again, the everchanging idea of 'cinema'.[9] In the twists and turns of cinephilia and theory, details play an important role; they stand for alternative areas of experience and criticism that can go beyond the constraints of linear narrative or structures of interpretation. What attracts about the detail is often explained by the term *excess,* which refers to the individual feature that does not fit into any aesthetic strategy, and elicits the impression that what is being seen is *in excess* of what is being shown.

Still, it is not sufficient to simply state that filmic details matter. As Raymond Durgnat observed*,* the moving leaves of a tree do not constitute as many narratives as there are leaves[10]; likewise, in a frame packed with an abundance of details, significance does not equal the sum of details in sight. The screen can be filled with objects that amount to nothing in particular, yet the shot of a single object can be infinitely open and tricky to put in words. The interplay of significance

[9] See Sarah Keller, "*Cinephobia: To Wonder, to Worry*," Lola 5 (2014), http://www.lolajournal.com/5/cinephobia.html and *Anxious Cinephilia: Pleasure and Peril at the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[10] Raymond Durgnat and David Ehrenstein, "Obscure Objects of Desire: A Jam Session on Non-Narrative," in *Cinematic Encounters: Interviews and Dialogues*), ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 88.

and triviality is part of how details become an effective category for criticism, singular entry points into the image. Even if it were possible to account for every detail in every frame, an inventory of details would not explain how *one* detail becomes important, and the others pass without leaving a mark (at no point would the claim be that *every* detail is important by definition). To stay in accordance with the smallness intrinsic to the detail would be the take into consideration the way they embed the viewer within the fictional world; and, at the same time, explain how one detail sparks particular interest that emerges from within this very world, and turns into the "tiny little scene", the place where meaning *happens* to us.

The concept of cinephilia, Mary Ann Doane argues, is "love of the cinema, but it is a love that is attached to the detail, the moment, the trace, the gesture." By this it names, as she claims elsewhere, the moment when the contingent takes on meaning— and a meaning that is outside the narrative.[11] By locating cinematic pleasure in the discrete detail, gesture, or moment, this mode of criticism promotes what I would call a decentered sensibility to cinema, that privileges the esoteric part over the whole. As Paul Willemen puts it, this sensibility designates "something which resists, which escapes existing networks of critical discourse and theoretical frameworks."[12] Recent books on cinephilia, including Christian Keathley's *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees, Cinematic Flashes: Cinephilia and Classical Hollywood*, and Malte Hagener and Marijke de Valck's anthology, *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, often speak of details in ways that follows Barthes's language of the excessive detail, either the *punctum* or the *obtuse* meaning. The cinephile's detail is discernable by the sensations and pleasures attached to it, an intensity that at first appears to

[11] Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 226-227.

[12] Paul Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered," in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 231.

contradict its triviality within the film itself. To follow Barthes, the details that attract the cinephile's attention are not those which play an active role as a narrative device, akin to *Citizen Kane*'s Rosebud, "a thing that makes other things (things of a different order) happen" (and in this case, Leslie Stern writes, the detail's value lies in its functionality[13]), nor are they factors that 'authenticate' the cinematic environment, making it into a reliable fictional space or efficiently setting a particular mood or a tone.

To locate our love of the cinema in the appeal of the transitory detail suggests something different: that one moment can expose something, or can open something *in us* better than others. Put differently, we are saying that the emotional effect of cinema is established in the part rather than the whole. Willemen, for example, writes of his pleasure in watching films as directly linked to these personal moments. By this, the privileged detail radically challenges the way meaning *ought* to be produced from a film: "the breathtaking fragment […] suddenly and momentarily bore witness to the presence and force of desire in the midst of appallingly routinised and oppressive conditions of production."[14] The fragment rises against systematic intentions (and this is where anti-narrative desires are, at times, perceived as resistance). The temporality of viewing is one of suspension and removal from narrative immersion, as Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* demonstrates in relation to interruptions to continuity and movement, such as the act of pausing the film (or alternatively in the use of the freeze frame).[15] Mulvey understands cinephilia as *anti-narrative*

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[13] Lesley Stern, "Paths That Wind through the Thicket of Things," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001): 318.

[14] Paul Willemen, "Edinburgh Debate," *Framework* 19 (January 1982): 49.

[15] The language of cinephilia, Jenna Ng argues, is one of "the suspended duration of being kidnapped and lifted into another life," and it ultimately speaks of the temporality of the film experience: "when we 'lose' ourselves in the movies, it is an immersion into different worlds, certainly, but also different temporalities—the rush of cinephilic revelation, the prolonged plangency of a movie resonating with our lives, the duration in whose blankness we are suspended while 'kidnapped,' in whose temporal abeyance we suspend movie time and consciousness." See Jenna Ng, "The Myth of Total Cinephilia," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 49, No. 2 (Winter, 2010): 146-151.

by nature, and uses stasis efficiently as a force that contradicts both cinematic motion and narrative flow.[16] Durgnat makes a related distinction by opposing the pictorial eye and the narrative eye,[17] A vocabulary that implies that two distinctly different models of attention are taking place, and that details can "push" us, swiftly and unexpectedly, *out* of the narrative.

As Kristin Thompson rightly observes, it is hard to imagine anyone watching *only* non-narrative aspects of a narrative film. Still, they are constantly present, and storytelling cannot account for the variety of cinematic details that we notice. To seek excess in the image is therefore to invite the partial disintegration of a coherent reading but is also a means to look "beyond narrative" to discover "the underlying principles of the film." Our conclusion, Thompson writes, must be that every stylistic element can contribute to the narrative and distract our perception from it simultaneously.[18]

In some accounts of cinephilia's pleasures, the 'anti narrative' appeal appears to be merely the visual fascination with a particular pattern or color, details that can hardly fit into any model of significance and belong to what I would call the pure materiality of the image. The act of "pointing" to what is appealing visually in the image, Thompson argues, is then the principal tool.[19] One of the paradigmatic and even hyperbolic examples appears in Gilbert Adair's *Paris Journal,* writing on the

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[16] Mulvey argues for the radical potential of cinephilia that is based on interruptions, that provide access to "key moments and meanings [....] that could not have been perceived when hidden under the narrative flow and the movement of film." Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 147.

[17] See Raymond Durgnat and David Ehrenstein, "Obscure Objects of Desire: A Jam Session on Non-Narrative," 86-96.

[18] Thompson describes how repeated viewings can bring forward the formal excess of a film. What then stands out are the "incomprehensible elements" that do not fit into the unified structures of meaning. See Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," *Ciné-Tracts* 1.2 (1977): 54-64.

[19] As Barthes admits in his "Third Meaning" essay, "I cannot manage to describe, only to designate a location." Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image/Music/Text,* trans. by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1993), 60. Thompson claims that to discuss excess "may be to invite the partial disintegration of a coherent reading. But on the other hand, pretending that a work is exhausted by its functioning structures robs it of much that is strange, unfamiliar, and striking about it." Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," 57.

most famous scene from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (and Gary Grant's bluish-grey socks): "though I doubt if I could coherently relate the plot of *North By Northwest,* a movie I must have seen four or five times, I believe I'll remember to my dying day the color of Cary Grant's socks as he flees from the crop dusting plane."[20] *Not* paying attention during one of the most famous scenes in film history goes hand in hand with an awareness to other details, that wait at the periphery of main events. The socks are part of the image, a patch of color that is small yet able to distract from an eventful scene; By noticing them, the viewer is allowed a glimpse at "something you are not meant to see", as Willemen puts it. I take this example to be paradigmatic of non-narrative film criticism at its extreme point, given that the emphasis on décor and accessories has to do *only* with the effect on the viewer, the pure sensation of pleasure and fascination with form.

To isolate the part in this manner is also a practice of desire, as we learned from Barthes. By shattering the unity of narrative coherence and pulling out a detail, our mode of criticism is in contact with our affective engagement with the film. Though this type of detail takes on a role in legitimizing the relevance of the emotional response, its conditions of analysis are somewhat limited. The evocative part is selected and realized, as it were, by the interaction between the viewer and the film. Taken from the film, these details might be important for the particular viewer, but they usually do not go back to reflect on the whole or make way for any coherent readings (they might even resist coherence). Cary Grant's rather unremarkable socks do not epitomize Hitchcock's art of storytelling, like the patch of yellow paint is able to do for Vermeer's mastery in Proust's tale; yet

[20] Gilbert Adair, "Gilbert Adair From Paris," *Film Comment* Vol. 14, No. 2 (March/April 1978): 6. Grant's socks in *North by Northwest* are also among the "mundane things" that fascinate James Naremore in his book *Acting in the Cinema;* Naremore was amused to discover that Raymond Durgnat had remarked on his own 'preoccupation' with the same detail. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 214. For another account of the dislocation of the gaze as an alternative register of film experience see Roger Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," *Framework* 30/31 (1986): 112–133.

what they do share with the patch is the materiality of color. That is to say that even if this part of the image is peripheral to the film as a whole, it is nonetheless recorded as the focal point of this scene.

'The Cinema Makes You Feel': Affective Criticism and Early Film Theory

The genealogy of non-signifying details, the ones that distract us from the narrative to tell a story of their own, is traceable to the early forms of cinephilic criticism in the 1920s, mainly in the figure of Jean Epstein and the circle around him. Paula Amad rightly expands this circle to include, along with Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac and Blaise Cendrars, the film reviews written by Collette.[21] In these works of early film theory, details are not tied to the 'reality effect' or to realism per se, but to the pinching effect of the *punctum,* the detail that we love. These French critics are often described as early cinephiles based on the centrality of momentary 'flashes' of insignificant details in their writings. And as Keathley's notion of 'cinephiliac moment' shows, this concept is based on a transitory and moving experience of the image.[22]The singularity of trivial details in the context of early French criticism is particularly relevant to our purposes with its emphasis on the affective traces of details, gestures, or objects in the cinematic experience.

[21] These critics are joined under viewing practices that focus on what Amad calls *unfamiliar naturalism* (based on excessive description, observation, and details). Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive*: *Film*, *the Everyday*, *and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 191.

[22] Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 7.

Figure 2.1 Still from *North by Northwest*

Early French critics posit a central claim: film puts us in touch with objects. By evoking what we might consider the equivalents of the term 'detail', these critics point to the displacement of attention and the magnification of the small and/or the banal in the new modes of cinematic perception. The cinema, they argued, can grasp objects as if they were the face in close up: the part can disrupt the sense of whole, but also animate it. The emotional intensity of the images on screen is tied to cinematic form, and especially the techniques of close up or slow motion that uncover hidden visions.[23] The following passage from Léger describes the suddenness of this perceptual shift:

> Here it is: 80 percent of the clients and objects that help us to live are only noticed by us in our everyday lives, while 20 percent are seen. From this, I deduce the cinematographic revolution is to make us see everything that has been merely noticed…. The dog that goes

[23] Malcolm Turvey accordingly terms this the revelationist tradition: "the cinema's most significant property, one which the other arts do not possess (or at least do not possess to the same degree), is its ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision. The value of this property is that it can reveal the true nature of reality to viewers." See Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Turvey's definition of the revelationist tradition, shared by Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer, states that "the basic argument made by these four theorists and filmmakers is that certain cinematic techniques—the close up, slow motion, time-lapse photography, editing—can reveal features of reality that are invisible in the sense that it is impossible for the human eye to see them without assistance." Turvey, *Doubting Vision,* 5.

> by in the street is only noticed. Projected on the screen, it is seen, so much so that the whole audience reacts as if it discovered the dog.[24]

As the emergence of details, objects and moments into the visual field is used to illustrate the perceptual shift that takes place at the cinema, they become central to the rhetoric of their film criticism. To demonstrate this centrality, Amad joins together Delluc's telephone, Epstein's revolver, Colette's single eyelash, Léger's polished fingernail, and Aragon's typewriter, which both separately and taken together expose cinema's capacity to make the small meaningful, that is, to magnify.[25] To observe such details in their new cinematic presence stems from an intense spectatorial mode, in which attention is fixed to the screen. This also makes this model of criticism cinephilic by nature, defined by the unsettling response to the cinematic event: desire, fear, love, or any combination of the three.

The aesthetic language of cinema is understood as one in which objects or isolated parts come to the foreground both visually and in terms of expressivity: extending beyond their usual size and function and more importantly, expanding in *significance*, things become key 'actors'. The detail is as animated as the human subject, and the human subject is simply part of the world on screen, a detail of it. This visual emergence of things on screen also makes connections between the viewer and the image, and the motif of expansion is repeated to signal the emotional response. Cinema draws out these categories of affect linked to the detail, including magnification, isolation, and the viewer's immersion in the images on screen. To cite one example, scale is often used to explain what happens to objects on screen; but scale in this context has less to do with actual size, and more with the impression of nearness, translated into emotional terms. Léger claims that "a stage door that

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[24] Fernand Léger, "*La Roue:* Its Plastic Qualities," in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, *A History/Anthology*: *Volume I*, *1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 273.

[25] Amad, *Counter-Archive*: *Film*, *the Everyday*, *and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, 216.

moves slowly in close up (object) is more emotional than the projection of a person who causes it to move in *actual scale* (subject)."[26] Amad aptly notes that this type of apprehension allows film to *interfere* with the normal order of things, "allowing the passive object-world on screen - décor and props - to adopt the witnessing properties of humans."[27] Objects in the cinema look back, and action and *personality* are not restricted to human subjects, but have to do with a charged presence of the non-human in our world.[28] Delluc emphatically claims for film's ability to make palpable the "sensetivity of things" that results in the insensetivity to humans: "this prior dimension of things [which the camera magnifies] *diminishes* the character of the actor, the human element. He himself is no more than a detail, a frgament of the material that is the world."[29] This kind of affective spectatorship flips the order of significance: the object, the animal, or the detail, are made into something to look at, while human subjectivity is simply one element out of many captured by the camera.[30]

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[26] Fernand Léger, "Painting and Cinema," in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, *A History/Anthology*: *Volume I*, *1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel *(*Princeton*,* NJ*:* Princeton University Press*,* 1988), 373, emphasis mine.

[27] See Paula Amad, "'Objects Became Witnesses': Ève Francis and the Emergence of French Cinephilia and Film Criticism," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring 2005): 56-73.

[28] The shift in the significance of objects is also pointed out in Yuri Tsivian's analysis of the use of objects in Eisenstein. Tsivian argues, in relation to sequences from *October* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927) and *Intolerance* (D. W. Griffith, 1916), that "while in *Intolerance* props played up the actor, in Oktyabr' they upstaged him." The "superfluity of props […] makes 'Oktyabr' look like 'a Baroque film about the uprising of dishes,' as Victor Shklovsky dubbed it in his 1932 'Letter to Eisenstein.'" See Yuri Tsivian, "Homeless Images: D. W. Griffith in the Eye of Soviet Filmmakers," *Griffithiana* 60/61 (October 1997): 51-75.

[29] Louis Delluc, "From Orestes to Rio Jim," in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, *A History/Anthology*: *Volume I*, *1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton*,* NJ*:* Princeton University Press*,* 1988)*,* 256. Léger, on the other hand, speaks of this revearsal of hierchcy—between human and the object world— when arguing for *La Roue*'s ability to eliminate the human object as the traditional focus of the cinema.

[30] Kracauer relatedly notes on the shift in significance cinema is capable of with an emphasis on objects taking over the role previously designated for human actors. The inanimate, and moreover the *part object*, is thus brought to the foreground as the mediator of events. Writing on inanimate objects, Kracauer refers to the medium of painting and its treatment of objects as subjects, and particularly to Léger's claims, when he argues for cinema's new sensentivity to details: "since the inanimate is featured in many paintings, one might question the legitimacy of characterizing it as a cinematic subject. Yet it is a painter — Fernand Léger— who judiciously insists that only film is equipped to sensitize us, by way of big close-ups, to the possibilities that lie dormant in a hat, a chair, a hand, and a foot." Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*: *The Redemption of Psychical Reality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45.

The camera importantly provides new forms of proximity and with it access to unfamiliar details, as we have seen with Léger's blow up of the fingernail. Collette and later Epstein mention the striking possibility of counting the actor's eyelashes,[31] and the sudden closeness evoked in this example is epitomized in the tiny, formerly inaccessible detail of the face.[32] These details prick the viewer, Epstein writes, the way needles do: abruptly, and with the precision of the small object. And it is prominently feeling that transports us in front of the screen, as Aragon writes: the critical language is one of touch, sentiment, and transformed impressions.

The emotional intensity in apparent also in Eve Francis's descriptions of the revelations she and Delluc experienced in cinema. In her notes on *The Cheat* Francis writes of "the 'exotic drama" which left Delluc 'shaking"', as the "[d]etails made him exclaim out loud." Later she lists these details; a "window of mat glass behind which the shadow of branches swayed," a "small, low lacquered table, alone with the incense burner," a "curtain shaking before the entrance of Hayakawa." By this, she notes, *The Cheat* had "*pinched* him, [and] he becomes prey to an astounding revelation." This pinching effect provides yet another affinity with Barthes's model of the prickly *punctum*, and with Epstein's needles: as an experience of cinema that is personal and emotional, the film detail acts upon *the body* by the very features of its smalless, and the affective impact is translated to the visceral metaphor of being pricked or pinched by the little object. As Francis declares,

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[31] Collette writes of the striking close-ups, where one could "count the eyelashes." See "They're All Going to the Cinema," in *Colette at the Movies: Criticism and Screenplays* (New York: Ungar, 1980), 37-39. Epstein writes in "Magnification" that "I can count the eyelashes of this suffering." Jean Epstein, "Magnification", in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, *A History/Anthology*: *Volume I*, *1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 13.

[32] The proximity to the eyelash is clearly tied with the question of the close up which I do not address here. Is the close up a detail? In the encounter with the magnified face, the viewer is called upon to carefully examine its details and contingencies; and based on Mary Ann Doane's definitions, the close up should thus be considered a fragment—a part but also a totality. See Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol.14, No. 3 (Fall 2003): 89-111. When the close up serves as the model for the detail, it makes the latter into a force of inherent separability or isolation. My reading, however, proposes that the detail is a threshold for entering a world.

"theater explains and comments. The cinema makes you feel."[33]

The emotional turbulence, I would claim, still keeps the detail small. The objects of cinema's revelations are in this sense ordinary and out of the ordinary at the same time; and more than any particular object, a new type of sensory awareness is born. Kracauer perhaps crystallized this unique address to the viewer when he claims that film punctured the habitual familiarity with the everyday things "[which] are part of us like our skin."[34]

This idiosyncratic genre of the filmic detail is therefore the result of a viewing practice that is centered on spontaneous, personal, and almost involuntary visual discoveries, in Susan Sontag's words "the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen. You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie." Sontag's surrender in front of the screen is openly modeled after the archetype of the cinephile in the French cultural discourse; the visual 'epiphanies' in Epstein and his contemporaries were equally central to the film critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Rivette sees in Nicholas Ray's films "a certain dilation of expressive detail, which ceases to be detail so that it may become part of the plot" in his search after a "breadth of modern gesture."[35] By directing the reader to these details, they called for the eye-opening revelation of a hidden truth about the cinema, the very truth accessible to them. In reviews of films by their 'privileged directors', the cinephiles of the *Cahiers* put an emphasis less on traditional critical evaluation, and more on private impressions (even if the private does appear to make a universal claim). As critics, Willemen shows, they were not always interested in wide-ranging questions of style, but tended to personal accounts of scenes or moments that meant something to them, "moments which, when encountered in a film, spark something

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[33] See Paula Amad, "'Objects Became Witnesses': Ève Francis and the Emergence of French Cinephilia and Film Criticism," 64, emphasis mine.

[34] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 55.

[35] Jacques Rivette, "On Imagination," in *Cahiers du cinema the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 104-105.

which then produced the energy and the desire to write".[36] This tendency to treat details as 'proof' of great authorship is exemplified in Godard's review of Renoir's *La Nuit du Carrefour* (1932), on which he writes that "every detail, every second of each shot makes [it] the only great French thriller, or rather, the greatest French adventure film of all." Filmic details do not simply provide the 'diagnostic' key for singling out inventive style, as in Morelli's methods; they speak, personally, of the film's viewer, for whom every detail contributes to the particular *unity* of the film. Even if *politique des auteurs,* the later and more coherent account of authorship, did focus on overlooked details as traces of a director's consistent stylistic traits, their writing often lingers on the pleasurable experience of a director's singular touch in particular and personal moments.

Details, Environments, And the Mood of Criticism

The excessive details of the first section exemplify how details become particular points of visual interest, detached from original narrative purposes or even pushing against narrative signification. Cinephilia attempts to integrate the love of detail and film criticism, and is one way of critically bringing together film details and feelings when writing about films we care about. Bazin's critical stance toward Postwar Realism bridged criticism and emotion differently, despite his connections and influence on the young cinephiles of the *Cahiers*. The main disparity I would point to in the context of the detail is that Bazin takes into account its relevance for the world of the film, and is not so much interested in removing it from where it organically belongs. Within his holistic approach to the image, details evoke the love of the critic to this particular cinematic world. And Bazin's love often considers the detail as an *essential* or organic part of the film as a whole. The mindset of fetish and fragmentation that cinephilia is often related to is not typical of the Bazinian

[36] Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered," 235.

detail. His investment in the particular moment does not call for its removal from the context, but on the contrary, treats it from a holistic perceptive. The detail can stand out as *part* of an environment. By this it does not overwhelm the whole, but rather is a key figure in our experience of filmic space as unity.

A central concept in Bazin's complex stand on the relation of part and whole is the notion of the filmic environment. We might assume that the viewer's absorption would entail focusing on no object in particular. Yet to the extent that the concept of environment speaks to *indirect* immersion, the singular detail still contributes to establishing it as a whole. The fact that both details and surroundings can be unremarkable at times does not negate their potential of gathering awareness and attention.[37]

The film detail thus brings with it renewed investment in the materiality of a given environment. By this quality, Bazin will praise the films of Italian New Realism with their sensitivity to the fragile human condition, disrupting previous hierarchies both visually and thematically. Specifically, in the case of De Sica, the emphasis on "the concrete instances of life" replaces the events typically featured in narrative films. When the narrative event is divided into series of micro-events, De Sica replaces the traditional units of storytelling with 'smaller' everyday moments, challenging the distinction between main events and peripheral ones. This is also where details shine: the micro-event puts the particular into focus. The method of portrayal which emphasizes the small,

[37] See recent scholarship on organic concepts of life, in early and classical film theory, that relate to the filmic environment, for example Oliver Gaycken, 'The Secret Life of Plants: Visualizing Vegetative Movement, 1880–1903', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2012), 51–69; Antonio Somaini, "Walter Benjamin's Media Theory: The Medium and the Apparat," *Grey Room*, no. 62 (2016), 6–41; and Inga Pollmann, *Cinematic Vitalism: Film Theory and the Question of Life* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017). In Somaini's work on Benjamin he rethinks the concept of 'medium' to close terms of environment, milieu, and atmosphere. See Antonio Somaini, "Walter Benjamin's Media Theory," 27. For discussions of particular case studies see the edited dossier, "Cinema's Natural Aesthetics," *Screen*, Volume 61, Issue 2, Summer 2020.

seemingly trivial details, also lends veracity to the fictional environment, making it, one could claim, a *natural* one.

The stories that details tell of singular lives are echoed in both the themes and the form of Italian New Realism, in films that are particularly attentive to the insignificance of the individual in the modern context. In Benjamin's *Arcades Projects,* the formation of the middle-class interior is similarly understood as a response to the overwhelming experience of the city:

> To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated. Coverlets and antimacassars, cases and containers are devised in abundance; in these, the traces of the most ordinary objects of use are imprinted. In just the same way, the traces of the inhabitant are imprinted in the interior.[38]

In the context of the modern milieu, Benjamin brings up the natural form of dwelling—the shell—to illustrate how an environment and its inhabitant *interact*: "the original form of all dwelling is existence not in the house but in the shell. The shell bears the impression of its occupant. In the most extreme instance, the dwelling becomes a shell."[39] The enclosed bourgeois interior is established against the openness of the city, the experience of the crowd, and the impossibility of leaving traces in the modern space.[40] By leaving a trace, the fact of being present is imprinted on interior surfaces and objects; yet the relation between an individual and their trace and is not only indexical. Benjamin implies that the interior space transforms into a universe in miniature, the shell of the private person, who in turn takes the form of their surroundings. The environment does not simply provide an indication of its inhabitants, but speaks of being *as* leaving traces.[41]

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[38] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 9.

[39] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* 220.

[40] One example Benjamin cites is the modern genre of the detective story, in which private and domestic traces take a new role and criminals are, respectively, members of the bourgeoisie. See Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 100.

[41] The practice of deciphering tracks, that is, imprints of existence, is what Carlo Ginzburg holds as the starting point of narrative: "perhaps the actual idea of narration," he writes, "may have originated in the hunting society, relating the

Film relies on décor to convey the dramatic situation, an artificiality exemplified even in Neo Realist cinema, that makes 'life' into drama. De Sica's work is primarily engaged with this task poetically, according to Bazin, and his "way of feeling" lends meaning to the particular *things* we see on screen. Bazin directly evokes Neo Realism's devotion to these 'useless facts' in his discussion of Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), with noteworthy similarities to Barthes's 'useless details'. Describing a hypothetical scene in which the opening of a door is of dramatic implications for a prisoner awaiting the executioner, he singles out the door knob, on which the eyes of the prisoner are fixed.[42] Bazin suggests that for the director of "shots," the door knob is an *arbitrary* sign: "the color of the enamel, the dirt marks at the level of the hand, the shine of the metal, the worn-away look are just so many useless facts, concrete parasites of an abstraction."[43] Conversely, for a director like Rossellini the unit of the narrative is the "fact", and these tangible characteristics would be made visible, as part of the doorknob's dramatic significance. The details of texture and surface (enamel, metal, dirt) are indispensable to this style of storytelling,[44] in which the human subject is just one fact among others[45]. In *Theater and Cinema—Part Two*, Bazin restates the displacement of the human taking place in film décor, which he regards to be the 'the solidity of the world' surrounding the actor; in this

experience of deciphering tracks." Carlo Ginzburg. "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop*, No. 9 (Spring, 1980): 13.

[42] André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality," in *What Is Cinema? Volume 2*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 28.

[43] Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality," 37-38.

[44] The tactile quality of Bazin's door knob example is explored in Ian Garwood, *Sense of Film Narration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 16.

[45] Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality," 37-38. By making factual details into the dramatic center of actions, a scene that the human subject merely *shares*, Bazin echoes Delluc's earlier statement: the camera *diminishes* the human element, making the actor into "no more than a detail, a frgament of the material that is the world." Delluc, "From Orestes to Rio Jim", 256.

setting, however, the human holds no advantage over "animals or things."[46] The claim, I believe, is not the naïve proposal that the camera can magically make all things equal, but rather that cinema makes room, in certain conditions, for a shift in traditional categories of aesthetic significance.

A different model for interpreting Neo Realist details and their thematic role appears in Arnheim's 1957 essay, "Accident and the Necessity of Art". Interestingly, Arnheim claims for a similar shift in hierarchy and attention achieved by the 'open form' of De Sica's *Umberto D*. Based on Heinrich Wöfflin's concept of "open form", Arnhein examines the film's use of 'arbitrary' details. As Patrick Keating shows in his reading of Arnheim on this matter, what is advocated is the notion of an open composition that does not follow the dichotomy of theme versus trivialities. What such a visual composition brings forward is the recognition of diverse particulars instead of a unifying theme.[47]

Arnheim considers the abundance of visual detail as a factor able to reflect the array of modern life, and especially "the impertinence of the lonely man's environment." The absence of pre-given meaning—the 'open form' of the film —actually makes use of the materiality of the surroundings to emphasize Umberto's own insignificance within it. The filmic space therefore rejects the hierarchies that organize the visual elements around a central subject that dominates the rest of the frame.[48] Umberto respectively *competes* with many other details on our attention, just as he

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[46]André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema—Part Two," in *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 106.

[47] See Patrick Keating, "Art, Accident, and the Interpretation of the Modern World," in *Arnheim for Film and Media Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 141-157.

[48] Open form, therefore, works with "abundance of material rather than with scarcity, with coordination rather than subordination." A subordinated image is the hierarchical image, in other words, where the hierarchies between central themes and trivial details are clear and obvious. A "coordinated image" would be a more open structure, where dominance is not presupposed. See Rudolf Arnheim, "Accident and the Necessity of Art," in *Toward a Psychology of Art: Collected Essays* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966), 162-180. Qtd. in Keating, "Art, Accident, and the Interpretation of the Modern World," 150.

does in his lonely existence in the urban scene. As with Benjamin's city spaces, the insignificance of the individual in the modern city is exemplified by their interaction with the environment, which reflects by its very form the impossibility for leaving traces of one's own being.

For Arnheim the film's composition encourages the spectator to notice diversity in the visual field. Even when all the obvious traits of Neo Realistic style, namely location shooting, natural light, or the use of non-actors, imply naturalness and spontaneity, Arnheim helps us see that the frames are packed with visual distractions. Do they ask the viewer to scan the image and look for explicit meanings? Not necessarily; Umberto actually competes with everything else on our attention, which also has narrative implications concerning "the secret misery, the egoism, the lack of fellow-feeling" which characterizes his social environment, as Bazin writes.[49] In other words, irrelevant detail interferes and disrupts his centrality as a visual theme.[50]

[49] André Bazin, "*Umberto D*: A Great Work," in *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2005), 81.

[50] Keating argues that the visual array does not exclude carefully designed compositions, as in the shot of Umberto and the man in the pound. The composition of the shot does not emphasize one face on account of the other, but asks the viewer to slowly notice the particularities of the human face, "from style of hair to the texture of their skin." See Keating, "Art, Accident, and the Interpretation of the Modern World," 150-151. Keating further emphasizes the contingency at play on the thematic level of the film as an essentially modern condition. Accidental filmic details do not only play a role in the portrayal of an environment, but emphasize themes in this very environment, which makes contingency thematic as well as stylistic. In *Theory of film,* Kracauer offers a similar concept of contingency, centered upon modern life: "the affinity of film for haphazard contingencies is most strikingly demonstrated by its unwavering susceptibility to the 'street'." Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 62.

Figure 2.2 Still from *Umberto D*

Accidental filmic details in particular are not only part of the Neo Realist space, but make contingency thematic as well as stylistic, as Keating's reading shows. Contingency therefore has a role in portraying the modern condition. Given all this, the Neo Realist frame does capture contingent details beyond directorial control. For Arnheim, however, such contingencies only add to the *intentional* effect of the drama by underlining the city's impertinence towards Umberto's needs. In his review of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) Bazin explains the role of chance in somewhat equivalent terms: "Few films have been more carefully put together, more pondered over, more meticulously elaborated, but all this labor by De Sica tends to give the illusion of chance, to result in giving dramatic necessity the character of something contingent. Better still, he has succeeded in making dramatic contingency the very stuff of drama."[51] Paradoxically, the accidental is then used as an intentional visual strategy; realism and artificiality coincide in film décor.

[51] André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne," in *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2005), 68.

Arnheim's 'open form' is especially fitting for an analysis of the film's celebrated depiction of Maria, the landlady's maid, who would typically be a marginal character. Bazin famously pointed the reader to a very particular bodily detail: Maria's toes. As she stretches her legs to shut the door, the camera "follows the movement of her leg so that the image finally concentrates on her toes feeling the surface of the door."[52] The toes are not Bataille's fragmented body parts, nor are they "free from all atmosphere", as Léger describes his photograph of the fingernail[53]; Maria is an *organic* part of her surroundings, and practically inseparable from it. By directing our eyes to the slight push of the door by the edge of the body, the camera momentarily puts the 'punctual details' in the center, yet without removing them from context. Comparing Boiffard's photographs of human toes with the moments from De Sica's film amplifies the liveliness of the ordinary event, set against the grotesque aspects of the Surrealist attraction to details. Bataille's big toe is an image that oscillates between disgust and visual pleasure, the part object put shockingly out of place. De Sica, alternatively, foregrounds the tangible meeting place of the tip of the toe and the door with one gesture. Maria's body and the object *touch* in a moving image of *punctum*.[54]

What is moving about this instance is the familiar constellation of the piercing detail. However, the momentary touch of the door with the tip of the foot is not at all fragmented or separated from the body of the film; rather it reflects their organic fitting together and the

[52] Bazin, "*Umberto D*: A Great Work," 82.

[53] Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting* (New York, Viking Press, 1973), 50.

[54] Keathley aptly describes the moment as one of "material contact" in which the detail is valued "first for its natural, realistic quality and then for the unforced, objective manner of its presentation; but beyond these critical justifications, it holds an especial force and gains extra value for Bazin because of its *physical quality*." Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, Or, The Wind in the Trees*, 53, emphasis mine.

interaction of part and whole.[55] Bazin will call this unity on several occasions love, a term he frequently uses to explain De Sica's mise en scène. For a director like De Sica the love he has for his characters determines his cinematic style, which is primarily a way of feeling. To love his subjects is to ultimately understand them, including, I would claim, their immersion in their own environment, and their deep belonging to it.[56] The tenderness of film style is one that does not pull apart for the sake of isolation, but that speaks instead to an organic whole, or in other words, to a holistic approach to film. Bazin writes of this approach in organic terms, as Inga Pollmann points out: "De Sica is one of those directors […] whose entire talent derives from the love they have for their subject, from their ultimate understanding of it. The mise en scène seems to take shape after the fashion of a natural form in living matter."[57]'Love' is itself an open category, one that Bazin's ideas on cinema are imbued with. It has been interpreted in relation to the love of nature and all beings, or as exemplifying the organic environmental principles of his writing.[58] As a mood of criticism,

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[55] Inga Pollmann claims that organic-environmental principles parallel the development of the narrative in *Umberto D.,* thus connecting Bazin's film theory to the philosophy of biology of the time. See Inga Pollmann, *Cinematic Vitalism: Film Theory and the Question of Life* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 235.

[56] Bazin makes a similar claim on Renoir's relation to his characters: "the most visual and most sensual of film makers is also the one who introduces us to the most intimate of his characters because he is faithfully enamored of their appearance, and through their appearance. of their soul." André Bazin. *Jean Renoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 90.

[57] André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne," 63.

[58] Dudley Andrew lists the 'love of the natural' as one of the traits that Bazin shared with Renoir: "the love of the natural; the subtle perception of an order which seems to emanate from the accidental arrangement of things; the appreciation of the minor or the bizarre". Dudley Andrew*, André Bazin* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203. Bazin's Franciscan love of all nature was suggested by Truffaut following Bazin's death, and has been widely cited. The prominence of love, particularly of animals and the natural world, in Bazin's film criticism is reviewed in Jennifer Fay, "Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin's Posthumanism," *Journal of Visual Culture*. Vol 7.1 (2008): 41–64 and in Pollmann's *Cinematic Vitalism: Film Theory and the Question of Life* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017). Pollmann writes that "'Love' for Bazin is not a disavowal of analytic treatment, but itself a kind of critical category that describes an attitude." Pollmann, *Cinematic Vitalism*, 234. The examples only from Bazin's "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne" include the statement that "the cinema more than any other art is particularly bound up with love," and later "I have used the word love. I should rather have said poetry. These two words are synonymous or at least complementary. Poetry is but the active and creative form of love, its projection into the world." Bazin's "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne," 72-74. On the emotional nature of Bazin's prose in relation to Jean-Paul Sartre's theories of emotions, see Greg M. Smith, "Reflecting on the Image: Sartrean Emotions in the Writings of André Bazin," *Film and Philosophy* 10 (2006): 117-133.

however, it constitutes an organic model of detail that reflects on the successful creation of filmic space that still holds on to the *contingent* feeling of the part.[59]

Bazin's holistic approach to film is one in which love is not so much about fragmentation for the sake of it; instead the affective tone of criticism reflects a cohesive quality of the cinematic world. This is also the case for his appreciation of Renoir's films, in which love passes through "the epidermis of the world."[60] The motif of skin[61] is the mark of intimacy and closeness, both the barrier and the medium of the interaction between the viewer and the film.

Figure 2.3 Still of Maria closing the door with her toe in *Umberto D* (De Sica, 1947)

[59] Writing on *Bicycle Thieves,* Bazin claims that "not one gesture, not one incident, not a single object in the film is given a prior significance derived from the ideology of the director." The arrangement of parts is compared to iron filings: "if [these elements] are set in order with an undeniable clarity on the spectrum of social tragedy, it is after the manner of the particles of iron filings on the spectrum of a magnet—that is to say, individually; but the result of this art in which nothing is necessary, where nothing has lost the fortuitous character of chance, is in effect to be doubly convincing and conclusive." Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne," 68.

[60] Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, 90.

[61] On the skin metaphor in Bazin, see Paula Amad, "Film as the 'Skin of History': André Bazin and the Specter of the Archive and Death in Nicole Védrès's *Paris 1900* (1947)." *Representations*, Vol. 130, No. 1 (Spring 2015): 84-118.

The Little Grain of Salt, or Vigo's Cats

The Neo Realist directors carefully selected 'facts', fragments of concrete reality that existed before any given meaning, for which significance arrived only afterwards. Their significance was realized only by keeping the events and their material context intact[62]. These facts of material context demonstrate the unexpected aesthetic function that trivial details can have. Twenty years before the publication of Barthes's influential theory of literary details, Bazin addressed the role of supposedly 'useless' cinematic details in an essay titled "René Clément et la Mise en Scène."[63] There his ultimate example for such a detail is a cat that appears on screen (and not in the screenplay) and on the surface gives the impression of an *insignificant* detail, inserted into the film with no clear reason. Bazin, conversely, challenges the initial reading of this cat as a 'useless detail' and rhetorically asks: "Useless? Are the cats that Vigo, in *L'Atalante*, rushes from the corners of the screen into the face of his heroes, useless? Are the music boxes in *The Rules of the Game* useless, or the little rabbits whose death is not spared from us?"[64]

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[62] For example, the merit of *Bicycle Thieves* lies in allowing all things to "to exist for their own sakes, freely," which also means "loving them in their singular individuality." Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne," 69.

[63] The essay appeared in *L'Écran Français*, Oct. 20, 1949. I wish to thank James Tweedie for generously referring me to this text.

[64] The translation of Bazin is my own. The original paragraphs read:

> Avant de concevoir ses angles, le nombre et le choix de ses plans, le metteur en Avant de concevoir ses angles, le nombre et le choix de ses plans, le metteur en scéne se pénètre de ses personnages, de la singularité de la situation où ils se débattent, et voilà qu'il pense, sans raisons apparentes, à un chat, au geste d'un chat qui saute. Rien dans le scenario ou dans le dialogue ne s'y rapporte, mais plus le metteur en scène s'enfonce dans sa méditation plus s'impose l'évidente nécessité de ce chat. Comme le petit fragment de sel jeté dans une solution sursaturée il se peut que ce chat cristallise autour de lui toute la mise en scène et que, dès lors, le découpage s'ordonne rapidement avec une rigueur impérieuse sur l'intervention de cet événement apparemment insignifiant, anecdotique, et inutile. Inutile? Inutiles les chats que Vigo, dans L'Atalante, précipite dans les coins de l'écran à la figure de ses héros? Inutiles les boîtes à musique de Dalio, dans La Règle du jeu et les petits lapins dont la mort ne nous est point épargnée?"

This terminology is somewhat repeated when Bazin writes of Welles's attention to 'signifianct and visibly premediated' details of mise-en-scene, "which have imposed themselves on the author's imagination by their affective power alone." André Bazin, *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, trans. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 67.

By comparing the leaping cat *added* to the scene with other "useless" details, namely the cats in Vigo's *L'Atalante* or the music boxes or dead rabbits in Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*, Bazin sets the grounds for a new reading of film details. With no visible role in the narrative, these 'embellishments' nonetheless *participate* in making the film whole, like "the small fragment of salt thrown in the saturated solution, such a detail—the seemingly insignificant, anecdotal and useless 'grain of salt'— can crystallize the entire mise en scéne."[65] The tone of Bazin's metaphor resonates with Aragon's description of the objects in Chaplin's films, elements of décor that "participate intimately in the action: *nothing is useless there and nothing indispensable.*"[66] The essential is palpable in everything we see, even when the crystallizing, expressive detail is not exactly part of the story, as he writes on Renoir: "characters, objects, light, all must be arranged in the story like colors in a drawing, without being directly subordinated to it."[67]

With Renoir, Bazin sees a faculty for *invention* expressed not in documentary reproduction of reality but in his use of "telling but not conventional detail" which have to do with creative intentions of emphasis and emotional effect. To the scene of the talent show in *The Grand Illusion*, for example, Renoir adds "the little touches"[68] which make it into what it is. The touches, *in plural,* explain the surprising effectiveness of details despite their being anecdotal, insignificant, or otherwise useless. Clearly, they are not the details produced by simply *recording* the space; they are meant to be there, and often 'added' to scripted events. By the term 'addition' Bazin implies that

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[65] Bazin also mentions salt and solutions in his writings on De Sica, to illustrate the organic unity of the events unfolding on screen: "for, after all, it is not surprising that the novelist, the playwright, or the film maker should make it possible for us to hit on this or that idea, since they put them there beforehand, and have seeded their work with them. Put salt into water, let the water evaporate in the fire of reflection, and you will get back the salt. But if you find salt in water drawn directly from a stream, it is because the water is salty by nature." Bazin, *De Sica: Metteur en* Scéne, 68.

[66] Louis Aragon, "On Décor", *French Film Theory and Criticism,* 167, emphasis mine.

[67] Bazin, *Renoir*, 32.

[68] Bazin, *Renoir*, 63.

these little points of meaning destabilize the possibility to separate 'main events' from trivialities. The detail that appears unexpected and esoteric is, in fact, the key for making a movie set into an environment, and the very fragment that makes the film into an experience of organic totality. Vigo's cats, often located at the periphery of the frame, are effectively doing *something* for the film, even if this something is hard to spell out.

Vigo actually uses cats in surprisingly diverse ways. In Bazin's example from *L'Atalante,* the director surrounds Michel Simon's character, Pére Jules, with an abundance of cats, that appear to multiply from scene to scene; they feature in many of the events, sometimes only in the background, yet still a presence that is impossible to ignore. At one point several cats play around a recently mended gramophone which continues to play music in the empty cabin, as if only for the animals themselves: this visual joke seems to carry a Chaplinesque sensitivity for objects. Did Vigo place them amongst Simon's gramophone, and all the other scattered objects and rubbish, or did they place *themselves* there, as cats often do?[69] With other instances in the film, their role appears to be *slightly* more planned, as in the initial arrival of the newlyweds to the barge. Pére Jules and the young assistant (Louis Lefebvre) prepare to greet the newlyweds; Pére Jules picks up one kitten and places it on his back, and takes another cat in his arms. The kitten struggles to stay there for the entirety of the scene, even as Simon jumps about playing the accordion. Later, he sits down and picks up a third cat, placing it this time in his lap. The editor of the film, Louis Chavance, actually noted on the cats' presence, 'scattered' all over the arrival scene: "the bride, wrapped in damp blankets, walks slowly along the barge among cats crazed by fear and by the cold."[70] In many other scenes, the cats

[69] Animals are attractive details to look at; the lack of awareness to the camera makes them into unpredictable and photogenic objects. And, as Mike D'Angelo observes, this is true of any animal and arguably "even more true about cats, who truly could not care less about what anybody on the set would prefer that they do or not do". See https://film.avclub.com/the-cats-not-the-cast-draw-viewers-eyes-in-jean-vigo-1798237367

[70] Qtd. in Steven Ungar, "Jean Vigo, *L'Atalante,* and the Promise of Social Cinema," *Historical Reflections* Volume 35, Issue 2 (Summer 2009): 72.

simply wander around the characters, and we spot them like little accidents, part of Vigo's poetically realistic mise en scéne.

A different cat altogether appears in Vigo's *A propos de Nice*. After a boy with a severely scarred face looks directly at the viewer, the camera travels along the gutter and cuts to a stray cat drinking water from the sewer, that pauses momentarily when noticing the camera and soon after rushes away. As Steven Unger remarks, neither of the gazes, the boy's or the cat's, are aggressive or hostile, they are simply *open* to convey an absence of artifice, compatible with the overall mood of the film.[71] Boris Kaufman's account in a 1949 interview supports this unobtrusive approach to subjects, both human and animal: "Our method consisted of taking facts by surprise, actions, attitudes, expressions and of stopping the camera as soon as the subject became conscious of being photographed."[72]

The cats of *L'Atalante* occasionally share the documentary quality with the cats of Vigo's Nice, yet somehow, they have a peculiar effect in that they *participate* in the film's depiction of the barge as a communal space, one removed from the rest of the world. Bazin claims that the cats in *L'Atalante* run into the characters from the "corners of the screen", and corners imply that cats are details located at the periphery of the events, and appropriately at the margins of the frame. Are the nameless stray cats that live on ship simply part of the setting? *Yes*, but not exactly. They matter, but not because the viewer knows their name or follows their whereabouts; somehow the nameless cats make this environment into what it is. By this trait, they are the essential, supplementary part, the little grain of salt, even if they are not exactly *important* in any conventional way. By no means useless,

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[71] Ungar, "Jean Vigo, *L'Atalante,* and the Promise of Social Cinema," 70.

[72] Boris Kaufman, "Un génie lucide," *Premier Plan,* no. 19 (1961), Qtd. in Ungar, "Jean Vigo, *L'Atalante,* and the Promise of Social Cinema," 67.

Vigo draws on these cats, that awkwardly bump into characters or animate objects, to portray a particular way of living.

Figure 2.4 stray cat in *A propos de Nice* (Vigo, 1930)

Figure 2.5 cats in *L'Atalante* (Vigo, 1934)

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Bazin points to animals (Vigo's cats, or Renoir's dead rabbits) as the details that crystallize the setting. Bazin loved animals, and favored them as cinematic objects; Jennifer Fay writes on this overlooked aspect of Bazin's life, noting on the centrality of films featuring animals in his seminal essays as indicative of his sense of film's deep affinity with the natural world (among these examples, he famously illustrates *Umberto D*'s achievement in the twofold achievement of making us aware of what it is to be a man *and* what it is to be a dog).[73] Fay takes this claim one step further, stating that Bazin's selection of case studies featuring animals speaks to cinema's ability to "reveal a world in which humans exist equally with animals and things; it may even show us a world in which animals and things exist independent of humans altogether."[74]

[73] For example, Bazin directs us to the walrus and seal hunts in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), or to the scene in *The Circus* (1928) of Charlie Chaplin locked in a cage with a lion. Fay writes that "these images are bound not only to the discourse of attention and love so central to Bazin's ethos, but to his surrealist attraction to films that momentarily showcase the objective copresence of radically different entities." See Jennifer Fay, "Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin's Posthumanism," *Journal of Visual Culture*. Vol 7(1): 41–64. Dudley Andrew similarly describes Bazin as an 'organicist.' Andrew, Dudley. *André Bazin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[74] Fay, "Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin's Posthumanism," 42.

We are already familiar with the fresh view that films offer on the nonhuman world, including animals, plants, and the world of objects, or in Virginia Woolf's words "life as it is when we have no part in it."[75] Pollmann makes a similar claim, noting that for Bazin "the essence of cinema lies not in the human being […] but rather in the way cinema mediates the world to us. This world is not 'ours'—it is alien to us, and work is required to establish it as our environment." According to Pollmann, Bazin's fascination with diverse forms of organic life is what leads him to draw this connection between animals and cinema.[76]

Importantly, Bazin is *not* saying that Vigo wants to direct our attention to the cats in this film, nor that we are supposed to follow them somehow along the narrative, and wonder where they have gone when they vanish from the screen (and they do enter and exit the frame with no particular reason). They participate in making the chaotic and disorganized space of the film, full of artifacts, garbage, and general clutter, into what it is. Bazin's language is extremely apt, as he exposes the paradox of these cats: they blend into the setting, the grain of salt in the solution, yet they are *necessary* within it. At once insignificant and essential, they make the film complete without doing much.

We find an earlier formulation of this principle when Germaine Dulac explains the capacity of cinematic images to create a sense of atmosphere by pointing to details of mise en scène, including cats. She writes on a party scene from the film *Kean* (Alexandre Volkoff, 1924) that juxtaposes drinkers, bottles on the bar totter, and a cat that "will look at them, but soon become frightened, it will seek out a corner in which to take over". These juxtapositions, she claims, "are not hors d'oeuvres. They are placed there mathematically to create a sense of the atmosphere, the feeling

[75] Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, vol. 4, 1925–1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 349.

[76] Pollmann, *Cinematic Vitalism: Film Theory and the Question of Life*, 211.

of noise *in* and *through* the silence. They have a reason for being there just as a well-placed word is necessary for the brilliance of a phrase."[77]

By the fragmentation of mise en scéne into its components, Bazin shows how one conspicuous detail can stand out, not by destroying the immersive quality of the whole but merely by exposing its mechanism. Taking the film text apart to the level of singular details makes room for pursuing the diverse levels of meaning that coexist in the totality of its parts. Even though Bazin's mode of film criticism does not necessarily correspond with Benjamin's 'dialectics at a standstill', the little grain of salt is clearly the result of fragmentation. As a fragment its value lies, Benjamin will claim, in the *indirect* relationship it has to meaning as a whole: "the value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to underlying idea."[78] This relationship between part and whole can only be grasped by immersing oneself in "the most minute details" extracted from the object, as Benjamin writes elsewhere, "to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event."[79] The absence of any clear explanation for *why* the detail is there is exactly what holds the film together.

Narrative Luxury: On Two Types of Detail in *Caught* (Ophüls, 1949)

Whereas certain filmic details are presumed to be the 'grain of salt' that unifies the filmic space, other details do not necessarily belong to the 'unifying forces' of the film. To go back to the obtuse

[77] Germaine Dulac, "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema," in *French Film Theory and Criticism Volume* 1, 308. For an elaborate account of Dulac's ideas on this matter see Tami Williams, *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 129.

[78] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 28-29.

[79] Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 461.

filmic details in *The Third Meaning,* these particulars would be termed 'a luxury': the detail registered in excess, the one tied to decadence and symptomatic of it.

With modern narrative, Barthes claims, one finds a great deal of insignificant notation, that is, details that are 'superfluous' in relation to structure.[80] Seeing their presence within the text, they display a kind of "narrative luxury", which has the effect of increasing the 'cost' of narrative information. Barthes helps us set the implications of practicing decadent, detail centered criticism, one engaged with what he elsewhere defines as *verbal display*.[81] The notion of verbal display in particular can be modified to visual terms, and applied successfully to critically examine the films of Max Ophuls. With his films we find that details, and mise-en-scène in general, does not participate in the medium's claim to realism, nor is it invested in the portrayal of the ordinary. The Ophulsian mise-en-scène does not transcend its subject, Andrew Sarris wrote; it *is* the subject.[82] As Willemen urges, with Ophuls we ought to reject the misleading opposition of form and content, that attempts to separate story from style.[83]

Ophuls is attentive to details in every respect; even the most insignificant among them, as he himself pointed out, are often "the most evocative, characteristic and even decisive."[84] The details in Ophuls are indeed overwritten to some extent, making his films *overflow:* with objects and with emotion. In his film *Caught* one can easily point to the detail we *should* be noticing, a fur coat, the

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[80] Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 141.

[81] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 23.

[82] Andrew Sarris, "Max Ophus," *Film Comment* Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1971): 56-59. Sarris notes on the abundance of staircases in Ophuls films, that stands out when compared to their actual narrative significance: "there are sixty shots of staircases in M*adame De*, but not one of them is dramatically effective in the Hitchcockian manner of *Notorious* and *Psycho*, nor philosophically portentous in the Wellesian manner of *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons.* Indeed, it is possible to synopsize *Madame De* without once mentioning a staircase." Sarris, "Max Ophus," 58.

[83] Paul Willemen, "The Ophuls Text: A Thesis," in *Ophuls,* ed. Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 134-140.

[84] Qtd. in Roy Armes, *French Cinema Since 1946. Vol. 1: The Great Tradition* (London: Zwemmer and Barnes), 1966.

object that emphasizes the motif of transformation of the leading character and her approach to commodity. The coat takes on meaning as part of the narrative and as a thematic motif, the one detail we will usually find in commentaries on the film. To this more traditional model of the symbolic film detail Ophuls attaches, within the scope of one scene, another type of detail: the peripheral, *useless* object in the form of a fly swat, employed not for its original purpose, but for no reason whatsoever. This scene shows very clearly that the mise-en-scène *is* the subject. This second kind of detail, however, functions differently than expected. While the coat spells out meaning, the fly swat refuses it; it avoids leading the viewer to any clear understanding of its exact role in the scene. Even if it belongs to everyday life, Ophuls uses the mundane object by way of excessive style.

Ophuls was celebrated for pure style by the critics of the *Cahiers du cinema* in the 1950s as one of the great 'auteur' directors. The *content* of his films was, however, often dismissed by others, especially given his interest in women's lives and their particular experience. Later, feminist film theory will use his films as exemplary of the 'woman's film', as they feature a female central character and focus on female desire. The critical voices to respond to Ophuls's films can be explained by his preference of genre or subject, yet they appear to be pointing to something else, a feeling of excess or *visual display*. Lindsay Anderson is representative of *Sight and Sound* of the 1950s when he suggests that in *The Earrings of Madame de*…(1953) Ophuls has "made the story an excuse for a succession of rich decorative displays,"[85] while in *Film Comment* they noted on the 'cellophane kitsch' of the story in *Caught*.[86]

An exemplar of this critical approach is Bosley Crowther's review of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* for the *New York Times,* which he concludes as follows: "if you are looking for sensibility and

[85] Lindsay Anderson, "*Madame De…,*" *Sight and Sound* 23.4 (1954): 196–7.

[86] Gary Carey, *Film Comment* Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1971): 62-64.

reasonable emotion in a film, beware of this overwritten 'letter'. It will choke you with rhetoric and tommy-rot." Crowther's sharp language points to his discomfort with the film's excessive style, and its seemingly moral implications. His dismissal of the film stems from its poignant emotional tone, and the affective investment which it calls for. As an alternative to 'reasonable emotion' (whatever that might mean), Ophuls gives us 'pseudo-Viennese Schmaltz' (this last comment does not only elude to the film's European setting, but to the director's own 'Europeanness' within Hollywood).[87] What I take from this commentary is that is rejects the rhetoric of the film, not simply its emotional drama but its *style*, that is, its overwritten details. Put differently, in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* everything means *too much*.

Caught will be one of Ophuls's final American films, typically classified as a woman's film or alternatively a film noir. Leonora Ames (Barbara Bel Geddes) is a young woman of the working class, whose desires are defined from the opening scene by objects of luxury and social status, particularly a mink fur coat. *Caught* engages thematically and stylistically with the commodification of the female subject, and the implications of capitalist success for women in particular.[88] Leonora's desire to break free, marry a wealthy man and transform into a woman of a 'higher' class, only leads her into another kind of trap.[89] When Leonora's wish comes true, and she marries a millionaire, the

[87] Mulvey claims that Ophuls's films, and his general cultural outlook, always remained European, particularly during his time in Hollywood. This sense of 'Europeanness' results both from his pan-European career and his struggle to hold on to his own non-American style within the Hollywood system. Laura Mulvey, "Love, History, and Max Ophuls: Repetition and Difference in Three Films of Doomed Romance." *Film* & *History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 43, Number 1, Spring 2013: 7-29.

[88] On Ophuls and the American dream, in the context of *Caught* in particular, see Laura Crossley, "Indicting Americana: how Max Ophüls exposed the American Dream in *Caught* (1949) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949)," *Studies in European Cinema* Vol. 11, No. 2 (2014): 116–125.

[89] Karl Schoonover joins *Caught* with *The Reckless Moment* to discuss Ophuls's special interest in 'stuff': details and objects of mise en scéne. Schoonover cites and the endless trinkets and miscellaneous objects that obstruct our view of characters and events, and argues that "this clutter is also consistent with Ophuls's legend. The director was famous for being intensely detail oriented." Karl Schoonover, "The Cinema of Disposal: Max Ophuls and Accumulation in America," *Differences* 29.1 (2018): 33–65. Paul Willemen referred to the same proliferation of objects in "The Ophuls

neurotic Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan), he turns out to be an abusive and possessive husband. In her new life she lacks nothing, but loses everything; trapped in her mansion with the cruel Ohlrig, she is incapable of imagining a way to escape within the social confinements of her world.[90] As Daniel Morgan notes, the constraints imposed on her actions are even deeper, and stem from the narrow options she can actively choose from.[91]

Leonora eventually starts working as a receptionist in the office of two doctors, and falls in love with one of them, Larry Quinada (James Mason), who asks her to marry him. At this point, Leonora is still married and pregnant with Ohlrig's child. Leonora's dilemma—the choice between Quinada, the man she loves, and Ohlrig, the man who can offer her financial security— resembles narrative patterns common in Ophuls films. As Mulvey argues, Ophuls's narratives often revolve around an opposition between two types of masculinity which the woman is forced to choose between. The two 'types' compete over the woman, and specifically, over the control of her desire.[92] The frantic ending of *Caught* includes Leonora's premature birth, the baby dying at the hospital, and Ohlrig left seriously ill after a heart attack, all allow her to unite with Quinada (Ophuls himself commented on the strange ending in an interview with François Truffaut and Jacques Rivette, noting that he had difficulties with the production regarding the script, so "the film goes off the rails towards the end").[93]

Text: A Thesis," where he describes it as the "obstacles between scene and seen." Willemen, "The Ophuls Text: A Thesis," 137.

[90] Daniel Morgan, "Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity: On the Aesthetics and Ethics of Camera Movement," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 38, No. 1 (Autumn 2011): 161.

[91] Morgan, "Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity," 137.

[92] Laura Mulvey, "Love, History, and Max Ophuls," 9.

[93] François Truffaut and Jacques Rivette's interview with Ophuls appears in *Ophuls*, ed. Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute; New York: Zoetrope, 1978), 23.

As Karl Schoonover shows, *Caught* explores its ethical dilemmas not only by the moves of narrative, that follow the costs of capitalist success as intertwined with the confinements of patriarchy, but also by its imagery, and particularly its 'anxious attentiveness' to stuff; the mise-en-scène is both object heavy and object *obsessed*, he argues, however in the long run 'stuff' only become an obstacle.[94] The film opens with what Susan White calls a bombardment of economic metaphors:[95] the title sequence, made up of fashion ads from a glossy magazine, merges with the narrative when the same magazine becomes the film's first shot, followed by a voice over—"I'll take this one," "That one," "This one's for me"—as we see fingers pointing to the objects in the ads, and playfully declaring ownership. This economic of desire, in Doane's terms, culminates in the final ad they pause on —a sketch of a woman in a fur coat, its significance marked by the camera tracking back to reveal a conversation between the two women leaning over the same magazine.[96] The fur mink coat will be, from this point on, *the* object of commodity fetishism, and the film's key signifier of economic success and particularly what it can offer women. As Leonora (then Maud) and her roommate Maxine (Ruth Brady) fixate on this particular object, plans are made on how the former will become the owner of not one, but two coats (she will gift her mother with one). The strategy they work out involves leaving her current occupation of manual labor (she is 'only' a carhop, and they converse as she is washing her aching feet) to become a model in a department store, with

[94] Schoonover, "The Cinema of Disposal," 43.

[95] Susan White, *The Cinema of Max Ophuls: Magisterial Vision and the Figure of Woman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 243.

[96] Mary Ann Doane, "*Caught* and *Rebecca:* The Inscription of Femininity as Absence," in *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge; London: BFI, 1988), 198. Doane spells out the play of female desire in this scene; fingers in particular are metonymic signifiers of desire, she claims, especially visible in the shot of the ad featuring a hand wearing a luxurious glove. Ophuls's *The Earrings of Madame de…* (1953) begins with a gloved hand pulling open a drawer of a case of jewels, that resembles the opening of *Caught* with the emphasis on women's hands, gloves, and objects.

access to wealthy men. To achieve this goal, she plans to attend Dorothy Dale's Charm School, and together they review her expenses carefully.

Maud renames herself Leonora, and successfully makes her way into charm school, where the 'teacher', Dorothy Dale (Natalie Shaefer), picks up a simple coat that stands for "a beautiful mink coat", and places it on Leonora's shoulders. A dissolve takes us to the following shot of Leonora in an elevator, now dressed in actual fur. To follow, tight framing opens the sequence and reveals first the texture of a fur coat, and then Leonora, dressed in the extravagant coat in the elevator of a department store. The dream appears to be her new reality until she walks out of the elevator to the department store floor, announced as "cosmetics, jewelry, perfume and furs"; she walks around, twirling in the coat she displays on her body, naming its price, "Forty-nine ninety-five, plus tax", repeatedly. It is not just the coat which is for sale: Leonora is clearly marketing herself in order to 'catch' a rich husband, as Doane points out,[97]and soon receives an invitation to a yacht party on the boat of the millionaire Smith Ohlrig. Unsure of what to wear for the party, she tries to decide between a borrowed fur wrap and her own, more subtle coat.

Ophuls continues to play with an assortment of coats to represent Leonora's confinement within her own image, and the improbability of authentic choices as a result. The mink fur coat opens the film to symbolize her dreams, and will later materialize when she becomes Ohlrig's wife, owner of a mink coat. The coat is a sign of her new privileges, but also of the domination of her husband, and his control over her life (she is often referred to as his *employee*). When she leaves the house to begin her work as a receptionist, she replaces it with a cheap, translucent raincoat, the merely functional cover. Even her choice to put away the mink, the object that represents her confinement by Ohlrig ("I'm done with that coat", she declares at one point), does not mean she is

[97] Doane, *Caught* and *Rebecca:* The Inscription of Femininity as Absence," 200.

actually free; her actions are the direct response to the fact that Quinada becomes suspicious of what he refers to as her "Park Avenue" appearance; "you're so fancy", he complains, "you're scaring people away!".

Only when Quinada sees her wearing her thin raincoat, he fully accepts her new image: the hardworking colleague, and immediately offers to buy her a warmer one. Eventually, her relationship with Quinada leads to Leonora's third coat: he gifts her with a 'sensible' cloth coat, functional and just warm enough, and appropriate of her new status ("it's not mink, but it will keep you warm", the doctor assures her). This one too is a performative object, embodying a social norm expected of women, this time of respectability. The last shot of the film is of a nurse in the hospital taking away the fur coat, to signify Leonora no longer desires it, not needs it.

The way Ophuls uses the coat motif goes beyond effective visual presentation of shifting environments, as Victor Perkins argues; it defines *our attitude* to the narrative events. None of the garments, however, speak to Leonora's true or authentic character, as the film does not provide access to it, nor to the possibility of self-expression or an authentic life. Rather, each article of clothing designates a role she will "try, or be forced, to live in", Perkins explains: the coat is the *functional* detail for the purposes of narrative and theme. [98]

This might be the place to examine the overwritten Ophuls text. In "Moments of Choice", Perkins points to the coat in *Caught* as a detail that has a *clear purpose*, that is, direct implications on the film's 'meaning'. Perkins gives an account of different types of details, including décor, performance, and clothing, all valued as the parts to construct the meaning of the whole. Writing on the sleigh-ride scene from Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) for example, and the conditions of filming it in freezing temperatures, he claims that "the very breath of an actor can be

[98] V.F. Perkins, "Moments of Choice", in *Movies of the Fifties*, ed. A. Lloyd, (London: Orbis Publishing, 1982), 209-213. Reprinted in *Rouge* 9 (2006), http://www.rouge.com.au/9/moments _choice.html).

made significant when the director places it in an expressive relationship with the other aspects of the scene."[99]

A detail like the apparent fumes of breath contributes to the effectiveness of the moment, and making a film is about choices of this kind, *small* choices (In the Hollywood system, he notes, directors were "paid to believe that every little thing mattered – and to prove it by their results"). One such object is the fur coat in Ophuls, which is also used in *The Reckless Moment* but made into an even more elaborate theme in *Caught*, both films from 1949. In the former, Mrs. Harper (Joan Bennett) cannot bring herself to dispose of it even in desperate need of money. Leonora, on the other hand, *must* get rid of it eventually. The coat implies mobility in social status, making it an object that can also mobilize meaning; yet with Ophuls there are always *other* details, those which do not necessarily translate clearly. Along with the transformations of Leonora's coat and its thematic implications, other details partake in the delicate balance of meaning and excess, saying too little and saying too much, often without any clear relation to the flow of the narrative or the status of the heroine. These details might be evocative, but of what exactly?

In the opening scene of *Caught*, one such detail appears: the fly swat. As Leonora and her roommate Maxine are planning her 'social education' at the Dorothy Dale's charm school, the camera moves to Leonora in an extended take. She is on the bed, imagining how she will start modelling at the store after she graduates, and soon meet a handsome, young millionaire, who will suddenly see her for what she is. The daydream is put in words, and in the meantime, Leonora distractedly plays with a fly swat. She idly, pointlessly, softly hits her legs (no flies are to be seen anywhere in the apartment), her gestures unaware, the inadvertent behaviors we engage in when thinking of something else. The fly swat casts a shadow on her face each time she picks it up for

[99] Perkins, "Moments of Choice."

another hit.

In her unplanned, *natural* gestures the role of artifice in this film is made even more obvious; especially the artifice at play in her making of her own image, to be completed only by *catching* the right type of man. The predatory undertone of her daydreaming is exposed by the play with the object, even if the film does want us to believe that Leonora has a sense of right and wrong, and that she does not marry for money alone, but for her idea of love.

What is revealed by her idle gestures is not exactly devious intentions, but her own unawareness, as Perkins writes of the scene, "what is blind in her calculation, too, emerges from her complete inattention to her own gestures and their evident meanings."[100] Readers of *Caught* often ascribe self-deception to Leonora's character (Morgan writes, for example, that she performs her actions while "convincing herself that she does so for love").[101] By this she resembles other Ophuls heroines, similarly caught in "a set of ideological frameworks of which they are at best partially aware", as John Gibbs puts it.[102] The dynamic around this lack of awareness often takes place in relation to objects, especially ones of luxury.

All of this still does not signal that Leonora's object teaches us of her 'true' intentions, nor that it insinuates her unconscious predatory drives. Ophuls does not make room for us to clearly tell the unintentional from the calculated in her behavior. Likewise, trying to pinpoint what *style* actually means is futile, as it lies in the indecisiveness of this very moment. The bed is, as Gibbs notes, the space of fantasy, and the scene constructs, in Perkins's words, "an isolated image of Maud-at-dreaming." The daydream allows for actions performed with little awareness, which Ophuls presents

[100] Perkins, "Moments of Choice."

[101] Morgan, "Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity," 160.

[102] John Gibbs, "Opening movements in Ophuls: Long takes, Leading Characters and Luxuries," in *The Long Take: Critical Approaches*, eds. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (Palgrave Macmillan, London, UK: 2017), 89.

in a way which does not commit to any one meaning. This is not to say that the photographic image and its recording of contingency, what Bazin would identify as the "ambiguity" of the cinematic image, is that which interests Ophuls in this scene, but rather that he does not *give over* to the dichotomy of the random versus the constructed image, as Schoonover points out.[103] The fly swat might be an ordinary object but the visual fascination of her actions does not reflect an interest in the everyday, as this is an overly stylized moment, that we recognize as meticulously planned; the gestures being performed absentmindedly makes style even more obvious.

Figure 2.6 Leonora (Barbara Bel Geddes) and the fly swat in *Caught* (Ophuls, 1949)

[103] I mean to evoke Schoonover's subtle and critical distinction in his analysis of objects in Ophuls. On the use of a towel in the opening scene of Ophuls's *The Reckless Moment* (1949) he writes that "the towel is neither a continuity oversight nor simply a set decoration to be looked past. Neither accidental inclusion nor symbolic flourish, it betrays something about how Ophuls practiced an odd realism in conversation with what he saw in the work of Italian neorealist directors such as Rossellini." Schoonover, "The Cinema of Disposal: Max Ophuls and Accumulation in America," 59.

The fly swat joins the abundance of objects filling the Ophuls frame, often seen as the mark of his style, making his cinema "a machine for captivating the look", in Willemen's words. They are not always the objects that necessarily *represent* something about characters or narrative events (in the way the development of the coat motif promotes themes and motivations), nor are they incidental details of the profilmic space. For Ophuls these prolific details are "neither extras nor supplements to the film's main project", Schoonover argues, and they placed for us to notice even when meaning is never made explicable, lucid, or clear. The fly swat is literally useless: it is detached from its original purpose, an accidental prop in a distracted daydream. And even within this distracted state, we know this object is not to be confused with a realist detail that happened to be on set. Leonora is playing with the object *as if* it happened to be there, and in her play, she shows something of who she is, and who she is not.

As the event takes place in the opening scene of *Caught,* and thus a possible introduction of the heroine's motivations, these gestures and the camera's lingering on them seem to demand more interpretation. An everyday moment, though made excessive, is still a micro-event. However, something about this playful and serious moment remains indecisive, which leaves the viewer somewhat restless. By joining the ordinary with stylistic emphasis, Ophuls activates the impulse to decipher, to hold on to the moment; the temporality of lingering characterizes this type of detail, and is part of what intrigues the viewer in its appearance. This is the filmic detail that we love, and the one we return to. Something about it is always left unsaid.

The gestures of the day dream thus expose hesitation at the heart of the act of interpretation. Perkins indeed revisits this moment in *Caught* elsewhere, as it appears that he had not been able to capture its complexity on the first attempt:

> [W]hile the conversation is still of mundane matters, she reaches out idly to take hold of a flimsy metal fly swat. She fiddles with this throughout her daydream, turning it in her hand, rubbing it against her thigh and tapping it on her knee. […] At no time during this does Maud pay attention to her gestures. She is not swatting an imaginary fly. Indeed, her fiddling

> with the swat seems to indicate boredom and aimlessness rather than a killer instinct. But on (her pronunciation of) "sees me… " she makes the most forceful of her taps with the swat and then, in the pause as she bites her lower lip with pleasant thought, holds it still in a way that would indicate—if she were attending to her actions—that she had achieved or imagined a hit.[104]

The web of meanings he points to in this detailed description is by no means directly stated in the scene. Ophuls avoids showing Leonora in pursuit of a real fly, which would convey a straightforward message, and instead chooses to emphasize the distracted nature of her gestures, the barely perceptible space between the accidental and the intentional. Perkins argues that the scene is highly suggestive by associating the fly swat and the 'capturing' of the husband (which parallels the fact that Leonora will eventually become the victim, the one who is *caught*, in the painful outcome of her hopes and dreams). The fiddling therefore reveals something about *itself,* provoking "what is calculating and predatory in [her] innocently naïve reverie."

Even so, Ophuls does not neatly compare the millionaire she is dreaming of 'catching' and the object (or the fly), a visual analogy that would spell out meaning directly and effortlessly (as the coat persuasively does). Alternatively, Maud's distracted fiddling conveys her unawareness to the implications of her own dreams, which is different from saying that her actions simply *illustrate* the act of capture she is wishing for.

The fly swat is an object that clearly stands out, yet it does so differently from the coat detail, that can be easily translated to thematic motifs, and particularly to the restraints of social mobility. Leonora's gestures and her interaction with the object do not spell out one particular theme, but set forth the very excess of meaning that lies in the body's spontaneous actions. As Andrew Klevan has suggested, when we are taken along with the performer's movement, we become sensitive to the

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[104] V. F. Perkins, "Must We Say What They Mean?: Film Criticism and Interpretation," *Movie* 34/35 (Winter 1990): 1-6. Perkins effectively demonstrates the ways in which interpretation still asks us to stay open to the play of "explicit" and "implicit" meanings in the cinematic image.

movement of meaning.[105] The way the scene is played out makes room for ambiguity: is she playing aimlessly, or is she in fact unaware of her own motivations, as they are reflected in her gestures? The uncertainty at the heart of our intentions is not evoked explicitly, but I propose it instead as a question of mise en scéne, and particularly of one detail that plays with the distinction between the accidental and the premediated. With this scene, the object makes an appearance, leaves its mark, and disappears for the rest of the film; and we are left with a detail that means too much.[106]

[105]Andrew Klevan, *Film Performance*, (New York: Wallflower, 2005), 11.

[106] I take the film's reflection on our ordinary actions from Cavell's remarks on conversations in film: "words that on one viewing pass, and are meant to pass, without notice, as unnoticeably trivial, on another resonate and declare their implication in a network of significance. These film words thus declare their mimesis of ordinary words, words in daily conversations." Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 11-12.

Chapter 3

The Accidental Detail: Rethinking Contingency on Film

> One can say, as I have implied, that everything caught by film is accident, contingency. Then one must equally say that every accident on film becomes permanent.
>
> Stanley Cavell[1]

> Make the objects look as if they want to be there.
>
> Robert Bresson[2]

In his *Lover's Discourse,* Barthes writes of *ravissement*, the initial event we often recreate after the fact, and during which the amorous subject is "ravished" (taken over, and captivated) by the sight of the beloved. When we fall in love we do so with the abrupt force of an interruption to everyday life:

> The first thing we love is *a scene* [un tableau] For love at first sight requires the very sign of its suddenness (what makes me irresponsible, subject to fatality, swept away, ravished) and of all the arrangements of objects, it is the scene which seems to be seen best for the first time; a curtain parts: what had not yet ever been seen is discovered in its entirety, and then devoured by the eyes; what is immediate stands for what is fulfilled; I am initiated: the scene *consecrates* the object I am going to love.[3]

Curiously, both mise en scène and *framing* play a role in this tableau of love at first sight. The temporality is distinct from other events of life, and is framed by memory in one particular moment. By this, Barthes asserts, love is the scene with *all the magnificence of an accident*, the fortunate twist of fate. The amorous language is familiar to those invested in film detail, who share a similar attachment to the idea of the accidental discovery. Still, the question of what exactly is mesmerizing about the film detail—what it is that we love— is not one for conclusive answers. I argue that

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[1] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 229.

[2] Bresson, Robert. *Notes on the Cinematographer,* trans. by Jonathan Griffin (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 101.

[3] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 192.

something still persists across the diverse answers we encounter, namely the contingent *feeling* of films that often clings to a detail, the element that we *suddenly* notice. The temporality is set: the moment of falling in love is a surprising event. Likewise, this moment in the cinema is upheld in memory along with its own sign of suddenness, and must be *perceived* as accidental by nature. These conditions ask for another look at what we mean when we speak of contingency on film.

Sheer Chance: The Contingent Feeling of Cinematic Details

The accidental nature of the cinematic detail stands for the unplanned or arbitrary aspects of its appearance, that are usually signified by the term *contingency*, what Dai Vaughn refers to as the "invasion of the spontaneous" and Mary Ann Doane identifies as the camera's ability "to record indiscriminately." The accidental details thus allude to the *invasion* of profilmic reality into the diegesis. The fly inadvertently captured by the camera in the famous shot from Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962), moving towards Jeanne Moreau's slightly open mouth, would be the perfect example. Dudley Andrew asked the cinematographer Raoul Coutard about this 'mistake,' and Coutard described it as the by-product of "a miracle where *nature* (an unexpected and extraordinarily beautiful morning light) lined up with the fiction." The resulting shot was so expressive, he recalls, that Truffaut never asked for a retake.[4]

Kracauer already claimed that film has an affinity with the fortuitous,[5] and whereas the terms of this affinity are featured elaborately across film theory,[6] one critical distinction is still missing: how

[4] Raoul Coutard, Interview with Dudley Andrew, February 27, 2003, New Haven, in Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 18-19, my emphasis.

[5] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*: *The Redemption of Psychical Reality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 18-20.

[6] See for example Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) and "The Object of Theory," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed., Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 80-92; Janet Harbord, "Contingency's Work: Kracauer's Theory

we should distinguish between the accidental or the contingent, and the *impression* of an accident.[7] This gap is often covered up by referencing the lure of unexcepted filmic details, yet what is contingent about the film detail (that aspect which is not synonymous with the purely unplanned event, as in the fly from *Jules and Jim*) is by no means clarified. For example, Doane's concept of 'the object of theory' does acknowledge, and try to account for that which is inarticulable in the film detail, i.e. the elusive element that makes a moment or a detail photogenic, and her solution would be that its supplementary value depends on the camera, and therefore we learn that it *must* escape our grasp.[8]

In this context Raymond Bellour similarly evokes the *unattainable text* of film analysis, pointing again to the slippage of critical language.[9] The accidental detail complicates this already tricky task of putting films in words: not only the struggle to represent moving images in writing, but trying to figure out words for contingency as an element taking part in the image. How to account for this new type of *representation* of contingency then becomes a new problem of aesthetics, and in this chapter I piece together an alternative concept of *filmed contingency* by highlighting this blind spot in film theory: what does it mean for the detail to *appear* accidental on film. The detail in my understanding is the very spark of contingency for which words are both the origin of intelligibility

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of Film and the Trope of the Accidental," *New Formations*, no. 61 (2007): 90-104; Nico Baumbach, "Nature Caught in the Act: On the Transformation of an Idea of Art in Early Cinema," *Comparative Critical Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 373-383.

[7] Bazin refers the aesthetic paradox of the accidental that partakes in filmic events in his remarks on Italian New Realism, and particularly *Bicycle Thieves*, in which "the marvelous aesthetic paradox […] is that it has the relentless quality of tragedy while nothing happens in it except by chance." André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scéne" in *What is Cinema?: Vol. 2,* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of California, Press, 2005), 68.

[8] Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol.14, No. 3 (Fall 2003): 89-111. The close up stands in the center of Doane's argument here.

[9] It should be noted that for Bellour this slipping constitutes the *impossibility* of film quotation, and thus presents an exceptional resistance to analysis: "the analysis of film never stops filling up a film that never stops running out." See Raymond Bellour, "The Unattainable Text," *Screen*, Volume 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 25-26.

and a death mask.[10] And the turn to language is, without doubt, a challenge. It indicates that we are now in a different phase of experience, evaluation and thought. Words appear after the fact, when the lights are on. We have left the movie theater and are again *in the world*. The film has ended. Not only is the temporality of the film experience itself is at stake here, but the critical distinction between the spark of contingency that we attribute to the image and the narration of the experience after the fact. Our language then tries to bring together choice and chance, rule-making and accident, which will all become part of our way to speak of the details that stand out.

At this point we might turn to an example for such a detail, tied to an event of spontaneity: the glove scene from Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), often cited as the model for skillful improvisation (the scene did come out of improvisation during rehearsal, but the event appearing in the film was not an accident per se).[11] Terry (Marlon Brando) and Edie (Eva Marie Saint) are in the middle of a conversation when she drops her little white glove. Brando begins to play with it; he strokes it, he wears it. The fiddling is both highly responsive to the situation and *appears* unaware to itself. The delicate, light object works against his rough hands and overall character. He is vulnerable, all of the sudden. Eva Marie Saint responds only after several minutes, taking the glove off his hand when she wants to leave. Brando's performance obeys the eccentric logic of the privileged detail: it sparks something in the viewer, and with it the desire to write, to explain, and to

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[10] Walter Benjamin concludes his advice to writers in "The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses," included in *One Way Street,* by the line "the work is the death mask of its conception." We might say that the filmic experience is similar, in that criticism becomes the symbolic death of the very spark leading to its creation. See Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 81. Goethe similarly writes in *Theory of Colors* about the difficulty to "keep the essential quality still living before us, and not kill it with the word." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1970), 302.

[11] Kazan described the scene by terms that join accident and intentionality: "as they were walking along, she *accidentally* dropped her glove; and Brando picked up the glove; and by holding it, she couldn't get away—the glove was his way of holding her. Furthermore, whereas he couldn't, because of this tension about her brother being killed, demonstrate any sexual or loving feeling towards her, he could towards the glove. And he put his hand inside the glove […] he was able to express, through the glove, something he couldn't express to her directly. So, the object, in that sense, did it all." Qtd. in Michel Ciment, *Kazan on Kazan* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 46, emphasis mine.

understand. For Willemen this very scene illustrates "the way an adventitious, unrehearsed event occurring in the performance of the script provides an occasion for Brando's method training or *intuitive genius (you can go either way)* to exhibit itself."[12] In other words, Brando skillfully puts the 'accident' into use by his acting style and screen presence. This is obviously a statement about performance, evocative gestures, and the talent for improvisation; but more interesting to the purpose of my discussion is the term 'accidental' in its wider implications, especially when coupled with Brando's intuitions, that are exemplified by his *making use of the accident* for inhabiting the character of Terry.

Is Brando helping the accident happen in his acting style, or is he doing something slightly different: is he making the accident *matter*? While we might associate the accidental with the spontaneity of the unscripted event, we can also make a more particular claim about the *impression* of an accident being performed, or the semblance of contingency that takes place in this scene. For Noël Burch this would amount to the *semblance* of sheer chance, an element "usually banished by most film-makers to some forgotten corner of off-screen space" and which "seems to be most palpable when it asserts its presence without ever becoming actually visible."[13] As Germaine Dulac wrote, by this the moving image becomes the 'faithful guardian' of the fleeting gesture.[14]
Writing on his meetings with his now famous patient Dora, Freud points to a type of gestures that resembles Brando's play with the globe. These gestures, in which we engage with an object in a purposeless manner, are called symptomatic acts. On one occasion, he observes Dora's interaction with a small handbag:

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[12] Paul Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered," in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 234, emphasis mine.

[13] Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 113.

[14] Germaine Dulac, "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema," in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology: Volume I, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 306.

> That day she wore at her waist (…) a small reticule of a shape which had just come into fashion; and, as she lay on the sofa and talked, she kept playing with it—opening it, putting a finger into it, shutting it again, and so on. I looked on for some time, and then explained to her the nature of a symptomatic act.[15]

Symptomatic acts are gestures people perform "automatically, unconsciously, without attending to them, or as if in a moment of distraction". Even if they are usually denied any significance and presumed to be inadvertent acts (Dora, for example, denies that her own play with the handbag has any meaning in particular), closer observation will show how such objects give expression to impulses or thoughts by allowing them to come to the surface, for fleeting glimpses of the inaccessible depths of the mind.[16]

Dora's erotic displacement is definitely activated in Brando's fiddling with the object; by touching the glove, Kazan remarks, he indirectly touches *her*. Or, we might say, he is in touch with his own desire. This does not point to any intentionality in his stroking of her object; on the contrary, something in his actions is convincingly perceived as unintentional. Brando's body brings emotion to the surface in the *mindless* play that somehow appears to escape scripting, exposing the unawareness of the body to itself; we are seeing something in his gestures that we are not sure he is aware of, that could not have been *programmed*.

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[15] See Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 68.

[16] We might think of this in relation to the concept of "appearing" in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, that he clarifies by referring to the body's symptoms: "this is what one is talking about when one speaks of the 'symptoms of a disease' [...] one has in mind certain occurrences in the body which show themselves and which, in showing themselves, 'indicate' [...] something which does not show itself." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 52.

Figure 3.1 Still from *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954)

My interest in these accidental moments should be distinguished from the captivation with natural contingencies, the 'incidentals' of film, epitomized in the exemplary myth of the wind in the trees' being the primal attraction for early audiences. The interest in cinema's incidental phenomena, the strange presence and movement of elements such as leaves, dust, smoke, and water, often intersects with cinephilia's attraction to the discovery of 'accidental' details; Keathley brings them together in the title of his *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees*, signifying that they are interchangeable terms. Critical accounts of film contingency often celebrate the overlooked details of nature as captured on screen, or interpret film details according to this 'natural' model.

However, the appreciation of film details that follows this model (as in the recent 'incidental as essential' versions of cinephilia[17]) is based on a partial account of the accidental nature of the

[17] In "Rescuing Fragments: A New Task for Cinephilia," George Toles provides one example of this tendency when he reads cinephilia as the viewing practice delighted with the 'corner of the eye' detail. Through the inspection of minor details, the accidental is made essential. In this model, the love of cinema *is* the love of detail, which favors the part over the whole, as we see in Toles's premise: "let us concede that most movies do not achieve a compelling unity or find the

detail, and its paradoxes of spontaneity. In this context Willemen earlier concept of cinephilia aptly captures the form of *predesigned* contingency that our favorite moments from films often share. My point of interest is thus not the fantasy of the 'pure' appearance of nature to the camera, but a more complex and often contradictory experience of intention and unpredictability in the film detail. The concept of contingency that Doane invokes does brings the subtelty of the accidental into play, but she then interprets Willemen's interest in cinephilia as an engagement with contingency *as indexicality*, namely the availability of "the particular, the singular, and the unpredictable— in short, the antisystematic"— within the cinematic.[18] The phrase 'antisystematic' is perhaps the most intriguing part of her analysis, given that Willemen brings up the system— the Hollywood set of codes, the skillful aspects of these premediated scenes—as *necessary conditions* for the appearance of 'involuntary' details. The encounter with what he terms 'the excessive detail' occurs when we face the coded and highly commercial system of images that is classical Hollywood cinema, in which contingency is discovered *within* conventions:

> It is no accident, indeed, it is highly necessary, that cinephilia should operate particularly strongly in relation to a form of cinema that is perceived as being highly coded, highly commercial, formalized and ritualized. For it is only there that the moment of revelation or excess, a dimension other than that which is being programmed, becomes noticeable. If that in itself is the system of the film, as, say, in a Stan Brakhage film, you don't have a cinephiliac moment because it's no longer demarcatable … because the whole film tries to be it.[19]

What follows is that the accident is paradoxically set in these highly stylized systems of images. Whereas Doane claims that the cinephile's pleasure lies in the unpredictable trace, I would propose that a more nuanced contingency is at play. The pleasurable encounter with the detail is where the

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ever elusive 'appropriate form'." See "Rescuing Fragments: A New Task for Cinephilia," *Cinema Journal*, 49.2 (Winter 2010): 159-166.

[18] Mary Ann Doane, "The Object of Theory," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed., Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 82.

[19] Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly," 238.

accidental and the predesigned as essential rules of cinema *collide*. In other words, the detail *depends upon* systematicity for its appearance.

Cinema and the Details of Nature

The concept of the contingent detail can be traced back to the idea of nature in early film theory, and particularly to the camera's capacity of revealing the hidden essence of things. Not only does 'the real' shine through the image in Bazin's *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, but a certain representation of nature, which will later in the essay become the epitome of accidental beauty *and* the revelatory qualities of the camera.[20] Photography affects us *like* natural phenomena does. Nature is not only the source of the snow flake or flower ("the vegetable or earthly origins" of the natural detail in Bazin) but an inseparable part of its beauty. Beauty is therefore tied to something that we experience in our views of nature. When we speak of the hidden splendors of the visible world that are suddenly *exposed* by the camera, we assume that nature has secrets that the camera can reveal, confirming the spirit of the Heraclitus fragment, *Nature loves to hide*.[21] In Walter Benjamin, one of the first to name contingency among the conditions of the photography, we find this early on in his interest in Karl Blossfeldt's photographs. The observations are taken from his first published statement on photography, the little essay "News about Flowers," a review of Blossfeldt's book *Urformen dey Kunst* (Originary Forms of Art, 1928). Benjamin writes:

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[20] We find a similar discourse of truth in the photograph in Edgar Allan Poe's notes on the Daguerreotype: "the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented. The variations of shade, and the gradations of both linear and aerial perspective are those of truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection." See Poe, "The Daguerreotype" [1840] in *Edgar Allan Poe's Contributions to Alexander's Weekly Messenger* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1943), 20–22.

[21] The cryptic saying (originally *phusis kruptesthai philei*) was traditionally translated as "Nature loves to hide", even if it is likely that this meaning never occurred to Heraclitus himself, as Pierre Hadot shows is his illuminating book *The Veil of Isis*. 'Love' in the original Greek is an especially tricky term, which does not only denote an emotion but refers to a natural or habitual tendency. See Hadot, *Veil of Isis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 7-17.

> These photographs reveal an entire, unsuspected horde of analogies and forms in the existence of plants. Only the photograph is capable of this. For a bracing enlargement is necessary before these forms can shed the veil that our solidity throws over them.[22]

Blossfeldt's vegetal worlds speak to forms of manmade creativity and gesture to the concept of the artistic genius.[23] Benjamin alludes to Blossfeldt again in his *Little History of Photography,* where he rephrases some of his earlier formulations and arrives to the unforgettable conclusion

> Photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and available for formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable.[24]

By isolation and enlargement, Benjamin claims, Blossfeldt opens the possibility of seeing of what we normally cannot see, while making the vegetal world into something uncanny, and unveiling the secret lives of plants.[25] A work that can be read along with Benjamin's remarks on Blossfeldt is Bazin's review of Jean Painlevé's documentary cinema, *Le film scientifique: beauté du hasard*, in which he asks similar questions regarding the *origin* of the image and the role of nature in its creation. For

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[22] Walter Benjamin, "New about Flowers," in *The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 156.

[23] Benjamin remarks on the relation of nature and art in his comments on the book's title: "*Originary Forms of Art*—certainly. What can this mean, though, but originary forms of nature? Forms, that is, which were never a mere model for art but which were, from the beginning, at work as originary forms in all that was created." See Benjamin, "New about Flowers," 272.

[24] Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 279. Kracauer employs similar terms in his remarks on the close up: "such images blow up our environment in a double sense: they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before." Kracauer, *Theory of* Film, 48. As Miriam Hansen notes, Kracauer's use of the term 'affinity' to describe film's ability to record the world also refers to its potential to reveal something in relation to that world. See her introduction to Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), xxv.

[25] George Bataille was also fascinated by Blossfeldt's photographs of plants. In his text "Le langage des fleurs" he claimed that only through magnification the sexual dimension of the plant becomes obvious (Blossfeldt did not want to include the essay in the publications on his work). As Ines Lindner points out, "within the enlargement lies a transgressive element, which in this case demolishes the optical discipline of Blossfeldt's illustrative concept." See Ines Lindner, "Picture Policies in *Documents*: Visual Display and Epistemic Practices," *Intermédialités/Intermediality* 15 (2010): 33–51.

Bazin accidental beauty is discovered in the science film, where "in the most absolute proscription of aesthetic intentions, cinematic beauty develops as an additional, supernatural gift."[26] As in Benjamin, he understands nature to be the genuine source of what we see. However, what adds inexplicable beauty to the creatures of nature is the apparatus, the mediator that appears *free from intention*.

Private worlds in miniature are discovered within nature, albeit the creator of natural phenomena is *not* the camera. This is why chance still takes an important role in Painlevé's documentaries: the details appear *as if by chance,* they have no intention to be captured by the camera (we might recall that for Benjamin, the details revealed by photography are *hiding* in their environment)[27]. These filmic details are not simply those we are not able to see in plain eyesight, but rather the aspects *disguised* by the dust of our preconceptions; in other words, photography and film test the confines of our attention to the world.

The dream of the secret life of things is suggested by the motif of the microscope, the mechanism to expose the life *within* life*,* the infinitely multiplied substance of tiny, miniscule objects.[28] Bazin echoes a similar sentiment towards the covert forms of movement unveiled by the camera:

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[26] See André Bazin, "Science Film: Accidental Beauty," in *Science Is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Cambridge, MA: Brico and MIT Press, 2000), 145–147.

[27] Oliver Gaycken points to Louis Delluc's remarks on nonfiction film, that anticipate Bazin: "there, that's beauty, real beauty – I would say the beauty of chance, but the cameraman must be given his due. He has learned how to see with such skill that we have exactly the same experience of the sea, sky, wind as he himself had. It is not just a film. It is natural truth." Louis Delluc, "Beauty in the Cinema," in *French Film Theory and Criticism: 1907-1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 138. Qtd. in Oliver Gaycken, "The Beauty of Chance*:* Film Ist," *Journal of Visual Culture* 11 (2012): 322.

[28] See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 54. Stewart refers to Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* and particularly to the stylization of the detail in this context, and her remarks appear extremely relevant to the filmic detail: "the very immobility of furniture or of the knickknacks sitting on this furniture, or of the deck of cards, can be proof of their unseen mobility, and unseen mobility equals secret lives." Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 69.

> What special effects could have produced the magical ballet of freshwater organisms...? What brilliant choreographer, what delirious painter, what poet could have imagined these arrangements, these forms and images! The camera alone possesses the secret key to this universe where supreme beauty is identified at once with nature and chance: that is, with all a traditional aesthetics considers the opposite of art.[29]

With Benjamin and Bazin the beauty and technology intersect precisely because chance is believed to be *the* element missing from previous art forms, and which the camera can now provide, resulting in a new and unprecedented access to visible/invisible worlds. The novelty of visibility is often attributed to the capacity to notice the minute details and creatures of a given environment.[30] Oliver Gaycken points out that Bazin's appreciation of the particular beauty of the science film resonates with Surrealist practices and tendencies, especially with the critical approach to intention and artistic persona, a connection Bazin himself acknowledges in this essay.[31] Following the affinity of his ideas with 'intentionless' exercises such as automatic writing, we could be tempted to read Bazin along with Keathley's version of the cinephile's visual discovery, which is a moment that *lacks intention*: "an embracing of film's inherent automatism means opening oneself to those fortuitous, chance encounters that are regularly captured by the camera in spite of the operator's intentions, and that

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[29] André Bazin, "Science Film: Accidental Beauty," 146-47.

[30] Epstein for example wrote that "if we wish to understand how an animal, a plant, or a stone can inspire respect, fear, or horror […] I think we must watch them on the screen, living their mysterious, silent lives, alien to the human sensibility". Jean Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*," in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, *vol. 1, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988): 317. Caroline Hovanec examines related questions in "Another Nature Speaks to the Camera: Natural History and Film Theory," *Modernism/Modernity*, Volume 26, Number 2 (April 2019): 243-265. Writing on *Plants of the Pantry* (1927), a short film that uses magnification and time-lapse to presents the secret life of its subject—in this case, mold—she argues that "natural history films do not just reveal the natural world via an expansion of vision; they also work to change viewers' affective responses to nature. They foster a love for strange, pesky, and mundane species, transmuting them into animated forms of living art." Hovanec, "Another Nature Speaks to the Camera," 246.

[31] See also James Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism the Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019). One example for this recognition of the Surrealists is when Bazin writes that "the camera alone possesses the secret key to this universe of images where supreme beauty is identified at once with nature and chance: that is, with all that a certain traditional aesthetic considers the opposite of art. The Surrealists alone foresaw its existence, which seeks in the almost impersonal automatism of their imagination the secret of an image factory." Qtd. in Gaycken, "The Beauty of Chance," 310. Gaycken emphasizes the word chance ['hasard'] in this context, as it appears several times in the essay and in its title, and was equally important for Surrealist thought and practice.

form the basis of cinephiliac moment."[32] To speak of contingency, then, means that we should emphasize what is captured without intention.

Keathley revisits the accidental in his discussion of the English art critic Walter Pater. The first goal of Pater's mode of criticism is to know one's *impression* as it is, and ask "what is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*?" Pater celebrated the 'epiphanies' that happen in front of details of an artwork. In an essay on Renaissance poet Joachim Du Bellay, Pater writes for example: "A sudden light transfigures a trivial thing, a weathervane, a windmill, a winnowing flail, the dust in the barn door; a moment—and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect; but it leaves a relish behind a longing that the accident may happen again."[33] As this quote shows, Pater's method was founded upon the *desire* for the accident.

Keathley's embrace of Pater's approach ultimately conforms to the Kantian notion of the agreeable, where *everyone has their own taste,* and as he claims it was exactly the *subjective* quality of filmic details that had formerly prevented film theorists from taking cinephilia seriously. As with the Kantian concept of what is agreeable, private beauty so to speak, Keathley's treatment of cinephilia tries to articulate the statement that this detail, or this moment, is beautiful *for me.*[34] This has another implication. When we say "everyone has their own taste", Kant emphasizes, we equally mean that there is no such thing as taste at all (as there is no attempt to make an aesthetic judgment, that claims for universal agreement). Cinephilia's model of the detail— discovered by an individual in

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[32] Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 65.

[33] Qtd. in Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees*, 34.

[34] Keathley recognizes that what he refers to as "cinephiliac moments" are not strictly *aesthetic* experiences and writes that "in Bazin's terms, encounters with these unprogrammed elements - what we are calling cinephiliac moments - are psychological, not aesthetic experiences." Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or, The Wind in the Trees,* 60. Toles similarly formulates the subjective aspects of the cinephile's experience, that follow the Kantian notion of the agreeable: "I feel that Walter Pater's emphasis on knowing one's impressions of a whole entity—'what effect does it really produce on me?'—is worth preserving." See Toles, "Rescuing Fragments: A New Task for Cinephilia", 161.

contingent viewings— is not exactly interested in making universal judgments, but rather is pointing to subjective impressions, rooted in a particular film experience. In that case, we are not strictly speaking of contingency's role in the films themselves, but also of a film *culture* shaped by the formerly restricted access to certain films, which contributed to the feeling of an accidental discovery.

But then was this the only thing that Bazin and Benjamin had in mind when they spoke of the accidental beauty of the details of nature? I would claim that the complexities of applying the term 'nature' for *cinematic* impressions of chance and spontaneity is arguably the key point missing from a wide range of contemporary accounts of contingency. Put differently, our experience of films is one in which chance *enhances* the beauty of what we see. Nature *on film* is where the detail appears to be discovered fortuitously. But nature does not simply indicate the lack of necessity or purpose: it defines a sphere *determined* by physical laws even if they are unfathomable to the human mind.[35]

The very concept of nature reflects this aesthetic tension at the core of the medium itself, which is in turn *projected upon* the visual representations of the natural world; even if we could claim that what appears to be accidental about nature is often what we simply lack the rule for. What would it mean, then, for an artwork to leave the viewer with an impression of chance, and produce an artifact with the *semblance* of nature? Although the accidental similarly represents the intrusion of the real in other art forms, in film the aleatory is "at home", as Burch puts it.[36] The detail in this

[35] The form of the universal rule in Kant's moral theory is modeled after nature, that is, in accordance with *universal* laws, even if morality can only imitate the formality of the natural law: "since the universality of law in accordance with which effects take place constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense (as regards its form) - that is, the existence of things insofar as it is determined in accordance with universal laws - the universal imperative of duty can also go as follows: *act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will* a universal law of nature." See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 31.

[36] Burch compares film's unique conditions and its "struggle against the accidental" with other media, in which "the sudden intrusion of more or less 'natural' contingencies into the totally artificial world of the work of art" are completely

reading has the appearance of an accident given that chance is *imagined* to be the prominent factor involved in its 'discovery' (and creation, often conflicting with the actual conditions of production). Considering the accidental 'feeling' of the detail carefully makes clear that it is a formal feature of our *experience* of the filmic detail. To return to the Aristotelian definition of contingency, namely anything that is neither necessary nor impossible (thus the concept of contingency is defined by the negation of necessity and impossibility),[37] we should acknowledge that most accounts of accidental details depend more on conditions of viewing than on the presumably accidental object: the film.

The role of the accidental in filmic depictions of the natural world is one of a delicate balance, stressed by Bazin and Benjamin, but recent theoretical work on cinephilia primarily refers to contingencies as a result of *viewing practices* - one film, and not the other; the attention we happen to give to one particular part of the screen. Willemen however opens up another possibility, namely of *appearance-as-chance*, or chance as semblance. We could therefore propose the accidental on film is an open, flexible, and often contradictory term. A fleeting impression which brings along pleasure, but one that is grounded in the calculated, edited, and carefully planned image. The role of nature in designing what we see in Blossfeldt's photographs or Painlevé's films is the model for my understanding of accidental beauty as the *law* of the predesigned cinematic world.[38]

The filmic world shares certain features with the experience we have of *our* world, and of the

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out of place. Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, 105. He understands contingency as an element that filmmakers struggled to take *under control,* and what constitutes control is the introduction of mise en scène. See Burch, *Theory of Film Practice,* 112.

[37] Niklas Luhmann provides the Aristotelian definition of contingency in a chapter entitled "Contingency as Modern Society's Defining Attribute," See Niklas Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity*, translated by William Whobrey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 46.

[38] The arbitrary as a feature of the representation of 'the real' is evoked in recent work on cinema and digitally produced images. Stephen Prince, for example, highlights the 'contingencies' included in software as the key to replicating the natural forms of accidental movement: "the laws governing an object's shape and behavior [in particle systems] are not fixed and deterministic. They are stochastic, that is, a degree of randomness is included. This gives the particle system the appearance of being alive, dynamic." See Stephen Prince, *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: the Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 22.

world as our own, especially in our encounter with beauty. Beauty in nature, for example, is the recognition of what *appears* to be arranged and planned for viewing, but in fact belongs to the natural realm. The unsolved antimony at the core of this experience: it must maintain the dialogue of randomness and compatibility that is part of our aesthetic demands from the world. We wish for the beautiful to appear perfectly arranged and compatible to our judgment, *and* free of intention. In this reading I follow the model of aesthetic judgement in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where he shows how beauty can be found either in nature or in art. The harmony between the beautiful artwork and nature is explained by the *form* of the object: "In a product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness of its form must still *seem to be* as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature."[39] Kant's claim is far from obvious: we maintain the awareness that something is art, but all the while it has the appearance of nature.[40]

The very idea of nature—a realm of necessary and universal laws— cannot account for the experience of *beautiful* nature in art. Although natural laws name the rule behind the plurality of phenomena, for the judgment of beauty we account for the singular object, and not for objects in general. When we refer to natural beauty, then, we try to single out what nature means *for us*, that is, how beauty appears free from any determining rule. From this Kant understands the appearance of nature in art to have the impression of something that exists for its own sake. Even though it gives pleasure when we encounter it, this pleasure is not predesigned. Consequently, the beautiful in art is defined by its self-enclosed quality, namely the dual acknowledgement of its being an artwork *and* an

[39] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185, emphasis mine.

[40] On this important observation from Kant, Eli Friedlander comments that "the artwork must appear free from artificiality, i.e. arbitrary or conventional rules. In its form, the object gives the impression of an *inner necessity*, one we find in nature." See *Expressions of Judgment: An Essay on Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 63-64.

object projecting the semblance of unity, where there was no option of choice (the latter means, in other words, that art appears *natural*).

Art that merely *pretends* to be identical to nature is not considered beautiful for Kant (see the example of the 'jovial host', 5:302). In the beautiful artwork we are not *actually* fooled to believe that we are standing in front of nature. There exists a much subtler sense of being captivated by what we see: we do not appreciate the artwork as the replica of nature but regard it to be an object with a natural appearance. Kant also accounts for the artificial aspects of the artwork, which have to do with the rules or the conventions grounding it; nature in art will then be when the artist can produce a beautiful object free from all constraint but *within* the conventions and rules guiding the work and its genre, medium, or style.[41] This brings Kant to the notion of the creative genius, an individual with the power to produce a work that relates to conventions but also conveys something that is not determined by preexisting rules. The genius is thus the individual who speaks *in the voice of nature*.

Do we appreciate the details of cinema only when the rule of their creation is not hidden well enough, when they actually *are* accidents? Not exactly; the accidental should rather occur *naturally,* that is, while providing the meeting point of chance and rule. When we accept that art is modeled after nature, i.e. it *appears* free from conventions even when they guide its making, film style then becomes precisely the gift through which nature can give the rule to art.[42] This will be the talent to make the film detail speak eloquently, or naturally, one that belongs to a world giving the impression of natural beauty in the sense of being made for us, synchronized with our desires and passions, yet completely effortless.

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[41] By this the work of art "shows the possibility of finding nature in and through the limitations of the conventions." Friedlander, *Expressions of Judgement,* 65.

[42] Kant points to the artist's talent as the natural gift that gives the rule to art: "*Genius* is the inborn predisposition of the mind *through which* nature gives the rule to art." Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* 186.

Contingency is part of the equation but not all of it. Take for example Nico Baumbach's recent work on natural contingencies (or 'incidentals') and Kantian aesthetics. The myth of the 'wind in the trees' in his reading provides the archetypical image of cinema and brings forward the absent *cause* of what we see, thus presenting early viewers with nature 'caught in the act.'[43] Baumbach then turns to Kant in an attempt to explain Griffith's famous remark on the wind in the trees: "what the modern movie lacks is beauty – the beauty of the moving wind in the trees." What Griffith claims, according to Baumbach, is that movies have lost their beauty, which was epitomized in the view of the wind in the trees; and this view and this beauty is strictly that of nature (he sees no distinction between cinema and nature Griffith's remark). Griffith observations are a way of paraphrasing Bazin's famous claim in the *Ontology* essay*,* namely that "Nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist." Put differently, nature here is the personified creative agent of cinema, and Bazin identifies it as the force *participating* in its own self-presentation in front of the apparatus. Considerably, this limits cinematic contingency to the appearances of nature, and overlooks a key sensibility in Kant: the appearance of art *as nature.*[44] I would argue then that our question needs to change: How can we possibly ascribe naturalness to the type of contingency that is captured on film, and not only to filmed nature?

At this point I believe the Kantian insights on art and nature point to critical distinctions to be made. We admire accidental beauty and make it the quality of the moving image when we

[43] See Nico Baumbach, "Nature Caught in the Act: On the Transformation of an Idea of Art in Early Cinema," *Comparative Critical Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 373-374. Baumbach draws attention to a phrase cited in early film reviews, used to describe the leaves in the trees, and other phenomena such as smoke, fog, and water: 'nature caught in the act' ('c'est la nature prise sur le fait'). Qtd. in Baumbach, "Nature Caught in the Act", 374.

[44] Baumbach importantly points to the transformative quality of the Kantian categories of nature and art, yet does not account for the cinematic possibilities of art that appears *as if* it were a product of nature. Some of this complexity is hinted upon in his discussion of Impressionist painting and its subject, the bourgeoisie in nature: "only the play of light on the leaves of trees but picnics, promenades, and boat trips, but these images of bourgeois leisure were to be rendered *as nature* insofar as nature was understood as the transient world of appearance." See "Nature Caught in the Act: On the Transformation of an Idea of Art in Early Cinema", 377.

imagine that photography operates similarly to the natural order, that is, free from human control and creative intention. Strangely enough, the 'natural' quality of phenomena on film gives the feeling that it was created by chance, not only automatically but *without intention*. Our pleasure, therefore, does not respond to the mere replica of nature, but to the appearance of unpredictability in the human artifact, precisely where nature speaks *through* art.

Purposeful Objects, or What is Mise en Scène?

When writing on contingency, film theory continues to put emphasis on representations of nature, without noting on the complexities of *naturalness* in the carefully constructed and assembled artifact, the film. The myth of the wind moving in the leaves is not denied in this formulation but expanded; it does not apply solely to the way nature is portrayed on camera, but speaks to any representation that creates the impression of being produced unintentionally. What follows is a model of contingency in which the film detail is recognized as a carefully constructed and designed element, albeit its *impression* remains natural, free from any known rule of creation. Where is our pleasure, then, in this complicated object? In the air of chance, which is at the same time the improbability of chance in film.

We can also interpret the unveiling of hidden worlds that we encountered in Bazin in this same light: film is where things have secrets, as they are *more* than what meets the eye (and this is precisely why filmic details are superfluous by definition: they hint to this particular truth). The sheer fact of mise en scène is assumed but at the same time forgotten. To understand the detail to be the manifestation of such predesigned contingency is to give a new meaning to the accidental, one that abides by the primary rule of the image: being an artificial design. In the world of film, the *feeling* of meaningfulness is given in advance and in abundance, but it appears to be *found* by us, in the simultaneous concealment and exposure of artifice.

The control over the image and cinema's evocative objects are intimately tied together in one of Godard's more notorious interventions from *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, in the section entitled The Control of the Universe introducing the "method" of Alfred Hitchcock, and primarily devoted to an illustration of the primacy of images over plot. In this extensively quoted section, Godard suggests that

> We've forgotten why Joan Fontaine leans over the edge of the cliff and why exactly Joel McCrea went to do in Holland. We've forgotten what Montgomery Clift's eternal silence keeps and why Janet Leigh stops at the Bates Motel and why Teresa Wright is still crazy about her uncle Charlie. We've forgotten what it is that Henry Fonda is not exactly guilty of and to what end the American government hired Ingrid Bergman. But we do remember a purse, a bus in the desert, a glass of milk, the sails of a windmill, a hairbrush. We remember a row of bottles, a pair of glasses, a musical score, a bunch of keys, because with and through these Alfred Hitchcock succeeds where Alexander, Julius Caesar, Napoleon and Adolf Hitler had all failed: he takes control of the universe.[45]

Godard is undermining any claims for the power of narrative over cinematic detail, but we should recognize that the claims are deliberately absurd; As Daniel Morgan notes, the moments he refers to are by no means *random*, as they are obviously narratively charged.[46] Rancière shows in his *Film Fables* that the 'argument' here, so to speak, can be refuted easily: for each of the objects he mentions, the narrative situation alone makes them important, allowing them to generate affect.

Godard's claims do not simply construct an argument; they accompany a set of images that make clear that the objects themselves no longer belong to Hitchcock, or to the stories in which they were originally meaningful. Still, we should keep in mind that stories are what made them *necessary* in the first place: either as what we might call narrative objects, or as part of the slightly different category of film style. Put differently, we are not only dealing with objects that participate

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[45] The translation is taken from Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 172. Rancière curiously omits Adolf Hitler from Godard's list, but he is mentioned in the film along with the other figures.

[46] Daniel Morgan, "The Afterlife of Superimposition," in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 135. According to Morgan, Godard's claim might actually be more subtle: when watching the film, we are absorbed into the narrative, and it's only afterward when we try to remember, that we forget these details.

in the staging of the fictional world, but those involved in its stylization.[47] Objects are on screen because they mean something, and they mean something because *they are there*. When placed *outside* of stories, they are no longer tools of suspense, but rather reflect on the very ability of film details to appear natural within their own (artificial) environment. Mise en scène would then mean making rules for a world of your own creation (which makes its objects the planned contingencies of this world). What would be, then, the *perfect* control of the universe, the type that Godard attributes to Hitchcock? Making style appear natural *and* premeditated.

From this it follows that the accidental nature of the filmic detail is based on an antinomy: contingency *as art*. When details become important in the world of the film, they are often minor and esoteric by nature, yet they also participate in constructing a space we are attuned with, one that gives us pleasure and accommodates itself to our desires (even if, as Barthes aptly notes, we know nothing about the very desire which precedes such compatibility).[48] For Cavell this is exactly the point where we find (and again, in Hitchcock) the materialization of the human need and *capability* of wishing:

> The Capra and the Hitchcock films make nakedly clear the power of film to materialize and to satisfy (hence to dematerialize and to thwart) human wishes that escape the satisfaction of the world as it stands; as perhaps it will ever, or can ever, in fact stand (whose wishes, a character's, or the viewer's? We would, I think, like to say both).[49]

Cavell is responding to an almost obvious, yet utterly impossible question to answer: what is the rule that motivates the camera to look and to move. One possible response is the concept of the wish. The pleasure of the beautiful in Kant, we recall, enables us to look at the world in a certain way, one

[47]At this point, Godard seems to be echoing Bazin's remarks on Hitchcock: "it is not merely a way of telling a story, but a kind of a priori vision of the universe." André Bazin, Review of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956). Qtd. in Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 231.

[48] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* 191.

[49] Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film," *Philosophy and Literature* 2.2 (Fall 1978): 254.

that validates our need for judgment. The beautiful object does not satisfy our cognitive needs, but instead gives pleasure when we become aware of the act of judgment, and its ground in the harmony of the faculties. By this, the pleasure we find in the beautiful is a discovery, where we are encouraged to look at the world as if it were designed for our own gaze. This feeling cannot be achieved through any cognitive reasoning, but only in the aesthetic realm. The beautiful is hence the response to our need to feel at home in the world.[50] When the film responds to our desire to see, it affirms our attunement to it. It is compatible with our desire. The minor details are essential parts of this satisfaction we feel: we discover how even the particulars become something worth looking at, something strangely meaningful.

Details can make us feel we belong in the world. This is equally true in the opposite case: what happens to objects when we *do not* belong, and where we do not feel in harmony with our surroundings. Cavell illustrates this alternative with the example of Chaplin's objects. Chaplin, as Rudolph Arnheim aptly puts it, does not fit into our world: "he is not simply poor, he not only lacks a collar and tie; he does not fit into his world at all, not even into that of the poor."[51] As a response to this incompatibility, Chaplin imagines. And imagination is manifested in his play with of objects, in a way that is both funny and serious. In *The Gold Rush* (1925) we find two routines that complete each other: the shoe that is served for dinner, and the dance of the rolls on forks. In both cases the

[50] A similar line of critique is given in Arata Hamawaki's "Kant on Beauty and the Normative Force of Feeling": "the distinctively aesthetic feeling of pleasure gives us a ground for employing a certain conception of our relation to the world and to other cognitive subjects for which we would otherwise have no grounding at all, but for which we have a kind of transcendental need. The idea that the world accommodates itself to our cognitive faculties is an idea under which we must think of the world insofar as we aim to bring the phenomena of nature under concepts but there can be no insight into the possibility that the world is indeed accommodated to us […] Thus it is precisely not a need that can be satisfied by the achievement of cognition." See Arata Hamawaki, "Kant on Beauty and the Normative Force of Feeling," in *Philosophical Topics* 34, numbers 1-2 (Spring and Fall 2006*):* 107-144.

[51] Rudolf Arnheim, "Chaplin's Early Films," in "Walter Benjamin and Rudolf Arnheim on Charlie Chaplin," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996): 312. Arnheim's essay originally appeared as "Alte Chaplinfilme" in *Die Weltbuhne*, No. 27, 2/7/1929, 20-23.

gag is based on the object treated as something it is not, a device Noël Carroll identifies as the transposition gag.[52] Chaplin's routines are in this sense opposites, according to Cavell, in that then allow him to suggest a complete world of imagination —in the one case a shoe is treated as a food (a case of dire necessity), in the other a food is treated as a shoe (a case of luxury). In both gags, Chaplin's wishes shape the environment, and more importantly: they shape his objects, even if they are never compatible with his situation, always too much or too little.[53] This is how the world is shown to be a sphere of alienation for Chaplin; he is not at home. He can only *wish* to be at home, and this wish is materialized in his objects.

Figure 3.2 still from *The Gold Rush* (Chaplin, 1925)

[52] Noël Carroll, "Notes on the Sight Gag". *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 36.

[53] Cavell writes on Chaplin's essential incompatibility that "one could say that the worldhood of the world never reveals itself to the little man; he is both too far inside the world for that, and too far outside." See Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film," 250.

Details and objects reflect our certainty that every part is there for a purpose. This might seem obvious (again, our strange acceptance of mise en scène); but I'm aiming for a more complicated kind of purpose, which corresponds with the way we find support for our desires in the ways the camera looks and moves. In other words, we are in agreement with the world unfolding on screen, and its details are accordingly *purposeful*. We might claim that a film works like nature: a source of pleasure when we interact with every one of its particulars. In Kant, we find agreement in nature as the object of our aesthetic judgment. Nature is where we sense that anything beautiful must have been produced on the basis of a *purpose* (one we have no access to) *and* for the benefit of our imagination. The details of nature contribute to this impression of purposiveness because we experience them *as if* their sole purpose is to be visible. One example of such a detail would be the striking features of the bird or the flower that appears as if it were created for our eyes alone, even if we accept the existence of distinctive purpose behind phenomena (the rule behind the colorful details of animals, for example, is what we would call today laws of natural selection). Kant writes on the purposeful impression of particulars in nature:

> The beautiful formations in the realm of organized nature speak strongly in behalf of the realism of the aesthetic purposiveness of nature, *since one may assume that the production of the beautiful is based on an idea of that in the producing cause, namely an end for the benefit of our imagination.* The flowers, the blossoms, indeed the shapes of whole plants; the delicacy of animal formations of all sorts of species, which is unnecessary for their own use but as if selected for our own taste; above all the manifold and harmonious composition of colors (in the pheasant, in crustaceans, insects, right down to the commonest flowers), which are so pleasant and charming to our eyes, which seem to have been aimed entirely at outer contemplation, since they concern merely the surface, and even in this do not concern the figure of the creature, which could still be requisite for its inner ends: all of these give great weight to the kind of explanation that involves the assumption of real ends of nature for our power of aesthetic judgment. However, this assumption is […] contradicted by reason.[54]

In this passage, Kant insists on the details; this helps us capture the affinity between the accidental detail of film and details of the natural world. When we speak of our views of beautiful nature, we

[54] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 222, emphasis mine.

imply that they appear free from intention or direct control, and exist only as something to be *seen*, without denying the role of natural laws or ends. Our investment in filmic details also has to do with a forgetfulness of the rules behind appearance, and this calls for a slight shift in category. We are no longer in the realm of natural contingency, nor are we dealing with the actuality of an improvised or spontaneous event caught on film. Still, the pleasure of the detail is not entirely predictable, as it tests the rules of its own appearance, both a random object and the necessary part. Put differently, the film detail is *playful*; and there is no better place to begin contemplating playfulness than the films of Ernst Lubitsch.

Follow the Handbag: Objects of Desire in *Trouble in Paradise*

The superfluous detail, intentionally designed to stand at the center of attention (and certainly not an accident) is one of the more celebrated aspects of the Lubitsch style. The director's awareness to detail is often tied to his 'touch', the visual fluency Truffaut credits him (and Hitchcock) with in *Lubitsch was a Prince*. The touch is evident in the virtuosity of storytelling by means of not telling, namely by displacement that avoids the simple representation of narrative events. The essential rule is to never treat the subject directly, and instead use the image in sophisticated ways to avoid the subject (while addressing it).

Details are indispensable in indirect storytelling; when you avoid direct representation of what the scene is actually about, superfluous meaning is attached to the stuff filling the environment. Gerald Mast explains Lubitsch's style by terms of omission, that is the art of *not saying* that actively refrains from the explicit and intentionally leaves key events off screen.[55] The abundance of detail is essential in this formulation as well, because showing less means that details are more expressive

[55] Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 207.

than usual. The result of the 'gaps' we often find in Lubitsch films, Aaron Schuster argues, is the role assigned to ordinary objects: "buttons, canes, swords, wallets, hats, handbags," all appear to have an unusual charge of significance.[56] The play of less and more is often illustrated by this attention to material objects; Mary Pickford famously complained that Lubitsch was a director of doors and not of people, that is, *overly* invested in his objects.

The details in Lubitsch can include objects, but also the particular way in which an actor delivers a line, or the small gesture repeated at exactly the right place; they are emblems of his style precisely because they mean more, thus exceeding the obvious, more trivial role they might have in another film.[57] The touch can be seen as referring to style and particularly the sophisticated use of mise en scéne: with indirect storytelling, objects speaks when central themes are not explicitly shown or said. Even so, details in Lubitsch are not simply signs to be deciphered. Instead, they *awaken* unexpected meanings within the insignificant by way of directorial "touches". In this we find the acknowledgment of our wish for a world where *anything* can mean *something*; and they respond to our desire for meaning in the most pleasurable way. By depending on the fleeting temporality of films (they occur in a moment, and can occasionally be missed), they make certain moments more important than others, possibly another motivation for Lubitsch's long-lasting appeal for cinephiles.

The Lubitsch detail is discovered in a moment, but not just any moment; I would call it the one moment that *lingers*. We find an example in his early silent comedy *The Marriage Circle* (1924), which was his second Hollywood feature, in a scene that takes place during the most quotidian event of all: breakfast. With Billy Wilder's famous motto, *How would Lubitsch do it* in mind, we should

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[56] Aaron Schuster, "Comedy in Times of Austerity," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait: A Theoretical Examination* (Ljubljana: Slovenska Kinoteka, 2014), 20.

[57] Often in Lubitsch's films, the subtext and the delivery are much more important than the lines of dialogue themselves, an observation made by Barbara Bowman in *Master Space: Film Images of Capra, Lubitsch, Sternberg, and Wyler (*New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 72.

question not only what appears or when, but *how*.[58]

The short scene begins with a medium shot of the married couple Dr. Franz Braun (Monte Blue) and Charlotte (Florence Vidor), facing each other at the table; the soft eyes and calm micro-movements of the body convey affection and warmth. We move to a medium close up of the husband looking into his wife's eyes, and a reverse shot of her tender gaze. Suddenly they are literally *replaced* with a shot of the objects on the breakfast table: on the right side of the frame, her hand stirs sugar in the coffee cup, and on the left, he gently knocks on an egg with the back of his spoon. She continues to stir while he puts down the spoon.[59] At this point, we can barely notice the characters, as he moves his body closer to her and slightly pushes the objects away. Only the shadows on the table mark the embrace, the psychical proximity we are not able to see (the shadows that replace the couple is a motif repeated in the famous shot of the bed from *Trouble in Paradise*, that I will address later in detail). At this point, when there are no *visible* events taking place on screen, the objects leave a strong impression, relating somehow to what is happening off-screen. Presence and absence are playful and light, but nonetheless confusing, and we are not sure what we are supposed to see, and what exactly is implied *by means of* these objects.[60]

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[58] Wilder's best example for the "the Lubitsch touch" is the suggestion the director made during the scripting of *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938): "Gary Cooper goes down the street in Nice, and what he's looking for is maybe in a shop, a big shop like Macy's. In the store window was information written out, FRENCH SPOKEN . . . DUTCH SPOKEN (…) Then underneath that—this was [Lubitsch's] idea—he added one more line: *AMERICAN UNDERSTOOD*. That was Lubitsch." Qtd. in Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 116.

[59] The stirring of the coffee cup in Lubitsch works is used differently than Godard's coffee cup in the scene from *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). Cavell writes of Godard's object that "with shots of the woman, and certain others, in a café-bar, the camera alternates, with progressively closer shots, a cup of coffee just stirred, and at last peers over the cup's rim until the bubbling liquid swirling as a whole fills the cinemascope rectangle; the sound track rises to a poeticizing meditation that fits our willingness to endow this image with the power to invoke the swirling of the universe, and hence the question of its origin and ending." See Cavell, "Things on Film," 256.

[60] Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett imagined how Lubitsch would translate a wedding night to the screen by using breakfast objects. Lubitsch, they suggest, would skip the wedding night entirely, and only show the couple eating breakfast, during which he would "put more delightful connotations of sensuality in the bride cracking the shell of a soft-boiled egg than could be evoked by the moistest of lips." Qtd. in Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 108-9. In an interview from 1932, Lubitsch insists on the importance of *showing* the audience what happened, and not simply using dialogue to

Léger claims in *Functions of Painting* that "by isolating a thing, you give it a personality,"[61] and Lubitsch seems to agree. However, the objects on the table do not signify anything in particular, but are held on screen for long enough to get our attention. While they are related to the narrative (a couple eating breakfast together), they effectively *pause* the flow of events. With this insight in mind we can return to the question of what happens when these objects take over the screen. Early film theory would read their intensity into the magical animating force of cinema, namely the emotive transformation of the material world, and the perceptual shift that the moving image calls for.[62] Another category of animation we could suggest is the metaphor of the face in Balázs, where objects on film take on the *expressivity* of the face. Objects in this formulation are *inherently* anthropomorphic: "When the film close-up strips the veil of our imperceptiveness and insensitivity from the hidden little things and shows us the face of objects, it still shows us man, for what makes objects expressive are the human expressions projected on to them."[63]

This is definitely a complex moment in Balázs, with its own surprises. For example, in the close-up he discerns a naturalism that involves the sharp observation of detail along with a certain tenderness, which he calls *the naturalism of love*. And again we find ourselves immersed in the details:

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convey information: "Mr. Lubitsch is calm only on the surface, and nothing gets him so fiery as dialog [sic] used to tell the story. 'What do we have the camera for?' he exclaims. 'Why talk about things that happen, or have happened? Show them!' Mr. Lubitsch is quite Anglo-Saxon in his tailoring but his volatile temperament remains Viennese. 'Let the camera build up the sequence— for which the dialogue is the climax!'". See "Lubitsch's Analysis of Pictures Minimizes Director's Importance," *Weekly Variety* (1 March 1932): 2.

[61] Fernand Léger. *Functions of Painting* (New York, Viking Press, 1973), 50.

[62] See for example Jean Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie," in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, *A History/Anthology*: *Volume I*, *1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 317, and Louis Aragon, "On Décor", *French Film Theory and Criticism,* 167.

[63] Béla Balázs,"The Close-up and the Face of Man," in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 119. Gilles Deleuze later mobilizes the metaphor of the face in his *Cinema 1* book: "Each time we discover 'reflecting surface and intensive micro-movements' we can say this thing is treated cinematically as a face; this object has then been 'facefied', with the quality of looking back (even if it does not necessarily resemble a face)." Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The Movement*-Image, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 87-88.

"what you truly love", Balázs writes, "you also know well and you gaze upon its minutest details with fond attentiveness."[64] Rachel Moore, discussing Robert Bresson's *L'Argent*, points to a different personification of things at play in films whose characters are affectless, with a more flat or 'muted' subjectivity. The objects in such films, she writes, "have the vibrance that characters do not possess."[65] Ivone Margulies makes a similar observation on the objects in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, but frames it by terms of displacement: "the intensity produced by the cumulative actions of an initially affectless protagonist, is, in *Jeanne Dielman*, displaced onto the objects and domestic scene."[66] Still, Lubitsch's breakfast objects do something else. Nothing remarkable is happening on screen—nothing but a breakfast table— but the objects still have an intensity unique to them.

Figure 3.3 Breakfast Objects in *The Marriage Circle* (Lubitsch, 1924)

[64] Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 39.

[65] Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham, N.C., 2000), 82.

[66] Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 230n45.

According to any one-dimensional 'interpretation' of these objects, the couple's emotional state is *represented* by the objects on the breakfast table. However, in Lubitsch presence and absence are never mutually exclusive. We should therefore replace any symbolic reading with the *play* of lack and surplus; the removal of the thing itself (that is, the main 'idea' of the scene) goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the curious detail. Then again, playfulness is the hallmark of the Lubitsch style, which is an important term in this context, that has to do with the exact nature of his details. We discover in them something more than the impulse for interpretation, simply trying to figure out what they *stand for*. Notwithstanding they do stand for *something*, but everything happens, to use Truffaut's admiring remarks, *while* we are looking at the film. This can be true of many films, if not for all of them: when the film is over, the threads holding it together seem less firm, more questionable. But with Lubitsch this temporality holds a particular truth. What hardly seems important when trying to put the film together, nothing more than a few objects on a breakfast table, was actually utterly important when it appeared on screen.

The accidental nature of details, as in Brando's little white glove, shares this peculiar temporality with Lubitsch, even if on the surface nothing in his films even resembles spontaneity, the term that accounts for what is not predictable by, nor is under the control of the filmmaker, by Dai Vaughan's terms.[67] With Lubitsch things are meticulous and over-stylized. Still, what appears at first to be the opposite of spontaneity, creates a similar impression of effortless *style* (this is also what it means to do something naturally, a fluency which is often evoked when commenters describe his style in terms of wit).[68] We might say that we feel the touch, without being able to put our finger on

[67] Vaughan argues that "spontaneity begins to seem, in human affairs, a matter less of behavior than of motivations. [...] 'Spontaneity', that is to say, comes down to what is not predictable by—and not under the control of—the filmmaker." Dai Vaughan, "Let There Be Lumière", *in For Documentary: Twelve Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

[68] See Leland A. Poague, who claims that "Ernst Lubitsch is generally remembered for his cinematic wit, for his gracefully charming and fluid style, for his ingenious ability to suggest more than he showed and to show more than

the rule behind it; it involves some form of *natural* expressivity.[69] William Gilpin wrote in his essay *On Picturesque Beauty* (1792) of the artist's *free* brush stroke, in words that seem to describe Lubitsch: "A brush stroke may be called *free*, when there is no appearance of constraint. It is *bold* when a part is given for the whole, which it cannot fail of suggesting. This is the laconism of genius."[70]

The obscure nature of what exactly is touched in the image has to do with this natural or seamless appearance, where part and whole are impossible to tell apart. As touch is not something that we can place anywhere in the image, we cannot say that this or that detail *is* the touch. We find a similar observation in a comment Lubitsch made himself: "I've often wondered who started that phrase. One shouldn't single out touches. They're part of a whole."[71] And indeed, the early references to the term, dated to the mid-1920s, were usually in the plural: Lubitsch touches.[72] When we do refer to the touches *in plural*, we are making them easier to understand. Then touches can be more or less effective, and as Leo Braudy observes, when you are not impressed by them, they become mere embroidery.[73]

Touch is akin to concepts like Epstein's *photogénie* in that they both imply something affective

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others dared suggest; for all of those qualities and characteristics known collectively as 'The Lubitsch Touch'." Leland A Poague, *The Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch* (South Brunswick, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1978), 13.

[69] Tactility also corresponds with the erotic undertones Lubitsch was famous for, on which a contemporary censor noted: "You know what he's saying, you just can't prove that he's saying it." Qtd. in Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror – Hollywood Comedy and the American Image* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1969), 110.

[70] William Gilpin, "Essay I: On Picturesque Beauty", in *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel and On Sketching Landscape: To which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (London 1792), 17.

[71] Qtd. in Herman G. Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Tough: A Critical Study* (New York: E.P. Dutton &Co., 1968), 259.

[72] In *Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood*, Kristin Thompson mentions this fact and notes that the phrase is probably linked to Lubitsch's new 'sophistication' and subtlety. Thompson's conclusion accepts the touches in plural: "perhaps the best way to define the Lubitsch touch is to say that it consists of all the many Lubitsch touches he invented during his splendid career." Kristin Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood: German and American Film After World War I* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 131.

[73] Braudy, "The Double Detachment of Ernst Lubitsch," *MLN*, Vol. 98, No. 5, Comparative Literature (1983): 1075.

that is at the same time slippery and hard to define (even if touch in the Lubitsch film involves an intellectual distance that is certainly missing from Epstein's model of proximity, where "pain is within reach").[74] While almost anyone writing about Lubitsch invokes 'the touch' to signal the elusive quality that sets his work apart, Kristin Thompson finds the phrase to be vague and not very helpful, and her statements equally reflect the more critical evaluations of Epstein's concept.[75] Following its elusive nature, and as is the case with Epstein, there have been numerous attempts to define the Lubitsch touch (and perhaps both terms refuse definitions because they speak primarily to the viewer's singular experience of a film). William Paul for example identifies it as "the conjunction of lightness and seriousness, of gaiety and gravity,"[76] while Sabine Hake asserts that Lubitsch's films "undermine the basic rules of the classical narrative cinema by dissolving the distinctions between form and content."[77] Herman Weinberg comes closer to the expressivity of the detail by saying that by the touch Lubitsch was able to move from the general to the particular, "suddenly condensing into one swift, deft moment the crystallization of a scene or even the entire theme," making him the master of compressing the quintessence of his subject into a visual comment that says it all.[78] Greg S. Faller evokes the director's talent for "interrupting the dramatic interchange by focusing on objects or small details that make a witty comment on, or surprising

[74] Epstein memorably wrote that the close-up "modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy." Jean Epstein, "Magnification", in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology: Volume I, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 13.

[75] Thompson is dismissive of the term's explanatory benefits, noting that anyone who knows what the touch is already knows Lubitsch, and for someone who is not familiar with his films the phrase explains very little. Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch Goes to* Hollywood, 127. Still, I argue that the term is elusive for a reason.

[76] William Paul, *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 8.

[77] Sabine Hake, *Passions and Deceptions – The Early Films of Ernst Lubitsch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

[78] Herman G. Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study*, 25.

revelation about the main action."[79]

Raymond Durgnat aptly claims that the touch is never *added* to the story (thus dismissing any reading of the Lubitsch detail as merely ornamental, and supplemental to the narrative). The mutual play of ellipsis and excess is in fact what makes the *sweet nothing*, to use Durgnat's expression, into something more.[80] Lubitsch's mastery is revealed in this sweet nothing, or in other words, by his ability to create meaning out of "nothing", even if translating the touch into 'touches' (or 'sweet nothings') is still missing the point. Then we would be claiming that only individual touches exist, and that they are necessarily plural.

The implications of making the Lubitsch touch into 'touches' corresponds to my critical account of the *subjective* nature of film details, that similarly poses the problem of making subjectivity into their necessary condition. But there is something even more interesting in Lubitsch, which exceeds any given collection of particular moments: the array of details in his films also reveal his *singular* brushstroke. Our pleasure is not necessarily limited to figuring out what details or objects stand for, but has to do with the ways meaning is materialized within his cinematic environments.

The ideal place for looking closely at tactility, detail and objects is his film *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), which announces its interest in raw materiality from the very beginning (and opens with the disposal of garbage from a gondola). Lubitsch will refer to it as an exemplar, stating that "as for pure style, I think I have done nothing better [than] or as good as *Trouble in Paradise*."[81]

Laws or *games* of replacement and displacement spin the objects of this film, making the

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[79] Faller, Greg S., *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* (https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/ernst-lubitsch)

[80] Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror – Hollywood Comedy and the American Image* (London, Faber, 1969), 110.

[81] Qtd. in Herman G. Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study,* 268.

subject of desire and the desire of the object hard to separate.[82] It's tricky to review the plot (Lubitsch is not one for clear storylines) but we could say we are dealing with a love triangle set against the Great Depression, where the leading couple, Gaston Monescu (Herbert Marshall) and Lily (Miriam Hopkins), a pair of thieves, develop an interest in the wealthy Madame Mariette Colet (Kay Francis), the head of the perfume empire Colet & Cie. The object that first sparks their interest is one we accompany from the beginning to the final scene of the film: Madame Colet's jeweled handbag, that travels in spiral movement within the story. As Schuster points out, any account of the plot could be easily replaced with the imperative *follow the handbag*.

We first see Madame Colet buying the diamond-covered purse in one of the film's opening scenes, and the item is stolen (for the *first* time) during her later visit to the opera. Before we know exactly what is going on, we learn that Lily is thrilled to discover the newspaper ad announcing the award for the lost handbag; we then confirm the intuitive feeling that the couple was responsible for the missing item. Gaston shows up at the Colet residence to return it and claim his prize. During the meeting Colet gives the impression of a long-time investment worthy of his attention, and Gaston modifies the initial plan. We notice his slight change in tone when he explains to Colet how he had obtained the object. He came across it at the opera house, he tells her in his soft voice, at *the little niche, near the statue of Venus*. The strategy works as planned, and he immediately becomes Colet's personal assistant, posing as 'Monsieur LaValle', and Lily takes on the role of his secretary, 'Mademoiselle Vautier'.

The handbag's first setting, at the feet of Venus, is where this particular object begins to spin. The statue at the opera house is obviously a fictional location, but it helps Gaston set the sensual air of the conversation. Not only the illustration for the birth of the erotic triangle at the

[82] See Sabine Hake, "The Object, the Image, the Cinema: *Trouble in Paradise*," in *Passions and Deceptions*: *The Early Films of Ernst Lubitsch* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 175-199.

center of the film, the statute also points to Gaston's art of storytelling, that makes this detail into the sweet-yet-meaningful nothing. In his narration Gaston disguises his stealing of the handbag with the chance encounter with the goddess of love, making the statue into his own accidental detail (Lubitsch and Gaston share the control over accidents).[83] The *little niche* at the feet of Venus (made even smaller by the redundancy of adding 'little' to 'niche') tells Colet that fate is revealed in the smallest of details. What follows is that the detail becomes erotically charged, *his* possession of *her* object. When Colet shifts the tone of the conversation and informs that she had never been to the little niche, Gaston replies with yet another displacement: "you were never at the niche? Then this must not be your handbag."

Colet and Gaston gradually move towards (cautious) intimacy, but at a certain point his true identity is revealed by Colet's suitor, François Filiba (Edward Everett Horton), whom Gaston had robbed in Venice (an event presented in the prologue of the film; Filiba's memory is triggered by an object: the gondola-shaped ashtray).[84] Gaston and Lily decide to take Colet's money and run, but when Lily realizes that Colet had turned out to be, in time, something more than her material assets, she modifies the escape plan. Lily's revelation leads to several others, and the three lovers eventually gather at Colet's home and disclose everything, including false identities and underlying passions. Lily leaves with the money from Colet's safe ("this is what I *really* want!") but without Gaston, disappointed and betrayed. Gaston and Colet share a moment (which I will return to) before he decides to leave her and join Lily. The last scene of the film takes place in the back of the taxicab

[83] I would even argue for a strong affinity between Lubitsch and Gaston: when Colet tells Gaston he is working too hard, she describes him being "engaged with too much detail," and Lily blames him of being able to talk his way out of anything with his brilliance, that is to say, his wit. Braudy compares the two based on their shared sense of irony: "as a con man who manipulates social forms for his own ends, Gaston is the symbiotic twin of Lubitsch himself, the master of manners and social irony." Braudy, "The Double Detachment of Ernst Lubitsch," 1076.

[84] The ashtray is the obejct that finally reminds him where he met Gaston for the first time: in Venice, Gaston pretended to be a doctor concerened with Filiba's tonsols, a story he then used to steal his money (and what are tonsols if not *the* redundent detail in this story?).

leading our original couple, Lily and Gaston, to their next destination. They repeat the ritual of seduction from the first night they met, slowly revealing objects they had stolen from each other. In this repetitive ritual, objects guide and words are pointless; Lily takes out the handbag she had just taken from Colet (stolen from her, it is worth noting, for the *second* time in the film); this is, importantly, the same object Gaston initially used to seduce Colet with. Now, with her final act of thievery, Lily hopes to restore what they have lost: the life under the sign of Venus. The handbag repeats the couple's original rule of seduction by means of the object, which does not employ its worth, i.e. its market price, but its *intrinsic* value, what it *means* to them. An object with no true owner and no right place, the hands that touch the handbag barely understand their own desire. This has to do with the fact that the object of desire is never explicit: things and people both fall under this category.

The motif of thievery in *Trouble in Paradise* has been read in two very distinct ways. The first credits the film with a critical social-political voice, as in Mast's remarks: "Lubitsch, in the most Marxist way, equates property with theft"; or Hake's interpretation, who claims that "using the motif of theft as a central metaphor of filmic representation, the film is […] a game with free floating signifiers where "trouble in paradise" also means the crisis of commodity fetishism."[85] Conversely, some argued that Lubitsch uses thievery as an elegant erotic metaphor.[86] William Paul compares Lubitsch's depiction of robbery with the gradual development of physical intimacy, based on the proximity the pickpocket has with the victim's body.[87] On the first play of the seduction ritual, Lily

[85] Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*, 219; Sabine Hake, *Passions and Deceptions*, 20.

[86] The Hays Code was introduced in 1934, shortly after the film's release (and it was not approved for re-issue in 1935). However, it is usually agreed that the constraints presented by the code opened new possibilities for Lubitsch's wit. See Russell Grigg, "The Joyful Art of Ernst Lubitsch: *Trouble in Paradise*," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait: A Theoretical Examination* (Ljubljana: Slovenska Kinoteka, 2014), 39-42.

[87] William Paul, *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy*, 58. Andrew Klevan, on the other hand, points to the opening credit sequence, and the bed at its center, to show that "the trouble in paradise to which [the film] refers is not social but sexual." Andrew Klevan, "The Art of Indirection in *Trouble in Paradise* (1932)," *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 5

and Gaston float around the other's body by stealing objects that become more and more intimate: a wallet, a pin, and finally, a garter. Theft is the currency of their erotic attachment, as Russell Grigg convincingly argues,[88] and above all, pickpocketing is also *touching*, which is emphasized by Gaston's visible pleasure in being robbed by Lily: "you tickled me", he says with a smile, "but your embrace was so sweet."

The twists and turns of the handbag further exemplify the perplexing quality that objects have in *Trouble in Paradise*. Despite being a concrete item, one we know the exact price of (in fact, the handbag's price is repeated numerous times), the object's meaning constantly shifts, making room for new desires and deeper complications. The rule of the object is, then, that you can steal anything, but possession over meaning is much harder to obtain. Before she takes off and leaves Gaston behind at the end of the film, Lily gives Colet some ironic advice: "when you embrace him, be sure to put on gloves." She is trying to say that the fingerprint sticks to objects and to people, and that touch is one imprint that is not easily removed. Nonetheless, Lily despises the idea of Gaston becoming a "useless, good-for-nothing gigolo." She loves him *as a crook*, she says, one that can modify the ownership of objects but he himself has no price.[89] When Lily realizes that he does *not* want to steal Colet's money she knows that everything is wrong. This is the real betrayal, which not only means that he had sold himself, but that the rules of the game have changed; and Lily does not want to play anymore.

(December 2014): 1. On the seduction scene Klevan adds that "the 'pickpocketing' scenario achieves a censorship-evading perfection in that a scene about the necessity of not feeling the touch of the other person is absolutely about it." Klevan, "The Art of Indirection in *Trouble in Paradise*," 6.

[88] Russell Grigg, "The Joyful Art of Ernst Lubitsch: *Trouble in Paradise*," 57-59.

[89] When Gaston tries to persuade Lily that Colet means nothing to him, he returns to her monetary value: "her whole sex appeal is in that safe," he assures Lily. Lily in turn makes a similar move with Colet's money, this time in order to 'sell' Gaston to Colet. She first steals the money from Colet's safe, but then returns it and hands Gaston over for the exact amount of money stolen. Colet, curiously, purchased the handbag for a close amount.

Lily and Gaston make a living from the skillfulness of touch, and hands are active agents in *Trouble in Paradise.* When Lily is invited to see Madame Colet, her body has a visceral reaction to the jewelry casually scattered around the room, and she needs to sit on her hand to control her *touching* impulse. Still, the film also wants to complicate what tactility means by alluding to *not* touching, and it constantly presents intimacy by intangible terms. What we see then are images that depict the realm of *if only,* the air of almost. This is what exists between Gastom and Colet, and the repeated gesture they share is that of the almost-kiss, the slight intimacy of holding their faces in close proximity when they talk. Likewise, the lines of dialogue they exchange before Gaston's departure specify that they are destined to stay in the realm of unsatisfied desire— "It could have been glorious. Lovely. Divine. But that terrible policeman!" In the final scene in the taxicab, the handbag eventually becomes a part of Lily and Gaston's relationship, but ironically as the souvenir of the lost promise of Gaston and Colet. The object's materiality then paradoxically stands for what is missing from Gaston and Lily's relationship: not touching.

Figure 3.4 Still from *Trouble in Paradise* (Lubitsch*,* 1932)*:* Colet and Gaston

Throughout the film, the purse moves between hands, and each hand has its own imprint. Any attempt to decipher the object is missing the point, as the Lubitsch detail is the fusing of essence with weightlessness. The shift in ownership clearly indicates the instability of meaning that we might be tempted to attach to the handbag. In this respect it is much closer to the instability of the Freudian symptom, set against the symbol in Freud's short article from 1916, "A Connection Between a Symbol and Symptom." While the symbol is essentially made to be deciphered, the symptom changes places up to the point of losing its original identity, and transgressing the limits of its own semiotic field. The symptom is therefore capable of "contradictory simultaneity" of displacement.[90]

The last appearance of the handbag in the back of the taxicab is when Lily tries to reinvent the rules one last time by modifying Colet's object. With this final theft, she is obviously looking for more than the object's worth; she wants it to mean something, to represent an *idea* she can own. But again, objects tend to relentlessly defy conventions of both ownership and interpretation in *Trouble in Paradise*. They are not exactly things we can make our own. When the jeweled handbag moves from hand to hand it speaks to the instability of meaning in terms of the instability of desire, and Schuster suggests that the lesson we should ultimately learn is that you always have to steal a handbag twice.[91] I would revise his rule: you must steal it again and again, *endlessly*, and it will still remain the slippery, unpredictable detail. Lily tries to manipulate the object (this is what she does, her mastery), but the handbag is tricky to own precisely because it has been touched by Lubitsch: it means too much and too little.

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[90] See also Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 69. With Dora's symptomatic acts, Freud reads the play with the reticule as the representation of her genitals, similar to the function of another patient's small ivory box. This association might be something Lubitsch was aware in handling the handbag in *Trouble in Paradise*.

[91] Schuster, "Comedy in Times of Austerity," 37.

Likewise, the rules of desire take different and confusing forms in *Trouble in Paradise*. While Lily's wish is to obtain what others have, Colet's desire plays with its own materialization. Lubitsch shows this in a series of images that illustrate what a promise might look like. When towards the end of the film Gaston asks Colet to spend the night with him, she explains her refusal with the unlimited options that await them: "We have a long time ahead of us, Gaston, weeks, months, years". As she speaks several shots of objects appear, all include an image of the couple created by shadows or reflections: they appear in the mirror above the bed ("weeks"), the vanity mirror ("months") and finally, they are shadows on the bed ("years"). Following the logic of omission, the lovers' embrace must be represented indirectly: they are *not* in the mirror we see above the bed, *not* in the mirror on the dressing table, and finally, they are *not* in bed. With this couple in particular, touch takes the form of a wish, the *almost touch*. The romantic image, Hake claims, cannot be shown directly; it must be incorporated, absorbed within the beautiful objects that surround the characters.[92] These images contribute to the strong feeling we are left with at the end, that Gaston and Colet are actually the true couple of the film; Lily hints to this direction when she blames Gaston for his affection for Colet: "What does she have that I don't?" She asks in anger. The simple answer would be: her material assets. But I think the film is saying something else: Colet has the ability to wait, and to *not* touch.

The proliferation of beautiful objects in *Trouble in Paradise* was often explained by linking the shiny surface of the film to the apparatus of deception, or alternatively taking the film to be a critical account of commodity and fetish. We find the hyperbolic version of this reading in Frieda Grafe, who claims that "[Lubitsch] furnishes all his films with the external signs of industrial production.

[92] Hake, *Passions and Deceptions*, 191.

Appealing to an audience of consumers, they are full of advertisement; they aim at the gaze."[93] This type of argument makes Lubitsch into a director devoted to the glossy surface of things, with no interiority to speak of. And it is also a challenging reading: *Trouble in Paradise* does bring together commodity and deception. Even so, I find that the film's themes and its style fit too well in this formulation. What we discover is exactly the opposite: the *impossibility* of distinguishing style and content, or put differently by Hake, the overlapping of knowing and not knowing, where meaning is never completely resolved but only complicated further.[94] We find an echo of this dance of revealing and concealing in the bit of dialogue between Gaston and Colet towards the end of the film:

> Colet: "I have a confession to make. You like me; in fact, you are crazy about me [...]"
> Gaston: "I know all your tricks."
> Colet: "And you are going to fall for them."

While we do *know* the tricks, that is we are aware of the director's almost tangible touch, we also release ourselves from this knowledge. We fall for the details. Even if we are supposedly familar with the rule behind appearance, namely that there are *no accidents* in Lubitsch (and we hold this awareness somewhere in our mind), the details in this film are still their own little revelations. As an erotic object, the handbag clearly takes part in the games of Eros, the one to travel between spheres in Plato's *Symposium*. The son of Poverty and Resource, he lacks splendor but resourcefully seeks beauty in this life. Eros exists *in the middle,* making desire metonymic by nature, of both part (the singular, material body) and whole (the idea of desire as such, i.e. philosophy, the love of knowledge).[95] Eros in *Trouble in Paradise* is likewise an open object, *one that can signify virtue or vice, and*

[93] Qtd. in Hake, *Passions and Deceptions*, 88. Kracauer explained Lubitsch's international success by his accommodating to the needs of 'consumers', who are "connected to each other not in reality but only through its denial." Qtd. in Hake, *Passions and Deceptions*, 88.

[94] Hake, *Passions and Deceptions*, 199.

[95] See Plato, *The Symposium* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39-41.

therefore more or less everything.[96] Where can Eros thrive, then? Only where the object is denied any conclusive meaning. The detail therefore *must* work by means of excess. When meaning in Lubitsch stays open, the object turns out to be playful, that is *infinitely open*. And it is, nonetheless, the sweet nothing, just a moment to which our memory sticks to.

Figure 3.5 Still from *Trouble in Paradise*

[96] Walter Benjamin, "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama.* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 174.

Chapter 4
Details to Remember By

Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved's absence.

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*[1]

"Untitled" (billboard of an empty bed), by Félix González-Torres, is a billboard made of an intimate moment, first exhibited on the streets of Manhattan.[2] An empty bed "alive with crumpled sheets", as Carol Mavor points out,[3] the texture of the fabric and the dents at the center of the pillows indicate the recent presence of a warm body. We can see, and slightly feel, how someone's head had just rested upon the white, fluffy material. Not only the scene of indexical traces—the empty bed is more than that; it is alive with traces of the body that moved. The bedding, an intimate material of everyday life, is not exactly still. It is *charged* with the presence of the moving body, a feeling supported by the fabric's proximity to this body. Bedsheets, clothing, fabrics, all share this intimacy: "every object touched by the loved being's body becomes part of that body", Barthes writes in *Lover's Discourse*[4] (and the first image of *Camera Lucida,* Mavor notes, is a photograph of a bed: *Polaroïd* by Daniel Boudinet).

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[1] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 15.

[2] The Billboard series was installed at the height of the AIDS crisis. González-Torres addressed the tension between intimacy and public display in a 1993 interview with Tim Rollins: "I need the viewer. I need public interaction. Without a public these works are nothing […] I need the public to complete the work." In that same interview, González-Torres mentions Roland Barthes, among other writers, artists and filmmakers, as an influence on his work. Originally published in *Félix González-Torres,* Rollins, Tim, Susan Cahan, and Jan Avgikos (A.R.T. Press: New York), 1993.

[3] Carol Mavor, "Pulling Ribbons from Mouths: Roland Barthes's Umbilical Referent," in *Representing the Passions: Histories, Bodies, Visions*, ed. R. Meyer (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 175–205. Mavor describes the presence of the maternal body in Barthes's later work, and traces the affinities between the Billboard series and *Camera Lucida* in relation to figures of absence and presence.

[4] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 173.

The sheets in González-Torres's photograph are not exactly the empty, white canvas, even if they do resemble it. Not a canvas, but perhaps the wet sand, the very material that makes traces possible. The textile sensually upholds the form of the body, and by that very holding, keeps it. The sleeping body, and the head resting on the pillows, left *details* of someone's shape, and from such details of the other's figure we surely know (and more importantly, feel) that life was in this bed. What moves in this photograph? the imprints made on the texture of sheets and pillows by the weight of a body pressing on them in sleep. The body leaves a mark, the photograph looks at this mark. A body was *just here.* At the same time, this intimate gaze is made other by a shift in scale and presentation: the small, domestic facts of the other's physical being are made gigantic, billboard-sized and publicly displayed. The size and facts of its display make the billboard into the public souvenir, an image that asks us to remember.

Around 1846-7, Adolph Menzel painted a view of his bed that captures similar details of movement. The composition of *Unmade Bed* is spontaneous, taken from everyday life, as is González-Torres's photograph. To Michael Fried, Menzel gives the viewer a strong experience of bodily presence in this painting, in what he calls the process of embodiment: the artist, and later the viewer, place themselves physically in what they see. We look at Menzel's bed from a close distance, and as Fried notes, "its special vividness and animation are grounded in the artist's bodily memory of what it felt like to lay himself down in the original of that bed."[5] *Unmade Bed* has an aliveness which it shares with the bed photograph, and Fried points to the feelings of comfort and softness in the lush pillows. Two other beds come to mind: the image of the lovers' shadows in Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise* (figure 3.5), that evades direct representation of the erotic by the play of presence and absence in the image; and the imprint of the mother's body in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960),

[5] Michael Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 42.

that is a disturbing form of a memory image. Still, González-Torres's photograph succeeds in capturing something else: vulnerability, exposure and absence. The bed is empty.

The story behind the photograph—taken after the death of the artist's long-time partner, Ross Laycock, from AIDS, five years before the death of González-Torres himself from the same disease—makes the fragility of life pressed on these sheets even louder. The details are made substantial in absence, suggestive of someone who was just here, and no longer is. The terms of indexicality do not suffice for explaining exactly how these details hold on to the body's moving life. They call out for a presence, they evoke it. The material bears witness, and opens the possibility to look differently at the objects of everyday life, now framed by the desire to *hold on* to someone's presence— the other's being is condensed, so to speak, in the detail. The photograph reveals not only the traces of our body on the textures of our interior spaces, but the potential of what is small to become large while holding on to a very particular smallness—that is, being a detail.

An impression is the pattern and shape that a body makes on material. It goes beyond the indexical trace, as it has the capacity to make movement visible, to help us grasp something about how it feels. And in this photograph, the impression is also the image of the other as *engraved* in memory, or on memory. Our gestures, the integral part of our body's movement, and the facts of being alive, can be made into impressions. When the body touches material—when feet sink into wet sand—the brief gesture is fixed, and a detail of the animated body is created. It can now circulate.

In Elegy 10, "The Dream", John Donne turns to the imagery of coins to describe the *impresa,* or impression, of the *eidos* of the loved one. The "fair impression" of the other is pressed on the lover's faithful heart "as kings do coins, to which their stamps impart". Of this poem, and the private, erotic emotions put into circulation, Susan Stewart writes: "once impressions are truly like coins, they may bear the impress of their original emotional force*,* but they acquire a life of their

own."[6] The *image* of the loved one conveys the emotional force of its source. When the other is made into an image, this token is the one to survive, even if the original emotion will, inevitably, fade. Benjamin notes on coins' reproducibility in the *Work of Art* essay; along with Bronzes and Terra Cottas, they were the only objects the Greeks could produce on a large scale.[7] While other objects were made "for all eternity", coin production is a technology without aura. Reproducibility and circulation speak, therefore, of absence.

Absence also plays a part in the efficiency of details in animating the other. The impression on the sheets is one way to speak about their emotional impact: details as tools for memory, that introduce the opportunity for what Stewart calls "a surrogate form of presence", like the biscuit tin full of mementoes that Emma Bovary's lover, Rodolphe, keeps in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Looking through the items he finds "a black mask, pins, and hair… lots of hair!". The locks of hair, like the patterns on the sheets, are souvenirs that speak of the body in absentia. They are places where a body once was, and meaning now is.

Making the moving body into an image entails stilling: the impression feet leave on sand capture the gesture of walking only in its stilled form. These traces of movement are the details that I explore in this chapter, with special focus on how they can evoke motion, and emotion, by stillness. By this I propose them as details that *re*animate, and move us. Stilling is the way to hold on to movement (and as the billboard series shows, to *remember* it). In the following, I read this force of

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[6] Susan Stewart, "The *Eidos* in the Hand," in *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 92.

[7] Benjamin writes that "the Greeks had only two ways of technologically reproducing works of art: casting and stamping, and coins were the only artworks they could produce in large numbers. All others were unique and could not be technologically reproduced. That is why they had to be made for all eternity. The state of their technology compelled the Greeks to introduce eternal values in their art." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 27.

reanimation into two things: the stilled-moving body, and the stilled-moving image. What they share, particularly in the amorous realm, is the way in which they keep desire alive.

What is *moving* about the moving image obviously has to do with beauty, and its own features of animation and activation. "Beauty spins and the mind moves", Anne Carson writes in her treatise of desire, *Eros the Bittersweet*[8]. And to catch beauty would mean to grasp how stability in vertigo is possible. In other words, the stability that we seek even within movement (or, *specifically* within movement) is the enduring form of beauty. Part of making the fleeting nature of beauty stable asks for this fixed form, the arrest of something in the spin. For example, to contemplate beauty after the fact presents a pause in its original movement; stillness, I would argue, lets something about beauty last. This works both ways. To suspend (for the object to be stilled) is, at the same time, to be suspended, to have time taken away from the viewer, and given to the object. To linger in front of something. The wish—*to still*— is part of the turbulence of beauty; and in this whirlpool, it simultaneously does something else: it preserves.

I examine this duality of still and moving elements in three central images: Aby Warburg's Nymph, Freud's figure of Gradiva, and a few freeze frames from François Truffaut's 1962 film *Jules et Jim*. By placing them side by side, I spell out the thematic motifs they share, primarily the making of the other (and in all cases, the figure of a woman in motion) into a stilled image. What I emphasize in these images is not only the capturing of gesture in the stilled object (a statue, a bas-relief, or a freeze frame), but the capacity of details of reanimate the still figure, and to allude to the animated body. What I take from Warburg's pictorial details in particular is that details make movement visible, but not only the particular movements or gestures of the body—details also speak to the emotional spin. I thus read this movement as twofold: it can stand for the agitated state

[8]See Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), xi.

of the subject at the center of the image (as in Warburg's figures, or the freeze frames from Truffaut's film), or as an element of our own engagement with details as viewers (and in all three cases, as lovers). These images speak, separately and taken together, of the impulses captured by the billboard photograph: to still, to love, and to remember.

Figure 4.1 Adolph Menzel, *Unmade Bed* (circa 1846)

Nymphs and Traces

What moves us in the moving *detail*? the emotional reaction to the filmic detail, which I understand here by terms of animation, responds to the elusive element of an experience that I first located in Barthes's erotic moving details. These particular parts of the lover's body are taken from the body *in situation,* that is, in motion. And in order to look at this problem, which is unique to the film detail, from a different perspective, I would posit that we ought to modify our object, and ask of still images to tell us what movement means. This would be, to some extent, moving backwards: to trace

how we can understand something about movement only by stilling it. I argue, then, that to capture the experience of the moving film detail goes hand in hand with an attention to the dialectic of stillness and motion.

Before turning to the stilled film image, earlier forms of arrested motion can clarify the centrality of these questions to the concept of detail. A moving body that is stilled, and fascinates in the transitory details of its movement, is the starting point for Aby Warburg's figure of the nymph. With the photograph that opened the chapter, the imprint produced by someone's body takes the form of an ending note or a memento, a souvenir of past lovers and past love. In the case of Warburg's nymph, however, the details function as imprints of motion that survive as they reveal new affinities between images and continue to animate the viewer herself. Even though the nymph is not strictly a *moving* image, Warbrug's singular way of looking at details might be the pictorial configuration of a formal device like the freeze frame.

To capture Warburg's nymph in one detail would be to point out the recurring feature of her "winged," dancing gait.[9] Importantly, the lure of the detail that awakens emotion is not to be confused with its indexical quality, the simple testimony of someone's being there. What affectively stirs the viewer are the details showing how the body moved. The floaty garments and the light steps are fixed in Warburg's image of the nymph. By the energy preserved in the visible shape of the pictorial gestures, she asks the viewer to follow. From this we learn that stillness is part of how our desire moves.

Who, then, is Warburg's 'Nympha'? To spend a moment with two excerpts from his writings:

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[9] Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms, Aby Warburg's History of Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 188.

> As a real being of flesh and blood she may have been a freed slave from Tartary … but in her true essence she is an *elemental sprite*, a pagan *goddess in exile*. If you want to see her ancestors, look at the relief under her feet.[10]
>
> You are enticed to follow [the nympha] like a winged idea through all spheres in Platonic amorous rapture, while I am forced to aim my philological gaze at *the ground from which she rose*, and to ask in astonishment: is this strangely graceful plant actually rooted in sober *Florentine soil*?[11]

Who is she? — Based on the fragments and sketches left from Warburg's *Ninfa Florentina* file, there is no straightforward way to answer. This young woman, moving forward in fluttering garments and a fruit basket on her head, is not only the primal image of Warburg's nymph archive; in contemporary studies of Warburg she is generally believed to be *the* embodiment of Warburg's concept of *Pathos Formula* (*Pathosformel*), the survival of forms.[12] The formula designates 'a surviving moment of the form,'[13] in which details and gestures make visible the affinities with images of the past and convey the revival of an earlier principle of expression. When she is identified with the "pagan goddess" who *returns* in one of the opening excerpts from Warburg, she therefore represents the essential theme of the survival of formulae.[14] Given that Nympha is defined by the perpetual repetition and

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[10] E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970), 124, emphasis mine. For Gombrich, the nymph "is a 'pagan spirit' because in and through her form *elemental passions* could find an outlet." Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, 124, my emphasis. Gombrich succeeded in transcribing what he describes as the fragment's hardly readable handwriting. Sigrid Weigel shows that "an examination of the notes for this project kept at the Warburg Institute shows that we actually cannot speak of a fragment of a manuscript on the nymph. Instead, what we find there are many folders with highly different motifs, themes and representational forms." See Sigrid Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile,'" *Critical Horizons* 14:3 (2013): 271-295.

[11] Warburg Archive, 118.2, Fol. 2, Warburg, *Werke in einem Band*, 203. Variants in 118.6 (1) Fol. 6: "through all Platonic spheres in amorous rapture […] in this coarse Florentine soil." Qtd. in Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile'", 280.

[12] See for example, Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms, Aby Warburg's History of Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017); Giorgio Agamben, *Nymphs* (London: Seagull books, 2013); Sigrid Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile'", Critical Horizons, 14:3 (2013): 271-295; Barbara Baert, *Nymph: Motif, Phantom, Affect: A Contribution to the Study of Aby Warburg (1866-1929*) (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

[13] Didi- Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 289.

[14] Warburg also he prepared a talk from his notes, delivered before the Hamburg secondary school authorities on 28 October 1901. The title of his talk (unpublished during Warburg's lifetime) was "Florentine Reality and Classicizing

reincarnation of her image, we should rule out any determinate or fixed identity.

We might, however, begin the portrayal of the nymph with one exemplary figure that appears on the cover of Warburg's Nymph folder and opens the (fictive) correspondence with his friend André Jolles, intended to become the shared project on *Ninfa*.[15] The image is taken from Ghirlandaio's fresco cycle depicting the life of John the Baptiste (1485-1490): the young woman enters from the viewer's right into the pictorial space of Ghirlandaio's fresco *The Birth of St John the Baptist,* located in the Tornabuoni Chapel of the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. She is probably the most cited figure from Warburg's repertoire of images.

Even so, it is clear that she is not simply one of the many objects that Warburg studied. Baert appropriately terms her Warburg's *pars pro toto:* the implosive energy that stands in the center of Warburg's life work, and a private catalyst for his 'nameless science'.[16] Nymph is in that sense a meta-image, the introducer of the interspace between polarities: light-footed joy and the underworld, movement and stasis. Nymph is not, however, a concrete theme or concept. To use Didi-Huberman's terms, she is 'a floating signifier', moving from one incarnation to the next. Following her only ever results in the twists and turns of the fleeting object, the chase that never reaches a point of termination at which we can finally "grasp" it. Put another way, the desire to capture her particular type of movement is well aware of its own failure.

We might open the question of nymph yet again (and the spiral is worthy of her) with what

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Idealism: Francesco Sassetti, his Grave, and the Nymph of Ghirlandaio." The nymph "returned from antiquity" is described as an example of "animated mobility." See Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile'", 288.

[15]This file, along with the letters they exchanged, are the only surviving efforts of Warburg's interest in the nymph; the impact of the image clearly stands in contrast to its actual modest size. The influence of the nymph figure on Warburg's reception also has to do with Gombrich's treatment of the file. See Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography,* 106-127.

[16] Barbara Baert, *Nymph: Motif, Phantom, Affect Part II: Aby Warburg's (1866-1929) Butterflies as Art Historical Paradigms*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 28.

is gestured towards in both of the excerpts opening this section, while keeping Ghirlandaio's dancing girl in mind.[17] First, the excerpts direct attention to the materiality of the figure, and more specifically to the soil under her feet, the site to carry traces or imprints of her gait. In Warburg's theory of the history of images, the soil reflects the past representations she participated in ("Florentine soil"), yet there is another, more subtle aspect of the soil: it stands for the material of the imprint, and specifically of soil, capable of producing a replica of the body. Beyond the themes of origin and survival of formulae that are at stake here, the gesture being *fixed* in material bestows the nymph with continuous motion. And the traces she leaves behind make the viewer follow her. Never, simply, the index ("the efflorescence of a causality", Barthes writes); the details of her movement are the entry points into her image. And in Ghirlandaio the dancing girl is placed, suitably, at the threshold of the scene: the point for meaning to enter the painting.

The opposition of the moving and the still is visible in the figure's unusual arrival into Ghirlandaio's image. In the scene depicting John's nativity she makes her appearance, as noted, at the threshold of the pictorial space; captured at the moment of entering, she looks detached from the group of women on the left, who give the impression of being interconnected amongst themselves. The temporality of arrival is indeed what Baert terms *spontaneous*;[18] caught at the moment she steps into the room in her flowy movement, she is a rupture or an interruption of an otherwise calm environment. And indeed, in Warburg's *Fragment on the Nympha*, she is the one who brings "life

[17] Several commentaries discuss the nymph's motion in terms of dance. See for example Phillip-Alain Michaud, who claims that the model of dance patriciates in the dramatic and temporal aspects of the works in question in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 28. Kathleen M. Gough in "Between the Image and Anthropology: Theatrical Lessons from Aby Warburg's "Nympha"' argues that theatrical aspects join the image of the nymph with the figure of "The New Woman" in photography, cinema, and stage-based media, especially to the early performances of Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), which Warburg attended. See Kathleen M. Gough, "Between the Image and Anthropology: Theatrical Lessons from Aby Warburg's 'Nympha'," *The Drama Review,* 56.3 (2012): 114-130.

[18] See Baert, *Nymph: Motif, Phantom, Affect,* 6.

and movement into an otherwise calm scene."[19] How does the nymph carry agitation into a quiet scene, and introduce motion into the still painting? By means of the tips of her hair and the edges her garments. In these points of the painting, movement is inscribed with its own visual trace: the detail.

In contrast to the traditions of iconography, the nymph is not a sign that denotes clear allegorical significance. A certain form of life Warburg encounters *in the margins*, she is an epitome of his way of attending to details. This type of encounter is far removed from the usual forms of intellectual interest. For example, he speaks, bewildered, of the search for the right words to pin down her particular way of movement, trying to figure out the origin of her appearance in his life work:

> *Close to the open door, there runs—no that is not the word, there flies, or rather there hovers*—she the object of my dreams, which slowly assumes the proportions of a harming nightmare. A fantastic figure—should I call her a servant girl, or rather a classical nymph?—enters the room…with a billowing veil. […] This lively, light-footed and rapid gait, this irresistible energy, this striding step, which contrasts with the aloof distance of all the other figures, what is the meaning of it all? […] In many of the works of art I had always liked, I discovered something of my Nymph. My condition varied between a bad dream and a fairytale… I lost my reason. It was always she who brought life and movement into an otherwise calm scene. Indeed, she appeared to be the embodiment of movement… But it is very unpleasant to be her lover… Who is she? Where does she come from? Have I encountered her before?[20]

In this turbulent excerpt of writing, the passionate interest in the nymph points to sensuality and desire, yet they come along with agitation and instability. The perplexing quality of the nymph's way of moving is reflected in the tone of his words, trying to settle on the precise vocabulary for her (later he similarly moves between terms when he describes the folds of her clothing, classifying them as crackly (*krackelige)* or spiky (*zackelig),* along with sketches of zigzagged lines to illustrate his words;

[19]Warburg Qtd. in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 107.

[20] Warburg Qtd. in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 107-108, my emphasis.

the page is bursting with energy and frustration). Nymph is an experience of desire *for* an image, and not only an image *of* desire.[21] The affective force testifies to Warburg's disbelief in the traditional, systematic research methods of his discipline, a rejection apparent in his notes on the nymph: tables that are half empty and half inscribed, uncompleted taxonomies of her movements, laying down the hems and folds of her garments and the wind taking part in her appearance.[22] The visual pleasure of pictorial motion *captured* in hair and garments was already described by Alberti in *On Painting* (writing a generation before Botticelli): "I am delighted to see some movement in hair, locks of hair, branches, fronds and robes. The seven movements are especially pleasing in hair where parts of it turns in spirals as if wishing to knot itself, waves in the hair like flames, twined around itself like a serpent."[23] locks of loose hair take us back to the surfaces of fabric on the bed, gathered up and clustered, and the purely visual tremor of the figure draped in folds of cloth.

[21] In this context Baert argues that "Ninfa is arguably responsible for the deepest 'neurosis' in painting: the desire for the image that eludes us." See Barbara Baert, "He or She Who Glimpses, Desires, is Wounded," *Angelaki*, 23:4 (2018): 47-79.

[22] The nature of Warburg's own writing and scholarly work demands certain adjustments, as Weigel aptly shows. Reading Warburg's nymph cannot result in the reconstruction of a unified, fixed concept, but rather makes way for the essentially fragmented character of Warburg's model of thinking. As Weigel writes, "instead of joining transmitted textual modules together to constitute the totality of an intellectual edifice, what is involved here is a detailed reading of *individual* texts." Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile'," 275.

[23] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting: Revised Edition*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven, Connecticut: 1966), 81. The serpent was another visual motif central to Warburg's work; the most obvious example that comes to mind in the statue of Laöcoon. See Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Among the Hopi" in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* pages, 171-228 for a provocative reading of the motif of serpentine motion.

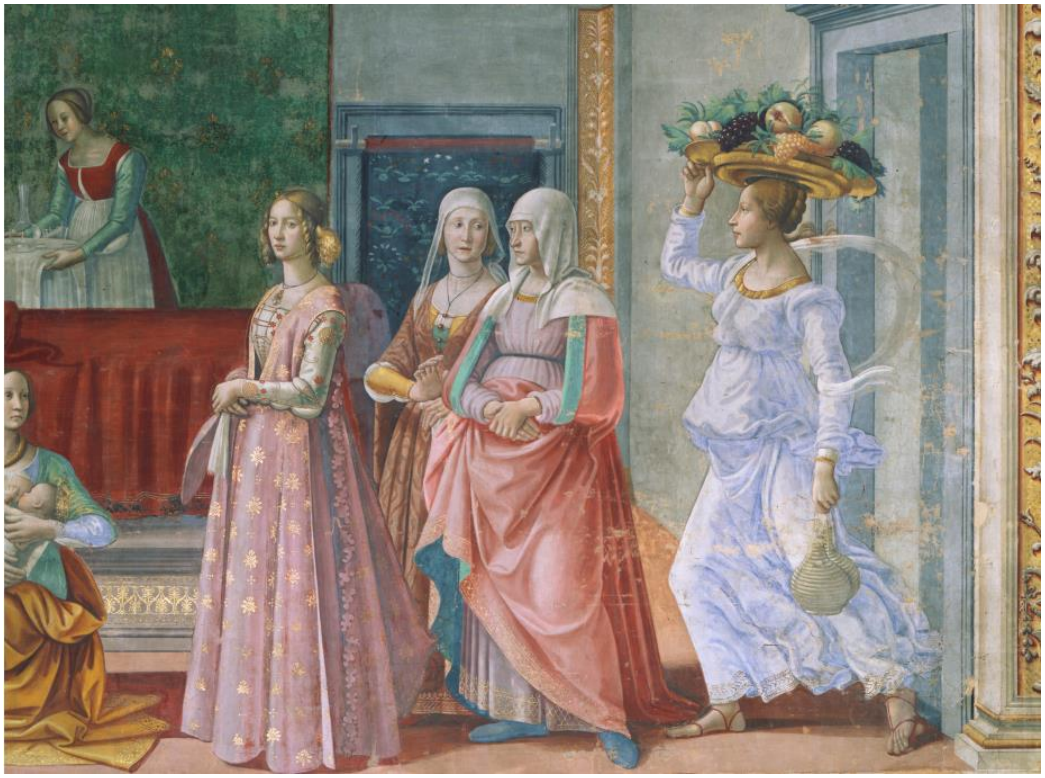

Figure 4.2 Detail from Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of the Baptist* (1486-1490)

The origins for Warburg's detailed and disoriented investigation go back to his early study of motifs in Botticelli. Already in his dissertation Warburg referred to the Ninfa as the central figure of Botticelli's *Spring* and described her impact along with the better-known Venus in the scallop shell. Around 1900 he will "discover" (or rediscover) her in the frescoes of Ghirlandaio. Originally regarded to be a "peripheral" figure (a servant girl), his reading made her into a key element of the picture. Along with her comes an ambivalent energy, one of nightmares, which Warburg locates in her Greek prefiguration—the maenad, the intoxicated companion of Dionysus, with a knife flashing in her swinging arm.[24] In this context Warburg speaks of energetic inversion, the shift in the

[24] The visual motif is there, as Moshe Barasch argues, even if it's hard to explain how or why. See in the example of Orpheus, raising his arm to protect himself from the maenad. The gesture is definitely not identical in all the examples Warburg surveys, but the arm is a referent we can recognize, that has to do with the displacement of meaning. Another prominent example is when Warburg discovered that Andrea del Castagno's *David* (1450) was modeled after a well knowen classical statue, the *Pedagogue* of the Niobid group. The Pedagogue raises his arm in a gesture which Castagno followed, but the reason for movement is very different in the two depictions. David proclaims his victory over Goliath in sudden joy (hair and drapery fluttering); The Pedagogue tries to defend himself from an angry god. In this context Warburg and Saxl will speak of energetic inversion. See Moshe Barasch, "'Pathos formulae': Some Reflections on the

meaning of the same sign or gesture, the "turnover" [*Umschlagen*] of polar tension; Not only the magical creature of dreams, the maenad takes the shape of a bad dream. Again, turning from the traditional iconographic development of motif, Warburg introduces the reappearance of type, form and detail in terms of *reincarnation*. The nymph, we might say, *happens* to him in different forms, yet she is an inexhaustible object by his own terms (the fragmentary nymph project, and the incomplete *Mnemosyne Atlas,* support this). An image which is both still and moving can reconfigure the traditional ways of thinking about time, duration, and change.

The revivals of the nymph in dreams and nightmares alike provide an additional connection with Warburg's early study of Botticelli. The figures of the Florentine master have "just woken from a dream to become aware of the world around them; however active they may be in that world, still their minds are filled with images seen in dreams."[25] Put differently, Warburg speaks of figures in the state of *awakening*, the fragile awareness laced with images lingering from sleep. We can think of this along the lines of Benjamin's dialectical method in the *Arcades Project*, namely "the art of experiencing the present as a waking world."[26] The nymph is in this sense a descendant of Warburg's dissertation on Botticelli, part of the collection of figures slowly entering consciousness, or *dream images*.

The nymph is often the point of entry into Warburg's unorthodox methods. As Weigel argues, Warburg was anything but a builder of systematically organized projects, but the insistence

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Structure of the Concept," in *Imago Hominis: Studies in the Language of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 119–127.

[25] Aby Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring*: An Examination of Concepts of Antiquity in the Italian Early Renaissance," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 141.

[26] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 389. Benjamin writes in a letter to Gretel Adorno in 1935: "The dialectical image does not copy the dream in a painterly representation—it was never my intention to say that. But it seems to me to contain the instances, *the place of the irruption of awakening* and to produce out of these places its figure, like a star constellation [is formed] by the sparkling dots." Letter qtd. in Rainer Nägele*, "*Thinking Images", in *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Gerhard Richter (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 23, emphasis mine.

and passion with which he treats certain topics surely demonstrates a systematic *interest*. Readers of Warburg posit theoretical frameworks that are capable of narrating her, in an attempt to conceptually *stabilize* the nymph's scattered appearances in Warburg's life and work.[27] And they often provide observations on the obstacles of such a process of becoming concept, that emphasize the particular difficulty of holding together the dialectical tensions that define her. I take a different approach. In his drafts for the 'Fragments' from 1890, later grouped under the title 'Spectator and Movement' Warburg notes that for the early Renaissance "the question is no longer: 'What does this expression mean?', but rather 'Where is this directed to?'"[28] and continues: "Figures whose clothing or hair is moved can receive this movement from their own bodily movements, or else from the wind, or from both together. They move on a plane parallel to the spectator, so that the spectator can believe in forward movement only when he moves his eyes." I would thus like to read the nymph by the terms of her own movement; not necessarily by asking what she means but *where* she leads the viewer, and by what means.

The exact nature of the nymph's movement— in Ghirlandaio's painting, or in Warburg's dreams and memories—is hard to specify and often contradictory. Nonetheless, she appears. Even when the right words are lacking. As with the impression of her feet on Florentine soil, she leaves an *affective* imprint on the one who sees her. The imprint takes the shape of the fixed details of her animated body: hair, billowy garments, and the dance-like gait. With affected visibility on the one hand, and a fixed pattern on the other, and like many of Warburg's objects of study, the exact way in which details move—typical to locks of hair and garments in the breeze, or the nymph's flowing

[27] See Sigrid Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile,'" on this particular issue. See also Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 89–103.

[28] Aby Warburg, *Bruchstücke* (Fragments), qtd. in Michaud, *Image in Motion*, 82.

steps— tends to escape the writer's grasp. Words are hardly ever satisfactory for capturing what travels within dreams; If you want to see, Warburg makes clear, look at the relief under her feet. The waving fabric and flowy hair by which the nymph moves grabs attention in a particular way. As it often is with details, it is hard to distinguish between the conscious act of giving them attention and the grip they themselves have on the viewer.

The motif of the butterfly can help us articulate how the study of the moving object blurs the firm distinctions that usually separate viewer and image, scholarly interest and passionate pursuit. The terms applied to the nymph invoke chase, infatuation, and dreams, that suggest that everything happens in the space between grasping the object and being gripped by it, or the interaction of subject and object taking place. "The dark flutter" of wings that Warburg mentions in his writings appropriately describes the agitating nature of studying the moving object, and the nymph is directly linked to the butterfly in one of Warburg's letters: "The most beautiful butterfly that I have ever pinned down suddenly bursts through the glass and dances mockingly upwards into the blue air. [..] Now I should try to catch it again, but I am not equipped for this kind of *locomotion*."[29] A few commentaries point to Warburg's actual interest in butterflies and moth, citing his collection of butterfly display cases and his 1912 Rome lecture, where the nymph is named "*au papillon florentin*" (to which we might add the nymph's etymological relation to the butterfly, not dissimilar to Nabokov's *Nymphet*).[30]

The transformative nature of the chase after the moving object goes along with the memory

[29] Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, 110, emphasis mine.

[30] Nabokov famously named the first butterfly subspecies he discovered in America "Nabokov's Wood Nymph." On the butterfly motif in Warburg see Didi-Huberman's introduction to *The Image in Motion*, "The Man Who Spoke to Butterflies", in *Image in Motion,* 7-20; Barbara Baert, *Nymph: Motif, Phantom, Affect Part II: Aby Warburg's (1866-1929) Butterflies as Art Historical Paradigms* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016).

of the butterfly hunt in one of the short vignettes from Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Around 1900,* sketching the mimetic effect the animal has on the child-hunter:

> Cabbage butterflies with ruffled edging, brimstone butterflies with super bright wings, vividly brought back the ardors of the hunt, which so often had lured me away from well-kept garden paths into a wilderness, where I stood powerless before the conspiring elements – wind and scents, foliage and sun – that were bound to govern the flight of the butterflies […] The old law of hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibers of my being, to the animal – the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul – the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price I had to pay to regain my human existence.[31]

In this encounter the child assumes the features of the animal, based on the mimetic relationship to the 'prey' that guides the hunter. The nymph and the butterfly are close attempts to catch the moving object by casting the butterfly net, and at times *becoming* butterfly.[32] *Mothlight* (Stan Brakhage, 1963) is likewise the pursuit of fleeting forms of life in their bare materiality. In an interview with Bruce Kawin that appears in *By Brakhage: An Anthology,* Brakhage points to his own mimetic identification with the moth, the result of facing the opposite challenge, namely making something out of wings that no longer flutter:

> These crazy moths are flying into the candlelight, and burning themselves to death. And that's what's happening to me! I don't have enough money to make these films, and it's destroying […] over the light bulbs, there's all these dead moth wings. And I hate that. Such a sadness. There must surely be something to do with that, and I tenderly pick them out and I start pasting them onto a strip of film to try to […] in one way, you'd say it's a kind of madness, to give them life again? To animate them again? To put them into some kind of life through the motion picture machine [laughs]? But really, it's, I think, deeper than that … It's to engage with this, that otherwise is just an unacceptable… unhappiness, or misery. To engage with it in some way that makes of it something.[33]

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[31] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 50.

[32] In this context, Inga Pollman argues for the affinities between cinema and the features of the butterfly chase. See Inga Pollman "Invisible Worlds, Visible: Uexküll's *Umwelt*, Film, and Film Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Summer 2013): 777-816.

[33] Stan Brakhage, interview with Bruce Kawin. *By Brakhage: An Anthology*. The Criterion Collection, 2003. In a kind of reversal, in a letter to his brother Vincent Van Gogh writes on the event of a large moth flying into his room, which he

The collecting of wings makes room for a film to happen by means of the mimetic kinship between wings and film (and it would be tempting to say: this answering to death can occur only in view of the fact that films *move*).[34] The fragility of life and death in the small body of the moth, a bead infused with pure life to use Virgnia's Woolf touching prose,[35] turns it into an object through which Brakhage can investigate the conditions of filmmaking, and particularly those of cinematic motion. Brakhage's reanimation does not conceal the fact that its object is no longer alive; stillness as the image of death is part of this film.[36] As such, the film formulates a dialectic of still and moving elements. Differently from Brakhage's engagement with the materials of moth movement, in Warburg something about the butterfly – and the nymph –is destined to remain beyond resolution and beyond grasp. Francesca Cernia Slovin writes of this creature in movement that "tempted [Warburg] to seize what could not be seized, to stop what could not be stopped, to possess the impossible."[37] The "antique butterfly" emerges, and the butterfly net is missing, making it impossible to pin down the exact ways in which she moves and the singular effect she has on the viewer.

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could not bring himself to paint—that would have required him to kill it. Qtd. in Didi Huberman, *Phalènes: Essais sur l'apparition II* (Paris: Minuit, 2013), 28-29.

[34] I would also point to his film *Sirius Remembered* (1959) in this context, as the two films appear to be interrelated in several ways: in both cases Brakhage was disturbed by an encounter with creaturely death, yet eager to look at it directly and focus on its most subtle details.

[35] Virginia Woolf*,* "The Death of the Moth," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays by Virginia Woolf* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 3-6. Woolf repeatedly describes the moth's fluttering movements as 'dancing,' which resonates with the Brakhage's ideas about his film; the three sections of *Mothlight* are referred to as "round-dances" and "a coda", and brings up the 'dance of death' in his letter to Robert Kelly. See Stan Brakhage, "Respond Dance," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 245-248.

[36] Brakhage originally planned to name the film "Dead Spring," but eventually changed it to "Mothlight". 'Dead spring', according to Brakhage, was a phrase that grew from "the process, the material involved, and the *simulation of life* that the eventual unwinding of this film would create of the material be way of this process." Brakhage, "Respond Dance," 246.

[37] Francesca Cernia Slovin*, Obsessed by Art: Aby Warburg, His Life and Legacy* (S.l., 2006), 23.

The Amorous Case: Jensen's Gradiva

Warburg's nymph is, unmistakably, an amorous object. The details of the body are at the center of the fascination with her image. As in the case of another follower of traces, the young archaeologist of Jensen's *Gradiva,* Warburg approaches her image in the manner of what Barthes calls *an excessive lover*,[38] the one who hallucinates what others merely evoke; in this case, the mobile elements of an immobile figure. The most striking correspondence between Warburg and Jensen's story is tied to the shared fixation on the particular gait of a female figure. Freud's *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva* (1907) deals effectively with the temporal paradox of the detail that appears in the midst of living actions, even if not exactly experienced in reality as actual movement (making it crucial to dream of the figure's movement, to reconfigure it elsewhere as it is missing from waking life). "To attribute motion to a figure that is not moving", Warburg writes, "it is necessary to reawaken in oneself a series of experienced images following from one to the other—not a single image: a loss of calm contemplation".[39] With Jensen's tale, the single gesture will similarly make us dream the figure's movement.

Freud's interpretation of Jensen's novella made it extremely well known: the tale of the young archaeologist Norbert Hanold who becomes erotically attached to "a complete figure in the act of walking", glimpsed within the frame of a bas-relief at one of the antique collections in Rome (the actual relief, part of a composition showing three women moving from the right, is later "discovered" by Freud in Rome, where he purchased a copy for his studio). The psychoanalytic process is often described by archaeological metaphors, and this is possibly one of the earlier

[38] Barthes, *Lover's Discourse,* 124.

[39] Aby Warburg, *Bruchstücke* (Fragments), qtd. in Michaud, *Image in Motion*, 82-83.

articulation of this affinity.[40]

Once Hanold returns home a plaster cast of the walking woman is made to occupy a central place in his study, perfectly located on the wall visited every evening by the sun (to show Freud's own attachment to the image of Gradiva, his copy of the figure was placed on the wall in his study, right in the patient's view: the female figure moves forward, visible by her lifting up her dress to expose the position of her feet). After Gradiva begins to appear in the archeologist's dreams at the exact moment of the volcanic eruption in Pompeii, he feels compelled to travel to Italy, where he eventually meets her in the ruins of the ancient city, apparently a ghost.

Within this setting, amongst tourists and newlyweds, the mysterious wanderer is revealed in her true identity, his childhood playmate Zoë Bertgang, who *solves* the turbulent dream-state by assuming personality, biography, and movement (all playing with the etymology of her name in Greek, "life"). Gradiva initially triggered Hanold's infatuation by the fixed gesture of her gait. Only later, when Hanold will meet Zoë, *the embodiment of Gradiva,* she will finally move towards him. In a letter to Freud, Jensen explained the "underlying idea of the psychological process" as follows: Hanold, he writes, had "*absorbed*" Zoë gait as a child, and the detail was in fact part of his early memories.[41]

Not only does the nymph resemble Gradiva in her arrested gait, but they both represent the way an image can rise from the areas of the unconscious, or the dream. Freud's *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva* is interested in the meeting point of science and art in her dream image, which like the nymph stimulates forces of survival and return. Eventually, Weigel concludes, Freud and

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[40] For elaborate examples, see Donald Kuspit, "A Mighty Metaphor: The Analogy of Archaeology and Psychoanalysis", in eds. Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells *Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 133-151.

[41] Jensen, letter to Freud, 25 May 1907. Qtd. in Andreas Mayer, "Gradiva's Gait: Tracing the Figure of a Walking Woman," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Spring 2012): 574.

Warburg moved in opposite directions: while Warburg was forced to turn away from the amorous rapture to his archaeological-genealogical research, only to become even more entangled in related problems of description, by his literary reading of Jensen's novella Freud was able to reach more clarity about his own science, which he will later define by the "ideal case" of Jensen's literary figure.[42]

Gradiva is not simply a case of fetishism and partial objects, Freud claims in his analysis; "the girl splendid in walking" is the encounter with an object of the psyche. An impossible object who, like the nymph, moves within thoughts and dreams, torments at times, delights in others. And these figures tend to escape our grasp because they are permanently, *eternally*, in motion. In her very first description in Jensen's novella, the emphasis is placed on Gradiva's gait, the movement that appears to be made "quickly, from life, as she passed on the street."[43] Wavy hair partly fastened up, this everyday walk is condensed, *captured* in one particular moment in time, the left foot slightly touching the ground:

> With her head bent forward a little, she held slightly raised in her left hand, so that her sandaled feet became visible, her garment, which fell in exceedingly voluminous folds from her throat to her ankles. The left foot had advanced, and the right, about to follow, touched the ground only lightly with the tips of the toes, while the sole and heel were raised almost vertically. This movement produced a double impression of exceptional agility and of confident composure.[44]

Warburg's details are of the same kind. What is captivating about these details is that the distinct way of moving is reflected in the particulars of the *static* figure. And to specify exact locations, it is not the feet that present themselves to the imagination in the case of *Gradiva*, but the gait and the mental

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[42] Weigel claims that we can in fact read Freud's *Gradiva* as a possible *commentary* on Warburg's nymph project, showing that "when research is steered by love of images alone […] it loses sight of history." Weigel, "Warburg's 'Goddess in Exile'", 294.

[43] Wilhelm Jensen, *Gradiva*, trans. Helen M. Downey (København; Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003), 8.

[44] Jensen, *Gradiva,* 148.

engagement with it (that is, what is added to the image by desire). Gradiva's wavy hair, and the elaborate folds of fabric of her clothing, are details which help create the impression of a body in motion, making the charm of bodily movement visible. If the nymph's garments flow behind her as she enters the room, expressive of the movement of her body, Gradiva's *way of walking,* her graceful everyday being, captures the archeologist's imagination. Not necessarily beauty traps him in the image of the walking women, but "maidenly grace"; Warburg's sensitivity is not necessarily directed to the beauty of the nymph, but to her expressive gestures.

The motif of knowing a person by their particular gait has a long tradition, as shown in Andreas Mayer's detailed study of Gradiva's gait[45]: in the passage from the first book of the *Aeneid*, Venus, disguised as a shepherdess, is truly recognized by her son only when she walks away, "and the true Goddess was revealed with her step". The *transposition* of bodily gestures, especially ones of walking, to animated folds of fabric, appears in Balzac's *Ferragus* (1831): "There is something, I know not what, of quivering buoyancy in the person, in the gait […] she glides like a star, and floats onward led by a thought which exhales from the folds and motion of her dress." The folds effectively carry an erotic weight, rhyming with the waves of hair and the unrestricted access to the lover's unbound hair, as Barthes notes elsewhere, "is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?"[46]

Warburg writes of Botticelli's Venus in similar tones: "her hair is parted in the center, then gathered in a braid and wound around her head, ending in a loose, fluttering dress. The imaginary breeze swells a scarf like garment that is looped over her shoulder." The fluctuating movement of the figure's garments plays with the outlines of the body: "Her gown […] clings to her body… Most

[45] See Andreas Mayer, "Gradiva's Gait: Tracing the Figure of a Walking Woman," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Spring 2012): 554-578.

[46] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 9.

of her fair hair wafts back from her temples in long waves."[47] The depiction of the truly fine details (waves of hair, billowy fabric, the feet placed, ever so slightly, above the ground) establishes the compelling sense of motion which the viewer can take in.

Freud also draws on Gradiva's "unusual and particularly seductive gait", the *detail* of the moving body which the viewer/lover makes into her essential image. Even when isolated from the active body, it preserves the energy of walking (or of dancing into a room). The flow of the body is *stuck*, so to speak, in this image; a sudden affective moment that lingers, the fixed quivering of wings (this conflict corresponds with Jensen's own contradictory description of the gait, a "flight-like poise, combined with a firm step"). Likewise, Didi-Huberman brings together the nymph and the fossil, which is "no longer simply a being which has lived; it is a being which is still living, asleep in its form."[48] An evidence of survival, these figures represent *life arrested within form*.

The woman who walks is not one image, despite what might be assumed from the tone of my analysis; the image of Gradiva is one in a series, and Ghirlandaio's nymph, placed on the cover of the *Ninfa* folder, is one of her many appearances (several panels from the *Atlas* show her in a full series of images and transformations, see for example panel 39). Even so, the removal of one detail from a series speaks to the isolation of part from whole at play in the respective figures.

[47] Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring*", 107.

[48] Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 162.

The Smile of the Statue: On a Few Moments in Jules et Jim

The question of stasis is central to *Jules et Jim,* Truffaut's third film.[49] Nymph and Gradiva attract the eye by the arrested details of their way of moving; Truffaut's film is more interested in the play of still and moving elements in the laughing face. As the film unfolds, the first significant frozen gesture—the sphinx like smile on the face of a statue that the two friends, German Jules (Osker Werner) and French Jim (Henri Serre), fall in love with—makes way for a second gesture, this time the stilled image of Catherine (Jeanne Moreau) laughing. I explore and compare both images, and show how Jeanne Moreau's portrayal of Catherine, and the film's use of the freeze frame, complicate the power of the still image to contain her agitated force of life.

Jules and Jim first come across the prehistoric sculpture, smiling enigmatically, in a photograph projected on slide from a friend's visit to an Adriatic isle (this friend is Albert, who will later be part of the romantic entanglement at the center of the film). The serene smile draws the two friends with inexplicable force; after they discover it in the photograph, they travel to the island see it in person. Walking around the open-air museum on the island, they find her among the figures in a sculpture garden: her mouth is only slightly open, the calm smile emerging from the stone like a living presence. As the camera circles the statue, to animate the effect it has on the two men, they identify the smile and the tingling agitation of desire it gives rise to. Suppose they ever meet such a smile; they both know that they will follow it.

And they do. The smile appears in person with Catherine, the love interest, in her first appearance. She arrives to a meeting in a Parisian garden arranged by Jules's cousin; as she steps down the stairs, her face covered with a veil, and into the small garden, the sight of her is somewhat

[49] The film is based on a memoir by Henri-Pierre Roché, also titled *Jules et Jim,* that relies on his memories from his friendship with Franz Hessel (1880-1940), Proust's German translator, and Helen Grund (1886-1982), who became a meaningful character in the world of the two. In the movie her character, Catherine, is French and not German.

of an amorous shock; the camera becomes restless as she lifts her veil, framing her as the very same statue coming to life. First her face in profile, shifting to the frontal image of her entire face, and zooming into the profile again. In the garden they see her for the first time, and they immediately *know*— they recognize the smile they are destined to chase (after all, they were prepared for her arrival; by her walking down the stairs, Truffaut makes it theatrical).

Catherine literally introduces turbulence into a quiet scene. With her impulsive, restless, independent nature, she is unable to stop and stay in the same place for long, and in any given environment she pushes for variation and transformation (this definitely lends the prophetic sign of her appearance— the statute—a slight sense of irony). Catherine is *never* still (with one notable exception, which I will address later). When Jules quotes Baudelaire at the end of an evening ("La femme est naturelle, donc abominable" and other lines she does not enjoy listening to[50]) she jumps into the Seine, an act of rebellion Jim is extremely moved by, to the point that he makes a sketch of it the next day; when she needs something in the situation to change, she will dress up as a young man and start running in the streets, aimlessly, competing with Jules and Jim. The unpredictability of her boundless character goes along with the spiraling movement of desire for her, which the two men share.

Catherine slowly becomes a *presence* to reckon with in the lives of Jules and Jim, yet she is never reliable, and always ambivalent; she is devoted only to change and to movement, trying to become something new by pushing against stability. Carole le Berre provides other examples of Truffaut's passion for similar female characters in constant motion, and for active and nervous characters in general.[51] Trying to know her, in the sense of figuring out consistent behaviors and

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[50] The exact quotation is actually "La Femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable." Charles Baudelaire, *Mon Cœur mis à nu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 677.

[51] Carole le Berre, *François Truffaut* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du Cinéma, 1993), 180-184.

predicting future actions, is futile. And like Catherine will later tell Jim, *she does not want to be understood*. I take this to mean that she does not wish to be an object of knowledge, but instead is engaged, passionately and desperately, with being.[52]

To constantly move is, therefore, to actively reformulate the rules they live by. "We thought we could invent love", Jim tells Catherine near the end, and the first reviews of the film treated Catherine's character as the embodiment of 'the modern woman.'[53] The one clear decision she makes is to marry Jules. From this decision, too, she will retreat (even if Jules does not, at any point, stop loving her). The failure of their marriage teaches the tragedy of *Jules et Jim:* even when she attempts to control certain aspects of their tangled lives, they all find out they are bound by the same powerful, insurmountable laws, those of jealousy, boredom, and distraction.[54]

Trying to make room for the unexpected as such, *as a rule*—allows for another Catherine and another smile to appear. After the statue's smile was played with to predict her appearance, the camera turns to emphasize her moving face once again with a series of five brief freeze frames, speaking to the wish that completes desire: *to hold on to her for a moment, to stop change.*[55] The short scene places Jules, Jim and Catherine outdoors, enjoying an idle day; they are on their first vacation together at the sea shore. Jules and Jim are in the midst of a game of domino, and Catherine is

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[52] In Dudley Andrew's reading of the film, by this Catherine turns into "the very image of the fleeting that words, and particularly writing, can never grasp," especially given the fact that Jules and Jim are writers and translators by occupation. I would rather read Catherine in terms of being, and less as standing for what an image is in relation to words. See Dudley Andrew, "Jules et Jim… et Walter Benjamin," in *A Companion to François Truffaut*, eds. Dudley Andrew and Anne Gillain (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 425.

[53] Andrew, "Jules et Jim… et Walter Benjamin," 430.

[54] Nature is curiously one option that the film gives for an alternative existence. Jules seeks refuge from the love triangle in a world conducted by the pre-determined laws of nature: when Jim visits him after returning from the war, Jules describes his slow withdrawal from the human order; now he wishes to write a love story, but one that takes place between insects.

[55] Actual photographs are featured in the film as points of reference, but I will focus on the freeze frame as the film's key figure of immobility.

sitting on a bench, her legs fidgeting, restlessly (she needs to move). At some point, she turns to the men seated at the table. In her attempts to catch their attention, she slaps Jules, with an open hand, on his face. They start laughing, and the game stops, making way for a more chaotic one, which she now controls.

Catherine turns to them, and to the camera: "Before I met you two, I never used to laugh," she demonstrates with a grim expression. The camera plays along with Catherine's pantomime and captures her facial expression in a freeze-frame. "I looked like this; or like this," she continues, and a series of fixed frames punctuate the little story. "And now I look like this" - she bursts into laughter, again interrupted by intervals of still frames. The scene is described by Truffaut in the script as "a series of close-ups of Catherine pulling faces, each new expression freezing for a moment."[56] The diegetic sound, however, continues, disrupting the unity of sound and image, and making the line between the still and the moving tangible, thin, and fragile.

No longer the calm serenity of the statue face with her closed lips; in the few moments the scene lasts it is the wide-open mouth and the energy of the laughing face that take over. The fixed expressions formed by this series of freeze frames are images *borrowed* from the moving face. Catherine, like Zoë from Jensen's *Gradiva,* is a statue come to life; in this scene she returns to the primal stillness of the Adriatic figure, but her image is npw overflowing with life, that which stillness cannot comprehend but only gesture to. By this the freeze frame *suspends*, rather than cancels, the moving image, as Gunning puts it; and the stilled image continues to *refer* to the moving object.[57]What creates this version of the statue's smile is the desire to stop, formulated by the freeze

[56] *Jules and Jim—a film by François Truffaut* (Modern Film Scripts), trans. Nicholas Fry (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 34.

[57] Tom Gunning, "Re-Animation: The Invention of Cinema: Living Pictures or the Embalming of the Image of Death?" in *Untot/Undead: Relations between the Living and the Lifeless, ed.* P. Geimer (Berlin: Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, 2003), 26.

frame holding the image in place. It takes something from the film and closes it within one image. The stilled frames appear *within* the flow of laughter, they make its rhythm with sudden arrests (Catherine's face, suddenly made of stone) and escapes (when the face moves again, and the laughter continues to vibrate).

The face is released from stillness to return to the world of film, a trope Kracauer comments on in relation to Alexander Dovzhenko's fixed camera in *Arsenal* (1929) and *Earth* (1930). Dovzhenko typically dwells on moments of immobility (separating him from the frantic energy of other Soviet directors of the time), emphasizing not shot duration (which is not notably long) but the lack of physical movement of the characters within the shots. Kracauer refers to this phenomenon as 'nascent motion', the meeting point of movement and stillness, producing "a shock effect, as if all of a sudden we found ourselves within a vacuum. [But] even though the moving images on the screen come to a standstill, the thrust of their movement is too powerful to be discontinued." When the characters are shown in the form of "stills", their suspended movement *perpetuates* by "changing from outer motion into inner motion" (for the immobile lovers in *Earth,* for example, "the deep happiness which is moving them turns inside out").[58] By means of the arrest of *external* movement, the viewer grasps the *internal* agitated state of the characters. When they regain life and start to move again, the viewer is somewhat relieved; motion marks our return to the filmic. And only the inherent motion of film makes such points of extreme tension, "excursions into the whirlpool of the motionless" in Kracauer's language, possible.[59]

Kracauer points to the displacement of bodily motion over to the passionate interior state, a

[58] See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*: *The Redemption of Psychical Reality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44-45.

[59] Even if Kracauer refers to such moments as 'stills', the effect of immobility in *Earth* is probably achieved by the fixed camera and the motionless subjects, and not by the use of freeze frames. In *Arsenal*, on the other hand, it is not clear if the static images are freeze frames, photographs, or staged shots with the total absence of motion. See Philip Cavendish, *Men with the Movie Camera: The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant Garde* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 266-267.

reversal that recalls Warburg's writings on movement in Botticelli. The dynamic quality of the pictorial folds of fabric and hair in *Birth of Venus,* for example, are the result of an external cause (the wind, personified in this example), but they simultaneously externalize the *inner* emotional setting. By this Kracauer's early remarks overcome the tendency of recent scholarship to understand stasis as purely oppositional to cinematic movement.[60] What the image of the whirlpool shows is that they are, in fact, intertwined: the static frame *reintroduces* us to movement, emphasizing its impact and appeal by pause and interruption.

Figure 4.3 Freeze Frames from *Jules et Jim* (1962)

[60] See, for example, Justin Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Karen Beckman and Jean Ma, eds. *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008); or Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Islington, UK: Reaktion Books, 2006), which I later address in detail.

Figure 4.4 Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (detail)

Warburg's concepts imply that what is moving in the still image is not only achieved by the representation of the body in motion, but rather encompasses both physical and psychological movement: the stilled body bears the agitation of the psyche.[61] Likewise, Kracauer relates the slowing down of the active body to an affective realization: the *internal movement* of the characters comes to the surface. The meeting point of motion and stasis takes place in the image of suspended turbulence: the whirlpool. The spiral at the heart of the whirlpool is both still, a pause in the stream, and the intense pulling of the circular force.

Catherine's laughing face will eventually overwhelm the fixed image, and move again. On the motionless of the photograph Barthes writes that it is not only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that "they do not *emerge,* do not *leave;* they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."[62]The frames of Catherine's laughter are not photographs precisely because she *emerges* from their stillness, which cannot contain her.

The photography scene in the beach episode from the semi-documentary *People on*

[61] See Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion,* 71, for an insightful analogy between Warburg and Kleist's *On the Marionette Theatre* on this point.

[62] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 57.

Sunday (*Menschen am Sonntag*, Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer, 1930) is an early example of this jump from the mobile face to the fixed portrait, and back again (even if not a direct influence, the resemblance to Truffaut's scene is striking). As bathers at the beach are having their picture taken, the photographer is placing them in front of the camera. First, we see the characters in motion, each preparing for the camera; a single freeze-frame follows, to illustrate the resulting photograph, or 'snapshot' in Kracauer's description of the scene.[63] This scene already shows the medium's capacity not only to still, but to reanimate. The 'snapshots' in the form of freeze frames are used differently here: they join the photographic and the filmic to create images that represent the fleeting joys of one day at the beach. By stilling, the film reflects a formal transition into the temporality of memory: the freeze frames are also souvenirs, both for the people sitting in front of the camera, and for the viewer. These are frames to *take away* from the film, to integrate into our own memory.

Of all the portraits from this series, I take the young boy giggling in front of the camera to be the one to stand out, his laughter refusing the stilling force of the frame; his response to the camera resembles Catherine's control of the freeze frame. The boy's silly faces and unstoppable giggles contradict the gravity of stillness, and the fixed image of his clownish expressions, his so-called 'photograph', is taken from this acting out in front of the camera; not so much a rigid portrait (which many of the still images from this scene are) but the frozen frame snatched from life's movement.[64] The editing table scene from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) plays with the materiality of animation in a similar way by bringing together the images of a boy's laughing face, first on celluloid to be spliced and edited, and shortly after, moving.

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[63] Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 44-45.

[64] Kracuaer compares this scene the Dovzhenko 'stills', and argues that *People on Sunday* clearly identifies the lack of motion with lifelessness. The shots taken on the beach do not immerse the viewer in their world, but instead freeze life into "an absurd standstill." See Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 45-46.

Figure 4.5 Still from *People on Sunday* (*Menschen am Sonntag*, 1929)

Even if she will later leave her lovers, Jules and then Jim, always the *restless presence* within any scene, Catherine makes their lives move in a spiral around her (her voice-over opens the film and predicts this: "You said 'I love you', I said 'wait'; I was going to say 'take me' when you said 'go away'). The song *Le Tourbillon de la Vie*, which she sings to her three lovers Jules, Jim and Albert, similarly "spins like a centrifuge to precipitate meaning out of incessant change", as Dudley Andrew writes.[65] The freeze frame is in this sense a telling instant, that allows time for pause: a whirlpool. Catherine appears to have control over the force of stilling, given that she uses it for her playful act of storytelling. At the same time, she is also momentarily *caught* by stillness. The freeze frame responds to what continues to move and to change: to her restless character, and the instability of the film's own structure of desire. Put differently, the freeze frame is a *practice* of desire.

By taking frames from Catherine's laughter, details of movement are made from her moving face, visibly referring the original smile that had predicted her arrival. Ludovic Cortade gives a

[65] See Dudley Andrew, "Jules et Jim… et Walter Benjamin," 426.

similar line of critique when he notes on the film's *hesitation* between the desire for movement and the nostalgia for immobility, representative of what he refers to as Truffaut's ongoing "Pygmalion complex".[66] Andrew makes a related observation: "Catherine's image is literally frozen into a photographic pose to be held in eye and mind, to be remembered, as though she were being returned to the statue from which she emerged"[67] (likewise, the figure of Gradiva fluctuates between still and moving forms).

The wish materialized in these moments, namely *to stop the film* and grab hold of something that will be taken away, is paradoxical: we want cinematic images to *keep moving*, and we want them to elude our grasp. The desire to still *coexists* with our pleasure in the way beauty spins; but to capture the spin calls for a moment of stilling. To join stillness and desire is very different from identifying the freeze frame with moments of pensiveness, which Raymond Bellour does with his concept of the *pensive spectator,* for whom still cinematic moments emerge as the possibility of contemplation, separated from the unfolding of moving images and narrative. For Bellour figures of immobility provide "the overwhelming proof of the photographic immersed in the film, forcing itself into the meaning and the thread of its story." When film intersects with photography, he argues, these moments become its meaningful instances.[68] The tone is one that takes film *backwards* to stasis as origin, similar to the way Serge Daney's sees the final freeze frame in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) as "the returning of the film to its skeleton of still images, just like returning a corpse to the ashes

[66] Ludovic Cortade, "Truffaut, Heir of Renoir: The Paradox of 'Familiarity,'" in *A Companion to François Truffaut*, eds. Dudley Andrew and Anne Gillain (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 283-299.

[67] Dudley Andrew, "Jules, Jim and Walter Benjamin," in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 39.

[68] Raymond Bellour, "The Film Stilled," *Camera Obscura* 4, Volume 8, no. 3 (September 1990): 98-124. See also Raymond Bellour, "The Pensive Spectator," *Wide Angle* 9.1 (1987): 6-10.

from which it was made (*ashes to ashes, frames to frames*…)."[69]

Truffaut's films constantly engage with forms of cinematic stasis, such as photographs, film stills, movie posters (and freeze frames), which leads Junji Hori to consider him by the terms of Mulvey's "possessive spectator", the one who "attempts to appropriate his favorite films by means of immobile images," answering to the desire to possess the moving image.[70] As Mulvey writes elsewhere, "the momentum associated with desire brings with it desire for delay, for pause and ecstatic pleasure in the cinematic medium itself."[71] By stilling Truffaut acknowledges that Catherine is a character but also an image, or as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis critically argues, "a plurality of images and representations of desire that circulate throughout the film, moments of exquisite beauty that can be freed from the constraints of narrative, isolated, savored, and committed to memory."[72] Hori even points to the biographical aspects of this interest in the stilled film frame, referring to the fact that Truffaut was engaged in "a small traffic in film stills"; the director himself will later recall how, at the age of sixteen, he stole a film still from *Citizen Kane* to enlarge it.[73] Jim recalls these tendencies when he tells Catherine about the ways of looking made possible by being unseen: "I've always loved the nape of your neck. The only part of you I could look at without being seen"; and

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[69]Serge Daney, "Photo et cinema," in *La Maison cinema et la monde, tome 2: Les Années Libé 1981-1985* (Paris: P.O.L., 2002), 542-543. See also Garrett Stewart's *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) for a discussion of the freeze frame.

[70] Junji Hori, "Truffaut and the Photographic: Cinema, Fetishism, Death," in *A Companion to François Truffaut*, eds. Dudley Andrew and Anne Gillain (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 137. See also Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 161.

[71] Laura Mulvey. "Love, History, and Max Ophüls: Repetition and Difference in Three Films of Doomed Romance," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 43, Number 1 (Spring 2013): 24.

[72] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Fascination, Friendship, and the 'Eternal Feminine,' or the Discursive Production of (Cinematic) Desire," *The French Review*, Vol. 66, No. 6 (May, 1993): 942. Flitterman-Lewis argues that her image is inseparable from Jeanne Moreau herself, as we see in Truffaut's own notes: "A l'interieur de mes vingt ans de tournage, le tournage de *Jules* et *Jim,* grace a Jeanne Moreau, reste un souvenir lumineux, le plus lumineux." Truffaut, *Correspondance*, qtd. in Flitterman-Lewis, "Fascination, Friendship, and the 'Eternal Feminine'," 941.

[73] Junji Hori, "Truffaut and the Photographic: Cinema, Fetishism, Death," 138.

elsewhere in the film, several point-of-view shots from the trip to the beach show her neck as she rides her bicycle before him.

Ways of looking that react to the shape of the other's neck— Jean Epstein responding to the local movements of the face is exactly this type of viewer. Epstein interrupts his own writing to mimic the affective intensity of the image, drawing the reader's attention to the sensual, captivating surface of the face and the momentary departure from the steady course of narrative: "even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it. I must interrupt. I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap."[74] And Catherine's laughing face is, indeed, a leap. With stillness, *always* leaping and never actually landing. Like Stanely Cavell's comments on this scene eloquently show, Catherine is captured at a heightened moment of expressivity: "In *Jules and Jim* the image private to the two men appears as materialized by their desire, which freezes her at the height of her laughter, from which she then descends."[75] For Cavell desire is what gives *form* to the image, interrupting the moving body at its peak (the most expressive moment) to make a private image. As in Goethe's observations on the motion of the *Laocoön* statute, she is "a flash of lightning fixed, a wave petrified at the instant when it is approaching the shore."[76] The frames of Catherine are images private to the two men in that they appear to be made by desire; and cinematic desire (or desire for the cinema) strives not only to animate, but to pause.[77] As much as the two men wish to secure her in place, immobility

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[74] Jean Epstein, "Magnification," in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology: Volume I, 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 236.

[75] Stanley Cavell. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 138.

[76] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Observations on the Laocoön," in *Goethe on Art*, ed. John Gage (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 81.

[77] As Gunning claims in a different context, "cinema's ability to fragment and reassemble space, time and the human body allows it to articulate the themes of eros through sound and image […] the very ontology of the cinematic images partakes in the paradox of the erotic, promising fulfillment only by withdrawing." Tom Gunning, "The Desire and

inevitably reflects back on their own situation, *suspended* by their desire for her. They are, by all means, choiceless.

Another way to rethink freeze frames and desire is by spending some time on what we touch on when speaking of *freezing* the frame. While French refers to stopping the picture, *arrêt sur image,* Serge Daney remarks in a short essay on the freeze frames that conclude movies,[78] in English we are oddly putting the image "in the fridge," and elsewhere he speaks of the "fridge image." In Anne Carson the temporality of desire is similarly linked to what she calls *ice pleasure*, the experience of holding melting ice in our bare hands. Ice is a substance in flux when wrapped in the warmth of our body. The tactile pleasure of its texture is obviously of limited duration, yet this strange, binding temporality is part of this very pleasure: to hold on to the inevitability of change. To force the melting ice to last would be to freeze it, and the freeze frame holds on to the moving image in a comparable way. And it is not only the camera that does not want to let go of Jeanne Moreau's face; the freeze frame holds us in the affective pause.

Not only the expressive face is held by the stilling of the frame, but the tips of Catherine's moving hair; by this she resembles Botticelli's Venus and her waves of hair, the details that draw Warburg's attention early on in his dissertation. The plasticity of movement he finds in the figure of Venus is made visible by the details— her hair blowing in the breeze, the fluttering garments, folds and drapes—the *animated accessories* [bewegtes Beiwerk] which reveal the signs of Antiquity in the works of the Florentine masters. The 'animated accessories' are the first in a set of terms which Warburg proposed in the context of his descriptive terminology for investigating the fixed

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Pursuit of the Hole: Cinema's Obscure Object of Desire," in *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern,* eds. Shadi Baretech and Thomas Bartescherer (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 273.

[78] *The Final Frame* appeared in the catalogue for the exhibition *Passages de l'image* at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, September 1990—January 1991 (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990).

formulations of pictorial movement. In his study of Botticelli, the representations of movement are located in the periphery of the central theme: the prototypical, predominantly female figure, with flowing hair and a windblown veil, who was generally abundant in the Quattrocento.

To reassert Philippe-Alain Michaud's interpretation of Warburg, the pictorial space is not any defined totality but rather the *juxtaposition of elements in tension.* With his discovery of the intensified motifs of movement borrowed by the Florentine painters from the works of antiquity, Warburg points to a type of agreement or correlation between diverse representations of movement, manifest the way in which the mobility of the body is *displaced* into the animated details, the trembling points located around the female figure, in her garments and hair as they interact with the breeze (fairly close to cinema's 'animated accessories', the natural contingencies of the wind fluttering in the leaves of the tree).[79]

The space between agitation and serenity, these liminal zones around the figures, are where the wind *touches* the edges of the body and the hair, thus displacing the *interior* cause of movement, namely the passions of the soul, into the details, i.e. the *externally* animated accessory. In Warburg's vocabulary, the involuntary energy ("elements devoid of will") is *trapped* when impressed upon the fluctuating waves of draperies, hair or garments, things that are indifferent and yet plastic.[80] The dynamism coming from within (that is, the emotional state) *intensifies* the contours of what are otherwise stationary bodies and lifeless drapes and garments. Likewise, Catherine's face fills the frame and displays the passage of her vibrant energy into the tips of her hair, now imbued with a tremor, details *charged* with the dynamism of the body or the agitation of the soul.

[79] The connection between the natural 'contingencies' of early cinema (wind or water) and the perception of motion is made by Jordan Schonig in "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI," *Discourse* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 30-61.

[80] Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, 152.

Agamben, by contrast, uses the nymph figure to think about the image as composed of memories, or alternatively charged with *time*. The figure of the nymph illustrates for him the capacity of images to anticipate future developments and remember past gestures. Even if she is seemingly still, the nymph continues to transform from one manifestation to the other with the tremor of *static* duration. Writing on 'the life of images' Agamben describes a moment of pause, which is neither stasis nor motion but rather the instance charged with the tension between two.[81] The freeze frame is, I would argue, exactly such an image: *the whirlpool of the motionless*, the interruption to the stream that brings stillness and motion together in one image.

We can think of the motif of the whirlpool in terms of Benjamin's concept of Origin in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel,* which he compares to "[A]n eddy in the stream of becoming."[82] By the gathering of the force inherent in the flow, Eli Friedlander writes of Benjamin's image of whirlpool, this very force is made visible. And "It is as though when one goes with the flow such force cannot become manifest in a stable form."[83] By comparing the freeze frame and the whirlpool we learn that the vitality of the image in motion is not effaced by stillness, as it is precisely the interval between movements that closes within itself something of that movement, that traps something of the flow. The pause, Agamben argues, is charged with memory and dynamic energy. This takes us back to Catherine, suspended at the peak of her vibrant beauty; the sudden pause also allows us to take her image with us, after the film ends. The freeze frame is somewhat of a souvenir, an object of possession, repetition, and sometimes loss. All this brings it closer to our model of the film detail. To the practices that we are already familiar with in the study of details (to fragment, to

[81] Agamben follows Benjamin's concept of 'dialectics at a standstill'. See Giorgio Agamben, *Nymphs,* trans. Amanda Minervini (London: Seagull books, 2013), 26-27.

[82] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 45.

[83] Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 62.

isolate, and to magnify), this scene adds an important element: to still. Even as Catherine's image escapes the static frame, and the turbulence moves on, the frozen details of the laughing face make their way into the workings of memory. Memory, as Benjamin notes in *Berlin Chronicle*, is a medium, just as earth is the medium in which dead cities lie. The careful inspection of the soil will retrieve the real treasure, namely memory images "that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the sober room of our later insights."[84] The afterlife of these images is one of eternal presence.

[84] Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 Part* 2, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2005), 611.

Conclusion

From Part to Whole, and Back Again

When we recount details of films or artworks, every so often they are mistaken. With Vermeer's *Lacemaker,* to take one example, an interesting mistake has made its way into the history of this particular painting. Paul Claudel admired *Lacemaker*, but his widely cited account of it includes a memorable misperception:

> Look at the *lacemaker* (in the Louvre) applying herself to her embroidery frame, a picture where everything - the shoulders, the head, the hands and the double row of busy fingers - ends up on the point of that needle. Or on that pupil in the centre of a blue eye, the point where a whole face and a whole being converge on a kind of spiritual co-ordinate, a shaft of light shot forth from the soul.[1]

Claudel's address to the reader or the viewer of the painting ('look') implies confidence in the accuracy of the details he sees.[2] However, a second look at the painting (zooming into its details on the computer screen, rather than visiting it in person) clearly shows that the eyes of the Lacemaker are practically closed, and the color blue is nowhere in sight. Critics have responded to this mistake by suggesting that it is emblematic of 'the aporia of detail'[3] or a testimony to the fact that Vermeer's paintings can make you start seeing things.[4] I agree with these views, but I would argue that such mistakes are actually part of how details work. The impression they leave is the result of our

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[1] Paul Claudel, *L'Oeil écoute* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 34, qtd. in Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Art of Not Describing: Vermeer, the Detail and the Patch," *History of the Human Sciences* 2, no. 2 (1989): 151.

[2] Didi-Huberman, "The Art of Not Describing," 151.

[3] See for example Didi-Huberman's claim that "I cannot for my part see what it all 'ends up on', according to Claudel. I cannot see any pupil at all, not even a blue eye in whose centre it might be found. As for the lacemaker's eyes, I can see only eyelids, and in all honesty this prevents me from declaring whether the eyes are open or closed." Didi-Huberman, "The Art of Not Describing," 151.

[4] Tuma claims that "her eyes, however, are not blue, nor can we even be sure that they are open at all." Kathryn A. Tuma, "'Une dentelle s'abolit': The Invisibilities of Vermilion in Vermeer's *The Lacemaker*," *Qui Parle*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1994), 29. Svetlana Alpers also cites Claudel's description in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, (London: Murray, 1983), 30.

encounter with an image, and accuracy is not always part of first impressions. To see details for the first time is often to see them with eyes slightly closed ("to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes" is how Barthes writes this paradox of looking).[5]

When our eyes are closed, or turned away from the image, we are mainly attending to our own reactions to it. We are open and attentive to the image's effect *on us*. However, I would not claim that details are the result of errors of perception, nor that they are radically personal and exist independently of the image, as Barthes appears to claims of his photographic details. Details ask us to *revisit* the image, to examine closely, and to make sure that we describe them accurately. In other words, they ask for a second look. To recognize our mistakes in perception, and to do so in revisiting, is also to learn something about ourselves. For Claudel's error in describing the *Lacemaker*, what would be more appropriate for representing the concept of the detail than the pupil, the tiny feature that reflects our own image, and our own act of looking, back to us?[6]

When working on details from films, we are likely to make these little mistakes, especially if our first viewing was not on a screen that we can control and pause as needed. The second look at the film detail comes after the fact, to confirm our initial perception. These two looks do not cancel each other, but rather they coexist, and even complete one another. I propose that the inaccuracies of description that occur with film details are telling: the central features of the detail mean that we are destined to make these mistakes.[7] Details in films are usually smaller than other elements in the

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[5] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 53.

[6] Paul Willemen has described what he calls 'The Fourth Look', the look *at* the viewer by a character on screen, that is usually avoided. The fourth look makes the viewer confront her own act of looking. See Paul Willemen, "The Fourth Look," in *Looks and Frictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 99-110.

[7] On a telling mistake in Bazin's descriptions of *Umberto D*, see Herve Joubert-Laurencin, "The Reality of Hallucination in André Bazin," in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife,* eds. Dudley Andrew and Herve Joubert-Laurencin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 42-56. See also Cavell's remarks on the "errors of memory" in Stanley Cavell, "Forward to the Enlarged Edition," *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), ix-xiv.

frame, therefore harder to notice. In the case of the film detail, we are also dealing with moving details that might disappear before we even had a chance to fully grasp them. Still, these limitations or problems only ask us to visit the film again, and to stay *closer* to it.

To stay closer entails a set of practices: to isolate and to fragment the film, but to also stay in touch with the unity of the image as a whole. Details, in other words, are not to be made into a new whole. The isolation of details that guided me in this project did not intend to highlight their value when examined alone, but to furnish a call to read them *internally*, by way of the organic signs of meaning that belong to an original film. This goes against some of the central aims of Barthes's later theories of detail, where the strategy is often to isolate details in order to allow them to expand and overwhelm the image. As an alternative I've suggested Warburg's sensitivity to details that proceeds in a way that does not separate them from the expressivity of the image as a totality. The principle is one of isolation yet without removal from context, precisely because the details propose a new understanding of *this very context*. My study is thus not conclusive, nor is the method limited to the details or films I've discussed; rather, it is directed towards an innovative approach to the relation of part and whole.

To think about details seriously often requires that we return to the problem of method. Warburg describes what I read as a personal hesitation in front of his own peculiar methods: "Sometime I will give you a sample of my methods, which, I may say, are quite new and possibly for that reason not as widely recognized as I might have in fact expected."[8] Beyond questions that are internal to Warburg's work, his statement articulates the disharmony of details and method as a persistent tension. Details are personal, plural, and small. By definition they describe the areas that are far from the center. All these features make them into an object that does not neatly fit into a

[8] Warburg's letter to James Mooney, dated to May 17, 1907, is quoted in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (New York: Zone Books and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 369n23.

method, and one that can challenge our own devotion to it. Still, these discrete motifs, often lost or dismissed in other ways of understanding images, begin to shape a model of reading that is essentially their own. This mode is not synonymous with the demand to isolate the significant details of films, or works of art, but to suggest that something happens when our eyes travel from the center to the margins. The detail is not the element we decipher in order to gain access to the overall *hidden* meaning of the film. On the contrary: my details draw no clear path to conclusions, or any uniformity of meaning or intention.

In the composition of his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Warburg modeled one way of presenting details in accordance with their inner logic: not only by chronological or thematic affinities, but details that make a chain of thought visible. Any argument projected on the images of the *Atlas* for the persistence of expressive forms— and for the interaction between the isolated gestures or details it is composed of—is based upon our own acts of looking, which take into account the composition *in its entirety*. Even if we do isolate parts of the *Atlas* for analytic purposes, the project does not aspire for the independent standing of each of its parts as a self-contained whole. The form of presentation itself holds them in such a way that makes the idea of the survival of forms inseparable from the visual materials. The *Atlas* thus presents us with the possibilities of thinking *in* images, and with a special emphasis on *details* from images—and then seeing these details as new kinds of details, that exist only in and because of their new context, as it were a second-order detail. To be sure, it's familiar to say that this aspect of Warburg's project and its composition can be compared to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (and the prevalent influence of both Benjamin and Warburg in recent scholarship is, to a certain degree, shaped by the projects they never completed). I would argue however that simply pointing to the affinities between Warburg and Benjamin still does not address

the open question of both projects, namely what exactly is made visible by this type of arrangement of details.[9]

Warburg and Benjamin do not necessarily share an approach to images per se; the deep affinity between their methods is that the presentation of the materials is key. What I take from these thinkers, who have been so central to my project, is that putting the pieces together is not meant to solve, but to present a question. The collecting of details which takes place in each of my chapters thus does not point necessarily to the kinship between them, as Warburg aspired to do, but is aimed to show that central tensions or polarities in our experience of the detail *persist* across painting, photography and film. What holds my details together is the way in which they create their own conditions for thought.

The path I took here was not always linear; the materials require a particular, and at times unusual, model of unity. What constantly challenges any supposed unity is what I consider essential to details: they arrive *in the plural*. Thinking about details, as we learn from the scattered materials of the *Arcades Project* or the constellation of images of the *Atlas*—does not mean fusing them into a unifying system, but demands that we keep their singularity in mind. It also requires us to develop a method for reading that does not reach a conclusion.

[9] See Sigrid Weigel, "Detail-Photographic and Cinematographic Images: On the Significance of the History of Media in Benjamin's Theory of Culture," in *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013) for a rich study of the affinities between the two scholars. Weigel cites the scope of their scholarly work that goes beyond disciplinary methods, a shared interest in the origin of art in cult and religious history, and a fascination with new types of media, as key features of this connection.

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