

DIGRESSIONS

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Special Issue: The Undead



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About the journal

Digressions: Amsterdam Journal of Critical Theory, Cultural Analysis, and Creating Writing is a student-edited, online academic journal based at VU University Amsterdam. We publish articles on critical theory and cultural analysis; reviews of books, films, and art exhibitions; and pieces of creative writing. This way, we aim to provide a platform for talented master's, research master's, and Ph.D. students to share their research and writing.

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Editorial

ROB SHEPHERD*

Welcome to *Digressions: Amsterdam Journal of Critical Theory, Cultural Analysis, and Creative Writing*. For our first issue, we asked for contributions that reflect upon the theme of “the undead.” As broadly understood, the term “undead” describes that which, while technically dead, remains animate and is therefore able to maintain an active presence in a world from which it should have departed.

It is arguably this ability to transcend death that makes the idea of the undead such a fascinating concept. Indeed, while touching upon humanity’s deepest existential fears, the ability of the undead to dissolve the distinction between life and death also proves to be a productive metaphor for addressing various contemporary concerns and perhaps helps explain our cultural preoccupation with revenants, ghouls, and specters. Examples of this fascination abound, from *The Walking Dead* and *American Horror Story* to *Twilight*, with these modern iterations of undeath joining perennial favorites such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

In addition, the concept of undeath can be used to explain a range of cultural phenomena at a greater remove from graveyards and mortuaries. For example, in the digital arts the uncanny and the gothic have enjoyed a recent resurgence, functioning as tools through which artists can explore the strange disjointedness of the online world. Similarly, online access to the cultural products of the past has resulted in the unlikely resurrections of obscure musical styles, novels, and films, an issue explored by Simon Reynolds in *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011). Entire record labels are now devoted to such marginal genres as home-recorded synth pop and publishers such as Faber and Faber offer an online print on demand service, Faber Finds, which aims to

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restore to print “forgotten” writers from Bridget Brophy to Robert Aickman. Meanwhile, YouTube is full of fragments of films that never saw release on DVD, the grainy quality of the digitally transferred VHS tape adding a certain uncanny aura to their modern remediation. Meanwhile, in economics the metaphor of undeath has been deployed as well, most notably by John Quiggin, with the term “zombie economics” referring to the continued survival of the neoliberal model following the banking crisis of 2008.

The figure of the undead revenant also plays an important role in critical theory. For instance, while Roland Barthes may have famously declared the author dead in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” the “author” appears to have resisted such an injunction and keeps returning, time and again, like an undead iteration of the Freudian repressed. Similarly, postmodernism has seemed to linger on in a perpetual state of undeath for a number of years, with different writers and theorists crowning a variety of new cultural and theoretical paradigms as its successor. Yet, in each instance, we see that such claims have been premature and that postmodernism has continued, unabated, like one of the seemingly unstoppable masked antagonists found in slasher film franchises.

However, the most explicit theoretical engagement with the undead, and the idea of haunting more generally, can be found in the work of Jacques Derrida. In *Specters of Marx* (1993) Derrida coined two somewhat slippery terms, “spectrality” and “hauntology,” positing ghosts, revenants, and hauntings as productive concepts for theoretical enquiry. Spectrality is used to describe the position of the specter, or ghost, a figure which is neither dead nor alive and which, by existing between states, blurs the distinction between supposedly simple dialectical positions. Hauntology, on the other hand, describes a state of temporal and ontological disjunction whereby the ghost-like traces of discarded cultural forms and ideas linger on and haunt the contemporary. Both concepts are best illustrated by the discussion of communism found in *Specters of Marx*. Therein Derrida argues that despite the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, communism maintains a spectral presence that continues to haunt the “West.” In recent years, Derrida’s work has seen resurgence, with theorists such as Mark Fisher engaging with his ideas in order to describe the often backward looking nature of contemporary culture and the strange sense of temporal displacement that this produces. Additionally, Fisher has used Derrida’s work to describe how the potential futures posited by modernism have failed to come to pass.

The contributions in this issue of *Digressions* engage with all these topics and more. In "A Becoming Failure: Deathly Encounters in Peng Yu's *Human Oil*," Simon van der Weele applies the writings of Donna Haraway and Mel Chen to analyze the performance piece *Human Oil* by Peng Yu, asking how posthumanism, by dispensing with the concept of death, is able to account for human loss and grief. Steven Vrouwenvelder takes up the concept of hauntology in "Haunted Pancakes," investigating how the Latvian post-Soviet music scene is haunted both by the communist past and its own counter-cultural history. In "From a Ten Hour Clock to a 'Primitive' Robot: *Metropolis* as a Temporal Critique," Zowi Vermeire looks at the way Fritz Lang's 1927 film has the potentiality to disrupt the notion of homogenous time and the relationship between past, present, and future. This engagement with the disruption of time continues in Nienke Sinnema's piece, "Where the Garment Gapes: On Objectification, Narrative Structure, and Sympathy in *The Fermata* versus *Cashback*." Sinnema explores how Nicholson Baker's book *The Fermata* and Sean Ellis' feature film *Cashback*, both narrative texts featuring a young man who freezes time in order to undress women, raise questions about the male gaze and sexuality. Laurens van den Broek's review of the *On the Move* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and two pieces of creative writing on the supernatural – the short story "Raven and Emperor" by Léo Masciarelli and the suite of poems "Three Stage of Love" by Charlotte Gijzen – round out our first set of contributions.

We hope that you enjoy our first issue. Please feel free to send us any comments, letters, or other feedback via our website or Facebook page.

A Becoming Failure: Deathly Encounters in Peng Yu's *Human Oil*

SIMON VAN DER WEELE*

Abstract: Recent writing in the field of posthumanism challenges the strict bifurcation between life and death or dead and undead. In this paper I analyze the performance piece Human Oil by Peng Yu to ask how the field of posthumanism may account for loss if death ceases to be a workable concept. Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway and Mel Chen, I introduce the notion of the failed encounter to show how loss emerges the moment our becomings are no longer mutually meaningful. Even if others are never quite dead, we produce death when we face the incomprehensible absence of the corpse – the very absence posthuman theory seeks to deconstruct.

Keywords: posthumanism, death, grief, encounter, animacy.

1 • I want to begin this paper by voicing the concern that drives me to write it. How can the field of posthumanism account for mourning, grief, and loss? When I use the word posthumanism, I refer to a bundle of theoretical strands pertaining to what Neil Badmington has called a “crisis in humanism” (8) and that commonly challenge the centrality of the figure of the human and human universality in modern European thought. As Carey Wolfe points out, many authors dealing with posthumanism embrace metaphors of hybridity and mutation to resist the strict binary distinctions they associate with the humanist project (xiii-xviii). Yet if in this move, posthumanism challenges the very binary of life and death or life and non-life (Chen 2; Wolfe xxii), and moreover moves from private, subjective emotion to “minimally emotive” (Vermeulen 122) affect, then Pieter Vermeulen’s notion of the posthuman as “a site in which neither relief nor grief is felt” (123) becomes particularly, even worryingly convincing.

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Yet such an understanding of the posthuman appears to me politically and ethically troublesome, as it fails to address both the relationality and vulnerability of *human* bodies and the devastating sense of loss following the death of others near us, as Judith Butler does in *Precarious Life*. If Butler asks: "What makes for a grievable life?" (14), we are now forced to think: What might remain of life to grieve? It seems as though posthumanism forecloses the question of mourning, of rendering lives grievable, in its disavowal of supposedly subjective, emotive, humane (if not "human") experience. Ironically then, what becomes lost in posthumanism is a way of dealing with loss itself.

At stake for me in this paper is thus the very possibility of mourning within the discourse of posthumanism. How can we rethink posthumanism to be inclusive towards concepts of death, loss, and grief? Or how can we, from a posthuman perspective, otherwise envision our encounters with the harrowing reality of dead bodies?

My guide through contemplating these questions will be Chinese visual artist Peng Yu, who in the spring of 2000 staged a particularly dramatic encounter with the reality of death and loss. In *Human Oil*, Peng cradled in her lap the body of a very young child. She then employed an ominous-looking plastic tube to feed the child through its mouth an oil extracted from human bodies (Cheng 93). Visually, the scene of nurturing recalled a long tradition of mother-child portraits. The child, however, was dead, and its body was skinless, decomposing, and utterly vulnerable.

Peng's performance turned out to be divisive. While many found the work morally repulsive, those defending Peng's performance believed that "a dead person is no longer a human being" (Cheng 94), a defense which Peng herself allegedly also called upon. This defense immediately triggered my interest, because it recalls the humanist binary of life and death, while simultaneously opening up the possibility for a non- and even posthuman conception of the corpse.

This paper is structured as follows. I will begin with a close reading of *Human Oil* alongside Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, to show how the work complicates Kristeva's understanding of the corpse as abject. Then, I will draw extensively on Donna Haraway's theories of the corpse and the encounter in *When Species Meet* (2008). Haraway's inclusive account of the encounter helps me to frame the particular encounter of Peng Yu and the child corpse in *Human Oil*. At the same time, I will show how Peng's performance challenges Haraway's ideas on the process of "becoming with." *Human Oil* stages an encounter with otherness that forces us to imagine something exceeding even the bounds of

posthumanism. If corpses are never quite dead, it is possible to see how they might make a demand for mourning; a demand even posthuman humans will find themselves forced (yet incapable) to respond to.



Figure 1. Peng Yu, *Human Oil* (2000). Performance at the Research Institute for Sculpture, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. Photo copyright © and courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.

2.

Peng Yu performed *Human Oil* as part of an event called *Infatuation With Injury* that took place in April 2000 at the Research Institute for Sculpture of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing (see figure 1). The performance has acquired a somewhat mythological status. There were only about two hundred viewers to witness her encounter with the child corpse. Few pictures were made. The few images that did reach the media – along with rather morose stories of corpses and human oil – made for spectacular tales in which the goings-on of Peng's performance itself easily dissolved.¹ Since I was not there to view the piece myself, I rely for my analysis on the few images at my disposal, as well as on the few strings of narrative that scholars like Meiling Cheng have spun out of the limited source material.²

The story of *Human Oil*, as I was able to piece it together, is that Peng brought to the Institute a child's corpse she obtained from a hospital's anatomy room, as well as some oil extracted from human beings – it is not clear to me where or how she managed to find these materials. Peng took the child, skinned and stiff, its eyes closed, its mouth half-open, on her lap, and using a see-through plastic tube, started pumping or otherwise inserting the oil into the mouth of the child. The child, hardened and punctured in many places, was not able to take in (drink?³) the liquid, causing the oil to drip out of the mouth onto some white sheets on the floor.

I can only imagine any first response to the images documenting this performance to be one of bewilderment and abhorrence. Because how else to

¹ Some online blogs have picked up on Peng Yu's *Human Oil* and other controversial pieces performed during *Infatuation With Injury*, perhaps most notably Zhu Yu's *Eating People*, which supposedly indeed involved an act of cannibalism. Many of the pieces written raise ethical concerns, drawing on a conservative language of abjection and disgust that quickly turns into Sinophobic hate speech. Their political agenda is so obvious, in fact, that I saw myself forced to disregard these pieces of writing in my research. See, for instance, the straightforwardly titled website *Chinasucks.org*, which may or may not be a joke: <http://www.chinasucks.org/art.htm>.

² Rather than seeing this as a hindrance, I claim that the stillness of the images will help me to slow down the discourse surrounding *Human Oil* and reflect on what it has to say on its own terms.

³ Here I run into the bizarre question of what words to employ when speaking of the dead. Can we say that a corpse *drinks*? Can we ascribe any agential verbs to the corpse at all? As Mel Chen points out, this issue is rooted in the very structures of our languages. Almost every language, both in meaning and grammar, reiterates a hierarchy of animacy and the binary of life and death in some way: Chen talks about "a conceptual order of things, an animate hierarchy of possible acts" (3). In this paper, I will have to follow Chen and experiment with the animacy I imply through the words I decide to use.

deal with Peng's bare hands, greasy with oil, oil that was furthermore extracted from human bodies; the floor, covered in the same brownish substance; the dirty plastic tube, like some vile, primeval technology; and most importantly the child's corpse, lifeless and helpless, its whitish surface (no longer covered by skin) eerily seeming to reflect the yellow light, its eyelids thick and swollen, its face smudged with oil, like a child refusing to eat their dinner, although no such comparison holds in the face of the motionless corpse? *Human Oil* is by all means a confronting, even devastating encounter.

Yet nothing of the like is legible in the face of the unfazed-looking Peng. Her posture is dignified, her complexion concentrated and caring. Clothed in a simple shirt and jeans, she carefully holds the child's head in her bare hands (no gloves, no cap), thus dispelling any associations with medical technology. In *Human Oil*, Peng is a mother before she is a nurse. Semiotically, the injection of a human substance into the lifeless body of the child could suggest an attempt at resurrection. We might think of Mary, the archetypical mother: *Human Oil* as a biotechnological Pietà? But no such thing. We discern neither despair nor any other expectation on Peng's unmoved face; her body only shows a cautious but intense engagement with something or someone absolutely indefinable.

According to Meiling Cheng, the artists performing during *Infatuation With Injury* considered themselves part of an artistic practice called *xingwei yishu*, which roughly translates to performance art or behavior art. Although indebted to Western performance art from the 1970s, Cheng argues that *xingwei yishu* is characterized by a shift of emphasis away from the interaction of the artist with the viewer towards an appreciation of "existential tasks" and "introspective experiences with the project at hand" (90).

The genre-specificity of *xingwei yishu* helps me to frame *Human Oil* not as a spectacle of abjection but as the site of an engaged encounter.⁴ The evidence is against me here: in her famous essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva declared that "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the *utmost of abjection*. It is death infecting life" (4, my italics). For Kristeva, the abject is that which the subject shoves aside for its relentless refusal to signify anything at all. It is

⁴ I implicitly respond here to Richard Vine, who has criticized certain contemporary Chinese performance art for being a vapid, overtly controversial copy of "Western" performance art that aims to stir art market interests. In *New China New Art* (London: Prestel, 2008) he writes about the work of Peng Yu and others that with "the deployment of the dead bodies of others," the genre "arrived at a commodification of others for the sake of notoriety and financial gain" (qtd. in Panero 29). With this paper, I aim to counter such an intuitive reflex of disgust and spectacle.

[a] "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (Kristeva 2)

Kristeva suggests that the only response to the abject, of which the corpse is archetypal, is a response of rejection and denial. As I pointed out above, *Human Oil* might well have elicited such a response from the viewer.

Taking Cheng's insights seriously, however, means that we should not necessarily look at the interaction between the performance and the viewer, but between Peng and the child corpse. Peng raised no shield to rescue her from the pit of meaninglessness that is the abject. Instead, she faced the abject, and more than this, purposefully stepped into the encounter and engaged with the corpse, cradling it and nurturing it, or at least attempting to. For Kristeva, "corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3); but Peng, to the contrary, on encountering the corpse, saw an occasion for proximity, for intimacy, for interaction. In *Human Oil*, in other words, the "utmost of abjection" ceases to be abject. I thus argue that *Human Oil*, far from staging a carnivalesque freak show, constitutes a moment of concentration, attention, and contemplation: a real encounter. Yet no matter how attentive or how thoughtful Peng's response, the corpse could seemingly only remain silent. This certainly seems to be the terrible truth Peng laid bare in *Human Oil*; and here her work still echoes Kristeva, whose "meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant" captures this silence perfectly (2).

It is this silence that Cheng considers the crux for interpreting the work. For Cheng, Peng's attempt at care was futile, because the child corpse remained irresponsive to her seeming affection: "Death rendered impossible any reciprocal transaction in this performance-installation. [...] A profound sense of futility deepened the pathos of *Human Oil*" (94). In fact, she argues that this failure amounts to an injury, a violation of the tranquility of the dead that frames living itself as a burden. In this analysis, Peng becomes a melancholic narcissist, unwilling to face the palpability of death, hopelessly attempting to once more imbue life in the perpetually departed child.

I am not ready to submit to Cheng's assessment of *Human Oil* as futile, however. If Peng withstood the reflex of abjection, then I similarly want to sidestep this reflex and enter in a meaningful engagement with her performance

piece. What is it that we can take from Peng's encounter with the dead? If not blatantly revolting and unethical, where is the ethical moment situated in *Human Oil*? And what might it tell us about the possibility for grief?

3.

To face these questions, I first need to examine this silence of the corpse more intently. I find a worthwhile point of entry in Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008).⁵ In a moving chapter on the death of her father, Haraway similarly emphasizes the silence of the corpse, although she does so in different terms. Allow me to quote her in full:

This was not a process uniquely of his no longer being present as a soul, or a mind, or a person, or an interior, or a subject. No, as his body cooled, his *body* was no longer there. The corpse is not the body. Rather, the body is always in-the-making; it is always a vital entanglement of heterogeneous scales, times, and kinds of beings webbed into fleshly presence, always a becoming, always constituted in relating. The corpse's consignment to the earth as ashes is, I think, a recognition that, in death, it is not simply the person or the soul who goes. That knotted thing we call the body has left; it is undone. (162-63)

For Haraway, the corpse is not a body, because it is no longer "becoming," no longer in interaction with other bodies that constitute it. In this understanding, death is more than the parting of the other's presence in terms of his spirit or soul: it is the body itself that ceases to be, cancelling out all meaningful terms of engagement or relationality. The corpse, in other words, remains silent.

Haraway's conception of the corpse mirrors Cheng's, in that both emphasize the futility of engagement with the corpse. Her observation also brings to mind the argument brought forward by proponents of Peng's artistic

⁵ In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway explicitly positions herself outside of the discourse of posthumanism. She writes: "I am not a posthumanist; I am who I become with companion species, who and which make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind" (19). Nonetheless, in her emphasis on the co-constitutional dynamic of interspecies encounters, as well as her questioning of the wholeness of the human body, I find her project quite in line with what Neil Badmington has called a "crisis in humanism" and a calling into question of the "reign of Man" (8). The book's inclusion as third entry into the book series *Posthumanities* is probably telling for Haraway's position, too. For these reasons, I will treat her theory as posthuman, albeit a critical and cautious one.

practice: a dead person is no longer a human *being*. Yet we are still left with the knowledge that *Human Oil* *did* happen, that engagement *did* take place, that there *was* an encounter.

If perhaps intuitively convincing, Haraway's idea becomes problematic if we consider more widely the field of posthuman thought in which it is located. Here, the binary of life and death increasingly faces contestation, even (or especially) in terms of the body – here, scholars continue the work Haraway herself began in her *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1990), where she attacked “the organic, hierarchical dualism ordering discourse in the West since Aristotle” (205). In *Animacies* (2012), Mel Y. Chen convincingly takes on this project by analyzing “the fragile division between animate and inanimate” (2). Chen introduces the concept of animacy to consider the condition of being alive, which includes properties such as agency, autonomy, and affectivity, as a spectrum rather than a binary. According to Chen, “[u]sing animacy as a central construct, rather than, say, ‘life’ or ‘liveliness’ [...] helps us theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times” (3). Degrees of animacy can reside in or be ascribed to living, dead, and nonliving matter alike, thus dismantling the binary construction it aims to replace. In this way, Chen argues, “animacy has the capacity to rewrite conditions of intimacy” (2) as it “offers a different way to conceive of relationality and intersubjective exchange” (11). The concept of animacy requires us to revisit not only the life-death binary but also our understanding of the intersubjective encounters that it shapes.

This final remark brings us back to *Human Oil*, an encounter that like no other depends on our understanding of the spectrum of animacy. If a corpse, although “dead,” can nonetheless possess animacy, be animate, we might also see how a corpse is still a body, in spite of its undoing as human being. According to Chen, “matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise ‘wrong’ animates cultural life in important ways” (2). For Chen, this animation occurs first of all linguistically: our use of language reflects a hierarchy of animacy that sometimes cracks when nonhumans get subsumed in a vocabulary of agency and liveness.⁶ In *Human Oil*, however, I argue that this animation occurs performatively: Peng enters into a willful encounter with a corpse and in doing so recognizes the animacy of her “partner” from the outset – even if this animacy appears to amount to an absolute irresponsiveness. This is not to say that the corpse only acquired animacy through Peng's gesture of recognition; rather, I

⁶ Chen's most primary example is the sentence “The hikers that rocks crush,” which ascribes a kind of agency to the rocks by placing the animate hikers in an object role.

suggest that the performance of *Human Oil* created conditions in which the animacy of the corpse was implicated from the outset. Through her engagement with the corpse, Peng indicated an expectation of interaction, and this expectation simultaneously constitutes a recognition of the animacy of the corpse.

The concept of animacy thus helps me to understand the corpse in *Human Oil* not as stagnant, but as an animated partner in an encounter. In this way, for instance, the incapability of the child corpse to “drink” Peng’s human oil we might more adequately (or *animatedly*) describe as a *rejection*. Contra Haraway, then, I think we must still conceive of the corpse as a body with animacy – notwithstanding the fact that, as Haraway no doubt wanted to emphasize, something very significant has also been lost in the event of death. The question now becomes: How can we make sense of that loss and how might we grieve for it? In terms of *Human Oil*: How do we make sense of the corpse’s rejection of Peng’s attempts at engagement?⁷

4.

I am here brought to borrow another concept from Haraway’s vibrant vocabulary, namely the concept of significant otherness. For Haraway, significant otherness is what follows from an encounter, the occasion where beings are constituted: “I am interested in the ontics and antics of significant otherness, in the ongoing making of the partners through the making itself, in the making of bodied lives in the game. Partners do not preexist their relating; the partners are precisely what come out of the inter- and intra-relating of fleshly, significant, semiotic–material

⁷ Chen mobilizes the concept of animacy to show “how the fragile division between animate and inanimate – that is, beyond human and animal – is relentlessly produced and policed” (2). Her project is thus explicitly political: animacy is “implicated in political questions of power and the recognition of different subjects, as well as ostensible objects” (9). My focus on the constitution of death and grief does not allow for fully thinking through the political conditions for and implications of the encounter between life and death that *Human Oil* stages. No doubt it matters where the child corpse came from, who it was, how she died, and why and how it was possible for this particular encounter to take place in an art institution, for instance. We might read Peng Yu’s willingness to interact with the corpse as a gesture of subjectivation, taking seriously the animacy of a corpse whose “liveness” was lost in a way we cannot be sure of. In this way, Peng Yu’s recognition of corporeal animacy hints at a politics of radical inclusivity. These questions are regrettably beyond the scope of the present essay. Nonetheless, because of its concern with what Chen calls “working ontologies” of life and death (1), I contend that the concept of animacy bears analytical prowess even when not in explicit reference to (bio)politics.

being" (165). Haraway calls such encounters "becoming with": there is no self without other, because both arise in the touch of their engagement, becoming *with* each other not just something *new*, but something *in the first place*. Significant otherness, in other words, is the result of becoming with, a mutually dependent and even constitutive relationship. Moreover, significant otherness comes with an ethical responsibility: "touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions" (36). Becoming with, then, is no weightless co-creation, but an invested, responsive process that comes with duties.

As we have seen, in *Human Oil*, two animated bodies met: one "alive," one "dead." But in this encounter of two significant others, something went awry. While Haraway claims that the process of becoming with "is all extremely prosaic, relentlessly mundane" (26), in *Human Oil* we witness a *failure* of becoming with, as the two partners are incapable of relating to each other in a meaningful way.

Why did becoming with fail? Let me consider once more Kristeva's "meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant" (2). For Kristeva, any response to such an insignificant meaninglessness would have to be abjection. Peng, however, refused to listen to her reflex of abjection, and desired to respond to the dead body somehow. But in this encounter, she faced a significant otherness she did not know how to become with. In *Human Oil*, becoming with fails, as the otherness of the child corpse is so significant that it becomes incomprehensible and thus meaningless to living humans. Death (which, as we have seen, is never *quite* death) confronts us with the most significant of others, even though (and exactly because) it signifies nothing. Death's animacy operates on a different plane of understanding altogether. This is why Peng's response can only result in failure: the corpse is too significantly other. Peng's decision to use *human* oil, lurid though it may be, only serves to semiotically underscore this point: "human" matter and "corpse" matter do not easily coagulate.

Perhaps this is the locus of loss: the moment when becoming with fails, when, like Haraway writes, the encounter no longer results in the "making of bodied lives" (*Species* 165). If, following Haraway, significant otherness is *made* in touch, Peng's encounter with the corpse *produces* a significant otherness so other that it becomes utterly meaningless; so other that we can only decide to term it death. The corpse is not necessarily silent, it might be still-becoming, but this becoming perplexes us. Death becomes the name for a condition we do not know how to become with. The question now becomes: how might we envision the "different way to conceive of relationality and intersubjective exchange" (11) Chen has in mind with the concept of animacy, in the extreme case of *Human*

Oil? Or, borrowing from Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), how can we think of the "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing" of the partnering in *Human Oil* as providing "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2)?

5.

I find it instructive here to turn to Jacques Derrida, whose work can shed more light on the incomprehensible alterity of death. In fact, Derrida himself has acknowledged the utmost otherness of the corpse: in *Echographies of Television* (2002), he claims that "the dead person is the wholly other" (120). Death is the one condition we absolutely cannot imagine ourselves to be in, the condition that almost defines otherness itself. Even though we all *will be*, we will never be able to *know* what it is like to be a corpse. As Cary Wolfe points out when discussing Derrida, "[o]nly the other does, and for that you are held hostage [...] in unappeasable ethical debt to the other" (84). In this incomprehensibility thus lies an ethical moment.

What does this ethical debt entail? For Derrida,

[t]he wholly other [...] watches me, concerns me, and concerns or watches me while addressing to me, without however answering me, a prayer or an injunction, an infinite demand, which becomes the law for me: it concerns me, it regards me, it addresses itself only to me at the same time that it exceeds me infinitely and universally, without my being able to exchange a glance with him or her. (120-21)

Drawing on the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida shows how the irreducible otherness of the dead person makes an ethical demand, presenting us a debt we can never settle (122). This demand we cannot respond to, not only because we cannot interact with the dead, but also because we cannot comprehend even the terms in which it is made. This is the moment *Human Oil* stages: Peng faced the dead, without being able even to exchange a glance with the dead, but recognizing nonetheless that the child corpse was making a demand; a demand she could never respond to, but nonetheless *had to* respond to. And perhaps it was the animatedness of the corpse – its strange animacy in spite of death, incomprehensible to us – that issued this demand: this must be one way in which animacy might rewrite "conditions of intimacy" (Chen 2). Such is the animacy of the corpse in *Human Oil*: an impossible demand.

Here we also retrace the ethics of Haraway's encounter. For her, to engage with significant otherness, to become with, is to accept a responsibility. In *Human Oil*, becoming with failed, but this failure was also an engaged failure. Perhaps "a dead person is no longer a human being," but the child corpse was animated nonetheless, and regarded Peng in a way she could neither ignore nor face. The performance piece thus achieved its own ethical moment: it stages a response to the demand of the other, in spite of inevitably being unable to do so properly. The failure of becoming with, in other words, can be ethical and as such also *another kind* of becoming: to paraphrase Halberstam, Peng's was a productive failure. What *Human Oil* shows us is that becoming with sometimes means to become without, to unbecome. This is what loss entails; and what remains is only grief. To mourn for the impossible encounter: such is the productive failure of unbecoming.

6.

In this paper I have attempted to open up posthuman thought to account for loss and grief. *Human Oil*, an encounter of the most significant of others, has given me clues on how we might reconsider the work of mourning when concepts such as life and death become increasingly muddled. In *Human Oil*, the corpse emerged as a vibrant, animated body, one that made a demand on the living body of Peng Yu. Like a posthuman Antigone, Peng saw herself required to take care of the dead, but ultimately failed: death, no matter how animated, remained irreducibly other, significantly meaningless. As I have shown, this failure of becoming with constituted an ethical moment that marked another way of becoming; and it is this new becoming, other-than-becoming unbecoming, that lies at the heart of loss and grief. As such, her performance was never futile, but a failure nonetheless. Grief, their encounter tells me, is the outcome of the productive failure of becoming – a becoming failure, indeed.

Challenging the binary of life and death, like Chen's concept of animacy does, helps me to understand more about the way in which the corpse of *Human Oil* might demand something from us and affect us. But as we saw, in death something *is* still lost, in unbecoming, and nothing, not even posthumanism (or especially not posthumanism) can adequately account for this loss. Even if there is no "death" as such and death as significant otherness is only *produced* in an encounter with something incomprehensible to us, it is something we still helplessly need to give a name: death. In the end, my attempt to open up posthuman thought to the idea of loss turned on itself: in a slightly revised vocabulary, I could not help but reiterate the irreducible otherness of death and

the sense of helplessness this otherness evokes in us the living. Perhaps unbecoming or becoming without is indeed a way of becoming with the dead, but the process does not fill the gap or ameliorate the loss. A corpse with animacy is still dead *to me*.

This is not a call for a renewed vitalism. It is the recognition that grief emerges when a relation changes so significantly that its becomings are no longer mutually meaningful. Death *fails us*, fails to make sense to *us*, and we fail death as well. It is a horrible, frustrating, deeply harrowing failure; yet a failure, nonetheless, that will never cease to animate us, even beyond death itself.

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Haunted Pancakes

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Abstract: The music scene in post-Soviet Latvia is not haunted solely by its communist past, but also by the musical countermovement against the Soviet Union. Ilģi, one of the most prominent post-folklore bands, tries to invent new ways to cope with both pasts. Firstly, this article investigates how the band deals with these pasts through "Pankūkas" (2008), a sequence of musical pieces that appears as a revenant specter on two different albums of the band. Secondly, I will use hauntology, a concept of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, to analyze their music in terms of the past.

Keywords: Ilģi, Latvian Music, Hauntology, Derrida.

H *haunted pancakes*
"Pankūkas" ("pancakes") are made of flour, milk, and eggs, and most people love to eat them. Now Ilģi made it possible to listen to them as well, in eleven different ways. I can hear a lively dance tune: "Pankūkas." A melody played by a violin and an accordion. A fast tempo (140 beats per minute) in a simple binary time, accentuated by the rhythm section of a drum kit, a guitar, and a bass guitar. A musical phrase of four measures followed by a consequent phrase on a lower tone. These phrases are repeated and followed by a single repeated contrasting theme. The dance tune is concluded with the initial antecedent phrase played twice. Altogether, it lasts only half a minute. It is a comprehensible form (perhaps the most common form for dance tunes) and its melody can easily be remembered and reproduced by anyone.

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Conjuration

In this essay I will examine Pankūkas, a dance tune from the Latvian folklore repertoire. I will focus my research on the interpretations by the Latvian band Iļģi. Their Pankūkas was initially released on the *Ej Tu Dejoj!* (2008) album as eleven different interpretations, each with its own name. These pieces later appeared as one track, called "Pankūkas Virkne," on *Izlase* (2011). This song title means "row of pancakes"; the different interpretations appear one after another in the original order of appearance with short pauses in between. In what follows, I offer descriptions of these interpretations, alternated with analytical parts, so as to present the music in a manner that is reflective of the repetitive character of the piece itself.¹ These descriptions are mainly based on my own experience of the music, yet they also involve the explanation on the band's website ("About our new album") and a personal communication with Gatis Gaujenieks, the bass player and producer of the band.

Each title of the interpretations refers to a pancake type originating from various countries, and the music reflects an influence from the music of these countries. Nevertheless, Iļģi's website states that the eleven versions of Pankūkas² are not a scientific study into national music styles and they kindly ask not to research it as such either. "Pankūkas Virkne" reflects the interpretation of a melody and musical accompaniment by a Latvian band. Therefore, the analysis of it cannot be a study into national music genres. Instead, I will analyze every interpretation on its own, as well as the series of renditions as a whole, in relation to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

The different versions of Pankūkas take a prominent position on the two albums due to the fact that the sound of most of the interpretations differs much from the music Iļģi usually makes. Although the Pankūkas music considered on its own seems easy and innocent, it will haunt you long after either of the albums has finished. Hence, I draw on Derrida's concept of a hauntology in order to gain

¹ The order in which I present the parts of "Pankūkas Virkne" closely resembles the order as found on the albums, but is not identical.

² With Pankūkas, without quotation marks around the title, I refer to the melody (and its dance) in general. I will use "Pankūkas," with quotation marks, when I refer to the specific interpretations by Iļģi. I use "Pankūkas Virkne" when I refer to the eleven renditions together as found on *Izlase*. This essay does not discuss the dance that accompanies the music.

further insight into Pankūkas's various spectral qualities,³ and to investigate if and how hauntology is a suitable method for researching music.

Again... (US-American)

The first type of "Pancakes" are consumed in the United States of America. The finger-picking style on the guitar refers to this country's music. The guitarist, accompanied by a brushed snare drum, plays a brief introduction to the same melody of the preceding tune in a tempo that is just as fast. The melody is played on a kokle.⁴ The accordion plays sustained chords until the contrasting theme appears; from this moment on it plays broken ornamented chords. The dance tune sounds like US-American country⁵ music.

Iļģi and pancakes

Iļģi is perhaps the most prominent band associated with Latvian folk music.⁶ Ilga Reizniece, who played violin in the folklore ensemble Skandinieki, is the founder of the band. She started Iļģi because she wanted to develop a new approach to the folk music repertoire. While the band thus departs from the folklore tradition, they still labeled their music "post-folklore" on their debut album: *Rāmi, Rāmi* (1993). In the 1990s they became a major act in the post-folklore movement in Latvia. With every new album release, they have incorporated elements of music genres other than folk. The albums became more stylized as well, as they made more use of studio techniques (Jaremko Porter 322-28). *Ej Tu Dejoj!* was a radical break with this trend.

According to Gaujenieks, the band wanted to create an atmosphere similar to their "live club manner" on *Ej Tu Dejoj!* ("Dance Off!"). Iļģi rehearsed and recorded the album in a farmhouse instead of the studio. The album consists of

³ Both "hauntology" and "spectrality" are terms used by Derrida. The first indicates the study of haunting and specters, while the second is used to express the spectral quality of the studied object.

⁴ The kokle is a Latvian string instrument. For an introduction to the kokle, see Muktupavels.

⁵ These genre indications are purposefully inaccurate and non-academic, the stereotyping is my experience and my idea of what the band tries to convey.

⁶ The terms "folk music" and "folklore" are problematic in Latvia. I discuss this below, but for now I just want to situate Iļģi in the Latvian musical landscape.

twelve folk dances in a manner that resembles their live performances (e.g. Ilgimusic "ILGI – Pankūkas"). Gaujenieks writes that Ilģi intended the different interpretations of the Pankūkas dance music as jokes in between the other pieces.

and again... (US-American again)

"Hotcakes" originate from the USA as well. The strummed power chords resemble the sound of a rock band. A human scream signifies rock music, too. The scream is also a sign for the violinist and the accordionist to play the melody. The melody is a simplified, more straightforward version of the Pankūkas theme. The contrasting theme is replaced by a break: the melody is omitted, the first beats of the measures are emphasized and only the accompanying band is heard. In my mind I still hear the contrasting theme. The melody possesses me already.

Hauntology

Music can be haunting. A melody can stick in one's mind and haunt one for the rest of the day. This is called an earworm: the melody is like a specter, the returning apparition that carries the past with it but in a new context. It comes from the past, presents itself differently every time it appears, and it returns. Although it returns, it is different because the remembered music is not the same as the actual music. The context in which it is remembered differs every time, which leads to a new experience of the music.

In 1993, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida introduced the term "hauntology" (10) as the name for the study of culture with the conceptual metaphor of the specter. Derrida uses this figure to investigate the characteristics of political and cultural expressions that are in between being and non-being, analogous to the appearance of a specter (hence haunt-ology). Derrida challenges traditional ontology (of which "hauntology" is a French homophone) by stating that "being" cannot be as easily delineated as it sometimes appears to be. The specter is a ghostly figure that is neither dead nor living, always returning and always more than one.

In this paper I will use these different characteristics of Derrida's theory to analyze various aspects of Ilģi's music. The methods of the philosopher have been employed in many academic disciplines, ranging from trauma studies to media studies to political science, yet not often for researching music. Hence, next to

investigating what haunts “Pankūkas” and how it is haunting in its turn, I see this paper as an attempt to find fruitful interconnections between musicology and hauntology.

and again... (French)

“Crêpes” are traditional French pancakes. This rendition of the dance tune is more delicate and romantic. Hand percussion replaces the drum kit and the accordionist plays chords on the after-beat, which creates a more lively character. A guitarist plays a romantic improvisation before it commences to play the already familiar melody. It plays the tune with subtle trills and the contrasting melody is played by bending the strings a little. The violin plays along for just a few notes.

Revenant

“Pankūkas Virkne” is the display or incarnation of a haunting melody. The melody returns ten times after it first appears. A guitar improvisation functions as an introduction and indication of the French style of “Crêpes.” A listener can expect that the theme is still to come, for the melody is similar but not the same every time it appears. This French version reminds me of the previous appearances because of the melody, but it clearly has a different character because of the accompaniment and ornamentation. The specter of a returning deceased, called “revenant” (Derrida 5), looks like the deceased but it is not this person. Rather, the revenant is an appearance on the threshold of the visible and the invisible or, translated to music, of the audible and the inaudible.

Every time one hears the melody, it is repeated, yet also new. It is repetition and first time simultaneously. Every interpretation is a singular iteration because it stands on its own, but it is also a reiteration of the melody. This goes for the first interpretation, “Pankūkas,” as well: although it appears first in the row, it is still the repeated melody. Moreover, Iļģi is not the first band to play this music, but it is the first one to play this music in this particular manner. The piece of music, like a specter, exists outside of an interpreter; the latter is merely evoking the specter of music. One can only create within one’s own frame of reference. In other words, one depends on her or his memory in the process of creating. Which memories are evoked depends on the person, but they remain within the limits of the knowable, conscious or unconscious. What may appear as

something new is in reality a juxtaposition or mixture of different memories. Specters of the past are returning, but in a new form.

and again... (again US-American again)

“Flapjacks” are pancakes that come from the USA, but the word flapjack is also associated with a British snack. This version of the Pankūkas melody sounds like folk rock music that is played in the English-speaking world. The drum kit is played without cymbals or snare and the guitarist strums open chords to create this folk rock sound. The melody is played in two voices by the violin and accordion until they play in unison from the second melody onwards.

Burden of the past

Derrida wrote *Spectres de Marx* in 1993 to stress the continuing importance of the work of Karl Marx after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Latvian nationalism is intertwined with the dissolution of the Soviet Union as well. I will not focus on Latvian nationalism in this paper, but I want to stress that both Derrida and Iļģi deal with communism and Marxism⁷ in their own ways. Derrida argues against the assumption that, after the fall of the socialist regimes due to the Warsaw Pact, Marxism is dead. The philosopher returns to the writings of Marx and shows that communism has always been spectral (not dead and not living), so it could not have died inasmuch it was already in a state between living and non-living.

At the end of the 1970s, a revivalist movement arose in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. This countermovement wanted to restore a Latvian identity based on folklore as an alternative for the Russian assimilation politics of the Soviet Union. The movement’s keyword was “authenticity” (Boiko 114). In the 1980s, a dissatisfaction with this claim of authenticity gradually led to the formation of new bands. Iļģi was one of these bands and in 1993 they called themselves “post-folklore” in order to distinguish themselves from folklore. Hence, like the folklore movement, Iļģi aims to shift away from Soviet aesthetics, yet the band does not fully align with the folklore repertoire either.

⁷ I am aware that the terms “communism,” “Marxism,” and “socialism” are problematic. Proper communism never existed but the socialism of the Warsaw Pact regimes is often called communism. I will therefore use both terms to refer to the practical situation in those countries and Marxism to refer to Marx’s ideology.

As a result, Iļģi is constantly vacillating between the notions of authenticity and creativity. From the moment they coined the term “post-folklore” in 1993 until 2001, the band was struggling with the past. In an interview in 2001 they express this struggle:

Concerning the last CD *Sēju Vēju*, which was created in the spring of 2000 and in which a bass guitar and a set of rock drums are used together with traditional instruments, Reizniece says: “This is no longer post-folklore. It is folk rock. But I still believe that it is ethnic music. It is ethnic music.” (Boiko 117)

Whether they label their music as “folklore,” “post-folklore,” or “folk rock,” Iļģi’s sound is clearly indebted to the poetry and musical forms of Latvian folklore, while they simultaneously try to innovate away from these roots. As the quote also brings out, the band remains haunted by the music and politics of their predecessors.

In other words, the specter of the folklore movement seems to continuously disrupt and haunt Iļģi in the present. “Pankūkas” is a way to cope with this past. This time, Iļģi appears to evoke the specter of the folklore movement deliberately, as “Pankūkas” constitutes a clear reference to the time the movement came into existence. On their website (“Diždancis”), the band has a section on dances. It is mentioned that Pankūkas is from a Lithuanian origin, although this is not completely certain according to Gaujenieks. However, at minimum it can be said that Lithuanian groups popularized the dance (*Kepė močia blynus* in Lithuanian) in Latvia at the end of the 1970s, right at the time of the renewed enthusiasm for folklore and the rise of the countermovement. While Iļģi is perhaps not able to exorcize the specter of the movement, through “Pankūkas” they deal with the material head on and in their own way. The band purposely evokes the past and appropriates it at their own discretion.

and again... (German)

“Pfannkuchen” is the German word for pancakes. A rolling snare drum together with staccato played guitar chords creates a rigid march rhythm that represents Germany. The accordionist plays the melody without any ornament and sticks to the notes.

and again... (Greek)

"Tiganites" is a type of Greek pancakes. This piece of music resembles "Sirtaki" (Panagiotis Christakos "Zorbas Syrtaki"). This is a famous piece of dance music from the film *Zorba the Greek*. "Sirtaki" is characterized by its progression from a slow to a fast tempo. Acceleration is also used in "Tiganites." The guitar plays an accompaniment that is almost a copy of the accompaniment in "Sirtaki." The melody of Pankūkas fits well with the rhythm with its emphasized second beat.⁸ Iļģi included laughing in the recording, which seems to be a reference to the laughter in the movie scene that features the dance.

Being and not being

The existing literature (Fisher; Sexton) on music and hauntology is limited to artists⁹ who explicitly identify with the philosophy of Derrida. While I believe that hauntology can be a relevant method for the analysis of music, both Fisher and Sexton remain within the frame of reference of these artists and do not fully use the potential of the conceptual method. They mention how the so-called hauntology artists use sampling (the manipulating and rearranging of pre-existing sound material) to create a sense of nostalgia. Although Iļģi are not hauntology artists, these articles are not completely irrelevant for this study, as every interpretation of Pankūkas is also a citation and thus comparable to sampling.

"Pfannkuchen" is German. The rolling drums and the marching rhythm together are neither a literal citation of a specific German piece of music, nor is German music just marching music. As I heard this version for the first time, without knowing the title, I thought it referred to Scotland. Nonetheless, it still represents Germany as, firstly, Iļģi evokes Germany in the title, and secondly it reminds of Germany by the use of stereotypes: rigid and sober. The use of samples by hauntology artists is nostalgic. In contrast, the citation and appropriation by Iļģi is exotic. Both involve forms of longing, which arises when the present, whether temporal or spatial, is experienced as insufficient due to the absence of an other. This other is (from) elsewhere (spatial or temporal) and felt as both a presence and an absence, just like a specter is in a state between being

⁸ For an insightful discussion of "Sirtaki" and other Greek music, see Pennanen.

⁹ Mainly artists from the Ghost Box record label (Sexton 561).

and non-being (Derrida 10). So “Pfannkuchen” is and is not German simultaneously. One can hear the “Germanness” of this interpretation but, at the same time, one also knows that a Latvian band recorded it in a farm in rural Latvia and that the piece of music is not German at all.

Similarly, “Tiganites” both is and is not Greek. The reference to the piece of film music, which perhaps has become a symbol for Greece, illuminates a longing for the past and for a distant place at once. The accompaniment of “Tiganites” evokes the specter of Greece in 1964 (the year of the film’s first release) next to the revenant Lithuanian melody of Pankūkas, which was popularized in the 1970s. Both refer to a distant place and/or time with a specific relation to contemporary Latvia or at least the contemporary musical practice of Iļģi. Exotic and nostalgic specters abound in this interpretation of Pankūkas, just as every interpretation of the music evokes multiple specters – most clearly so in “Spacecakes.”

and again...

“Spacecakes” is not associated with a specific place. Spacecakes are not a kind of pancake either. This piece of music is a reggae version of the dance tune; hence the title “Spacecakes.” Although reggae has its roots in Jamaica, it is music that is made all around the world, just like marijuana is consumed all around the world. This version of Pankūkas is in a half-time tempo played by the guitarist on the after-beat. The sound of the instruments is manipulated, just like global reggae from after 1972¹⁰: the guitar is played with a wah-wah effect and the drums have an effect that causes reverberation.

More than one

“Spacecakes” may appear as a specter of Jamaica. Just like many versions of “Pankūkas,” this piece is based on stereotypes as well. Derrida states that a specter may not be as lucid as it at first seems to be. By taking a closer look, one

¹⁰ For two reasons, I take 1972 as the turning point of reggae from local to global music. First, the film *The Harder They Come*, portraying the Jamaican roots of reggae culture, was a commercial success that year. Second, in 1972 Bob Marley signed a deal with Island Records, which meant a major change in his sound that caused him worldwide success. These are my observations; for more, see Bradley.

sees that more specters appear (1-2). "Spacecakes" may sound as reggae, but by looking closely at this genre, one may notice the influence of other genres. While Reggae is perhaps associated with Jamaica, it was developed in many countries and is a mixture of various Caribbean and American styles. However, I will not present a history of Reggae music here. It suffices to state that Reggae is a global type of music (Bradley), which is true for all genres evoked in "Pankūkas Virkne." Although a music genre may appear as national or even local music, and is perhaps also regarded as such, it is nevertheless often listened to and practiced globally. Of the eleven interpretations of Pankūkas, "Spacecakes" best illuminates the spectral quality of being and non-being, because Reggae is often identified with Jamaica while it is produced and consumed all over the world (and in this case Latvia). Hence, trying to capture one specter may cause the evocation of other specters.

Each interpretation of Pankūkas gives rise to multiple associations and meanings. A piece of music may seem comprehensible and easy to pin down, but reality is always more complicated. The next rendition is another good example of this.

and again... (Jewish)

"Latkes" are potato pancakes served at the Jewish holiday of Hanukah. The word latke is a Yiddish word and is thus associated with Jews outside of Israel (where Hebrew is spoken). The piece of music also resembles Klezmer rather than Israeli music. Klezmer is the music of Jews in Eastern Europe and is influenced by Jazz and Roma music. This can be heard in "Latkes": a distinctive 2/4 rhythm with a heterophonic melody (i.e. the accordion and violin play the melody as well as semi-improvised ornaments around the melody).¹¹

New contexts

The two albums that feature "Pankūkas" present the piece in different forms: the same but different (Derrida 10). On the album *Ej Tu Dejot!* it is offered as eleven separate tracks, interspersed in between the "regular" songs. As such, the melody dominates the album, due to its repetitive occurrence and its deviant musical character. On *Izlase* the listening experience or sonic afterimage is different, as

¹¹ For more information on Klezmer music, see Slobin.

the pieces are sequenced into one track: each interpretation after the other. *Izlase* translates to “favorite” and it appears to be a so-called Best Of-album. The album is a compilation of songs released between 2001 and 2009. Five out of the fifteen compositions are from *Ej Tu Dejoj!*. The longest track, right in the middle, is “Pankūkas Virkne.” Although it has a central place on the album, the series is not as dominant as it is on the first album. “Pankūkas” thus functions like a specter: it returns in a new context (on another album), both in a similar (the order of the interpretations is the same) and a different (all interpretations are put directly after one another) form.

In addition, its two parent albums can be said to be haunted by a second specter, namely the intention to capture the feel and style of a live performance. For *Ej Tu Dejoj!*, Iļģi attempted to achieve this effect by recording the album outside a studio. Meanwhile, inside the case of *Izlase* is written: “In this compilation you will find songs and dances, which we enjoy performing in concert.” However, the songs are not ordered chronologically as is often done on “Best Of”-albums, nor are they sequenced to resemble a live performance, as Iļģi claims (“About our new album”), for the band always ends concerts with “a jolly session of folk dancing.” On this album, though, they present the folk dances in the middle of the sequence. Nonetheless, it can be argued that *Izlase* succeeds better at conveying the goal of the *Ej Tu Dejoj!* album than the latter album itself does. The character of the *Ej Tu Dejoj!* recordings that are presented on *Izlase* is so different from the rest of the studio repertoire, that every “live club” composition stands out as such. Both albums are thus like specters of live performances; they attempt to give the idea of a live show yet neither is a recording of a concert.

and again... (Ligurian)

“Ligurian Farihata” seems to refer to the chickpea pancake that is made on the Ligurian Coast of Italy.¹² On first hearing, this rendition of the Pankūkas tune is a classical waltz as it is in a clear 3/4 waltz rhythm, but the waltz is commonly associated with Vienna and not with Italy. In Genoa, the capital of Liguria, a tradition exists in folk music singing called “Trallalero.” Although

¹² It is remarkable that this version has an English name while the others have names in their respective languages. In the language of Liguria it would have been *Fainâ Ligure* or just *Fainâ*.

this music is mainly a 3/4 rhythm, it is a polyphonic vocal genre,¹³ and "Ligurian Farihata" is neither polyphonic nor vocal. I would argue that this version signifies classical music as a whole, as it is played neat with a little romantic vibrato and the waltz is associated with classical music.

and again (Latvian again).

"Naktskūkas" is again Latvian and means "night cakes." Naktskūkas are no pancakes; they are not even real food. This version refers to Iļģi themselves. It is played in their own distinctive style; the kokle with reverb is prominently present. The relatively low density and the absence of percussion in this interpretation are representative of the calmness of the night. The musical texture is almost limited to the sound of the kokle. Only at the end do the violin and the guitar support it. This piece foreshadows the band's next album *Īsākās Nakts Dziesmas* (2009), which is dedicated to Jāņi, the night of June 23 to 24. "Naktskūkas" can be viewed as the specter of the future, foreshadowing what is to come.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored the usefulness of the metaphor of the specter for the analysis of music, in this case the music of Iļģi. In this last section I show how the band connects repetition, citation, and a relation with the past in the eleven interpretations of "Pankūkas" and "Pankūkas Virkne."

According to Derrida, "conjunction" means three things in French: *conjuración* (or conspiracy), *conjuración* (or incantation destined to evoke), and *conjuración* (or exorcism). Summed up, conjunction is a ritualistic gathering in which there is a magical evocation as well as exorcism of specters (52-59). People evoke specters to communicate with the past, with deceased relatives, with the future, and/or to banish a haunting specter through exorcism. I pose that the different versions of "Pankūkas" and "Pankūkas Virkne" are Iļģi's conjunction.

The past seems to haunt Iļģi. The melody of Pankūkas refers to the time of rebellion at the end of the 1970s. It refers to the struggle of the musical and folkloristic countermovement with the assimilation and cultural politics of the

¹³ Listen to the compilations *Trallalero Genovese, Volume 1* and *Volume 2* by Various Artists.

Soviet Union. Pankūkas is folklore. Iļģi is on the side of the countermovement against Soviet politics, but they are not a part of this movement as they have another aesthetic. The countermovement seems to haunt Iļģi; on the one hand the band springs from the movement and it wants to be associated with it, yet on the other hand they also wish to be different. It appears to me that they have been struggling with this past for a long time. The different versions of "Pankūkas" and "Pankūkas Virkne" are Iļģi's conjuration; they deliberately evoke this past in order to communicate with it.

Eleven versions of Pankūkas have been released by the band. Each of them evokes many specters; not only as a result of the melody from the past, but also due to the incorporation of music from other places. The music is alien to Iļģi's repertoire as it cites sources from outside of Latvia. This citation of other music is an appropriation, it is a blunt citation since it is often without a specified origin, but therefore doubtlessly theirs. Instead of being haunted by this multiplicity of specters, the band evokes as many as they want, doubled by the repetition-with-a-difference of the piece on a second album. By presenting the melody over and over and yet every time in their own style, Iļģi shows that the past does not disrupt the band anymore, but that instead they are able to use it for their own purpose. Or, by way of the double conjuration of the eleven version of Pankūkas, Iļģi has found a way to make music with the past, rather than being haunted by it.

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From a Ten Hour Clock to a “Primitive” Robot: *Metropolis* as a Temporal Critique

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*Abstract: We do not often think of the clock or calendar as a mechanism of translation. A clock renders time linear, measurable, and comparable. This static conception of time is referred to as homogeneous time. Heterogeneous time is a much more abstract concept and a different way of experiencing time. Heterogeneous time can be viewed as time without our pragmatic filters of logic and organization. This experience of time is heterogeneous as it allows for the perception of the heterogeneity and dynamics of the “real”; there are no filters of organization. Henri Bergson argues in favor of a more abstract, heterogeneous conception of time as opposed to the homogeneous time of the clock. Bergson’s theory has led to the argument that film has the possibility to disrupt homogeneous time; an idea which others such as John Mullarkey and Bliss Cua Lim have developed further. In this paper, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) will be discussed as an example of the ability of film to disrupt homogeneous time.*

Keywords: *time, Bergson, film, Metropolis.*

// Time flies when you are having fun.” “We have to kill some time between classes.” “Time heals all wounds.” These are just three expressions from the English language about time. Here they are used to show how the passing of time is experienced by using metaphors. Literally translating the expressions to another language would render them incomprehensible, or at best awkward. While this seems common sense, the

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translation of the abstract concept time into seconds, minutes, hours, evenings, mornings, days, months, and years is something we pay almost no conscious attention to. The countable, structured time visualized as a clock is perceived as a part of "reality" rather than as an invention that mechanically translates abstract, durational time.

Time is measured in countable parameters: minutes, seconds, months, years and weeks. This is called homogenous time. Heterogeneous time is time as we experience it: a fluid, abstract notion of time. For instance, when I write an essay just before a deadline, I might experience time as moving quickly; the time as I experience it is heterogeneous, incomprehensibly moving. Nevertheless, the amount of hours and minutes that pass will until my deadline remain the same and compose homogeneous time. In this situation, heterogeneous time is my experience of time, and homogenous time is symbolized by the deadline an editor has set for me.

Several philosophers and film theorists, such as Henri Bergson and Bliss Cua Lim, critique the time of the clock and calendar, or what could be called modern homogeneous time, as they consider it to be an oppressive force used for colonialist and capitalist purposes (Lim 15). This notion will be further elaborated on throughout this paper. Homogeneous time can be shown to be a construction rather than a "reality" and Lim argues that film has the possibility to expose homogeneous time as a construction through fantastical narratives (ibid.). Likewise, John Mullarkey argues that Bergson's philosophy has built the fundamentals for understanding film as a medium that presents time out of joint: as upsetting homogeneous time (88). In other words, according to Lim, Mullarkey and Bergson, film has the possibility to upset the homogeneous notion of time; it can reveal that homogeneous time is a construction that cannot do justice to the fluidity of abstract, heterogeneous time. Furthermore, as will become clear in this paper, homogeneous time allows for the perpetuation of colonialist and capitalist discourses as it enables the oppressor to define how the oppressed is situated in time. Additionally, the oppressor can control the manner in which the oppressed spends his/her time. These are two very generally described reasons for why it is important to reveal homogeneous time as a construction. Later in this paper I will return to this topic and discuss it more elaborately.

In this paper, I will analyze the film *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) to research whether film indeed has the possibility to upset homogeneous time. Michael Cowan – a scholar who has subtly aligned *Metropolis* with the homogeneous and heterogeneous time debate – argues that *Metropolis* represents the debates in Germany during the Weimar Republic about the

replacement of natural rhythms (those rhythms associated with the fluid movement of nature) by mechanical rhythms (those rhythms associated with the staccato movements of machines). More and more people felt they were solely relating to their environment through machines rather than through direct 'natural' contact (231). As such, in this period there was a general feeling of losing touch with the body's natural rhythms, and people felt that the natural rhythms were replaced by the mechanical rhythms of the workplace (ibid.). Cowan ties the natural rhythms to fluid, abstract time (heterogeneous time), and the mechanical rhythms to the staccato movement of the clock (homogeneous time) (ibid.). Yet, Cowan does not delve deeper into the connection between time, rhythm, mechanics and *Metropolis*. This essay will build upon Cowan's idea of *Metropolis* as a film that *shows* the clash between the "natural" and the "mechanical," or the clash between heterogeneous time and homogeneous time, but will delve further into this connection than Cowan does in his paper.

Instead of getting lost in the narrative of *Metropolis*, I want to focus on the specifics of the film to be able to reflect on aesthetic choices, rather than simply reflect on narrative. In order to do a close visual analysis of the film, I will analyze two scenes. The first scene shows how a machine employed by a worker changes into a clock, which creates an image of the worker manipulating the working of the clock. The second scene I will analyze is the "exotic" dance by the robot Maria. Both scenes critique the notion of homogeneous time in a distinct manner which will allow for an in-depth analysis of how *Metropolis* upsets notions of homogeneous time in various manners. As will appear from this paper, the clock scene critiques homogeneous time as an oppressive force that controls the division between leisure and labor time. The "exotic" dance scene critiques homogeneous time by combining both the "primitive," that which is both associated with the "natural" or natural rhythms and the past, and the mechanical or futuristic in one robotic body. Finally, I will look at the position of the viewer in relation to the film, to see how film, in general, might have the ability to upset homogeneous time.

Though this paper will apply existing theories on time and film to *Metropolis*, it will also attempt to expand the application of these theories by including the viewer's experience into the discussion of duration, temporality and film. However, before delving into the visual analysis of *Metropolis*, I first want to briefly discuss Bergson's critique on time and Lim's application of his work as a framework for my analysis.

Theories on time

Starting with Bergson's theory on time, I want to explore Bergson's conception of "present," or rather his idea that the 'present' is non-existent as an entity that can exist on itself (176-99). Instead, Bergson argues that the present is always in convergence between past and future: "what I call 'my present' has one foot in my past and another in my future" (177). To give an example: while writing this paper, I draw on my past. Not only do I build on the knowledge I have of academic writing and theories or the research I have done beforehand, but I also use my past while doing something simple as phrasing a sentence. I use the memory of each letter I type and follow it with another one, and I draw on previous knowledge to make sure that this essay will make sense and that it will not be a random mix of letters. Simultaneously, I anticipate a certain future argument and future letters I type. As a result, past and future always exist alongside the "present" while writing this paper. Likewise, Bergson refutes the possibility of a sole present existing on itself (ibid.). As such, translations of abstract time (heterogeneous time) into terms such as past, present, future, but also, year, week and hour become apparently clear as constructions, rather than part of a "real."

Another example might be helpful to further understand Bergson's notion of time: when a person attempts to name the present in its instant, it is already past. As a result, Bergson argues that the "pure" present in itself does not exist, and that we only live and perceive our immediate past (194-95). As such, the translation of the "real" movement of time as an indivisible quality in itself into the clock or calendar, which makes time measurable and creates an idea of separation between the present, past and future, clashes with Bergson's idea of the present as solely existing as *both* present and past since that number will never exactly capture time as not one moment, but as a wired network between moments (ibid.). Consequently, he argues that qualities ("real" movement, such as time) are heterogeneous and movements (in the mechanical sense, such as a clock or calendar) are homogeneous (267).

Rather than elaborately defining time and its workings, Lim uses Bergson to explain why it is important to critique homogeneous time as an oppressive force (31). She argues, for example, that from the thirteenth century onwards workers have experienced, and resisted, the measurement of time as a manner for employers to control the division between the amount of time they spend on work and the amount of spare time they receive (ibid.). In this context, the homogeneous measurement of time becomes a means to control how workers spend their time. Though Lim does not mention class struggles in her book, her

discussion of homogenous time as a tool of control relates to a critique uttered by Karl Marx on capitalism. Marx's critique states that workers are simply an underpaid commodity for the capitalist who either spends his/her money on a luxury good or on labor power (Marx 657). In sum, homogeneous time allows for the possibility to buy someone's time and to control the manner in which it is spent, which further confirms homogeneous time as a means towards problematic practices of for instance the mistreatment of workers.

Additionally, Lim critiques the way in which homogenous time renders the West as the present and future while the "rest" is rendered as the past, aspiring to the Western future: "[t]he colonial trope of time-as-space, of the *globe as a kind of clock* – with the metropolitan centre marking the path to progress, while the colonized other remains primitive and superseded – is a version of what Bergson exposes as the all-is-given logic of homogeneous time. To maintain that the future holds the same thing for everyone..." (Lim 38). According to Lim this reinforces problematic colonialist discourses in which the West is perceived as superior to the "rest" (ibid).

The clock scene

The merging of time into a commodity is critiqued in *Metropolis* by the clock scene that shows that homogeneous time can be used as a means of oppression of workers. First, however, I want to briefly point to the very beginning of the film. *Metropolis* starts with showing sprockets turning and pumps pumping, after which a big clock and a smaller clock are shown. The bigger one shows numbers from one till ten, exemplifying the ten-hour workday that the workers in the world of *Metropolis* have to endure, and the smaller one shows 24 hours, the duration of the day according to homogeneous time. At the very start of the film, the viewer is already made aware of the presence of two mechanical clocks that represent the distinction between work and leisure time for the workers in *Metropolis*. This brief introduction to the world of *Metropolis* demonstrates the importance of the division of time in this futuristic world.

The film incorporates the temporal critique in its image also later, when Freder, one of the upper class civilians, discovers the hardships of the workers after a coincidental meeting with the beautiful Maria, who he follows into the factories in search for her. When he realizes he is unable to convince the upper class civilians (particularly his father, the mayor) to care for the workers, Freder returns to the lower class workers in the machine rooms. He enters a steam-filled room. Dressed in white and surrounded by the steam, he seems almost angelic. The shots of Freder show a sharp contrast with the shots of the workers clad in

black suits and hats in a largely grey environment. It is made clear by eyeline match² that Freder's attention is particularly drawn to a worker who stands in front of a white circle operating a machine. He approaches the machine and sees, and the viewer through his eyes, that the worker is moving black pointers towards light bulbs. The worker is clearly struggling, indicated by the sweat he swipes from his forehead. Eventually, the worker collapses into Freder's arms due to the exhaustive work. Freder takes the place of the worker and he now controls the machine.

In a scene that continues the storyline of this scene later in the film, the viewer sees Freder dressed in a black costume employing the pointers in a close-up, while also swiping the sweat from his forehead. The change from a white costume to a black one signals Freder's change from upper class to lower class. There is a cut to the double clocks that started the film. It clearly costs Freder as much effort as the worker to keep up the work. His stress, indicated with an eyeline match, intensifies when the liquid in a thermometer is rising. When Freder collapses to the ground, the numbers of the big clock appear in the white circle of the machine: one to ten. Afterwards, separately from the pointers that Freder had to point to the light bulbs, the second-hand starts to move, and Freder attempts to pull it towards him, trying to manipulate the clock to make it run faster. He fails, and the second-hand quickly moves to its original position. Freder's expressions show the viewer the torment he experiences. The intertitle reads: "Father! Father! Do ten hours never end??!!"

This scene does not only critique homogeneous time as controlling leisure and work time, but it also critiques how homogeneous time forces people to work by hours and not by their physical ability to continue to work. The ten hours are an imposed amount of time the workers have to work, but the hours do not do justice to the heterogeneity of time as a fluid concept that is experienced differently in different circumstances. A connection is made between the standardization of labor, working the machine, to a certain amount of hours by the numbers appearing in the white circle of the machine Freder is employing and the cut to the two clocks. Freder's urge to manipulate the machine, and, thus, the clock, by pulling the second-hand towards him, indicates that he is exhausted and that he cannot work anymore. Yet the clock and the machine cannot recognize his exhaustion; homogeneous time is unable to detect human experience of time. In his experience, Freder has already worked sufficiently as he

² Eyeline match is an editing technique in which a shot of the character looking in a certain direction at something that is not part of the frame is followed by a shot of the object or subject the character is looking at.

cannot continue the work any longer. Freder's experience in the factory shows a clash between heterogeneous time – the experience of time while doing hard work – and homogeneous time – the mechanical ten hours that are determined to be working hours.

Obviously, Freder has never experienced the pressure of homogeneous time before as lower class workers have, since he is from the upper class in the *Metropolis* world. Interestingly, he voluntarily takes over the part of the worker, willingly submitting himself to homogeneous time, while in his class he has the freedom to divide his own time as he wishes; he can live independently of the work clock. His class in itself and the role he takes up as a worker also stand for the clash between the manner in which the upper class can enjoy the benefit of not having to conform to homogeneous time, and the sufferance and exploitation of the workers by the clock the upper class has manufactured for them. As throughout the film a revolution is organized against the upper class, it is shown that the pressure of the clock is one of the oppressive forces coming from the upper class to control the working class. A ten hour work clock is something that is invented by the higher class to ensure a certain amount of production in *Metropolis*; it is not based on the workers' physical capabilities. All in all, homogeneous time is here shown as a means of oppression by the clash of two classes. Likewise, the clash between homogeneous time and heterogeneous time is also embodied by one of the characters in the film: the robot Maria.

The "exotic" dance scene

To create chaos among the workers in *Metropolis*, the inventor Rotwang builds a robot that looks exactly like Maria, a woman who strives for the rights of the workers. In one scene the robot Maria performs an "exotic" dance, which seems to evoke an interesting clash between past, present and future. Andreas Huyssen argues that the robot exemplifies the coming together of nature and technology (71). He argues that women are seen as part of nature because of their ability to produce life, while technology only produces lifeless goods. For this reason, women are often excluded from technology as it is considered a world of men (69). Consequently, the robot Maria combines the technological aspect of the robot with womanhood, representing both technology and nature. For time as either homogenously arranged, or homogenously or heterogeneously experienced, this means a clash of both types of time existing in one body. Nature, as is argued by Cowan, stands for natural rhythms, and hence the more flowing type of heterogeneous time, while technology stands for the rhythms of the machine, or the rhythm of the clock: homogenous time (231). This contrast

becomes quintessential in the scene in which the robot Maria performs an “exotic” dance.

The scene is initiated by Freder who finds an invite on his nightstand for his father from Rotwang. Afterwards, there is a cut to a scene in which the camera pans over a room in which men, dressed formally, walk around and converse with each other. This is followed by a cut to a big decorated platform that balances on the shoulders of black men and women who are on their knees. There is a brief cut to Rotwang and Freder’s father conversing until Rotwang points towards the camera. In the next shot it becomes clear he points to the platform from which smoke appears and the top lifts. There is a brief shot back to Freder in his bed, who seems to be dreaming. The robot Maria rises from the inside of the platform, which is intercut by shots of amazed, well-dressed men, leaning towards the platform. What follows are shots of robot Maria moving her hips and dancing while being scarcely dressed, intercut with shots of almost drooling men and shots of Freder who seems to be dreaming about a priest declaring an approaching apocalypse.

The scene intensifies when a double exposure³ is used to show multiple faces of the frenzied men watching robot Maria performing her dance. One shot focuses solely on their eyes, exemplifying their male gaze upon the dancing body of the robot Maria. Rapid editing between different shots of dancing and gazing works to a certain climax. The rapid editing ends with a shot of Freder sitting up straight in his bed drinking a glass of water. It becomes clear that he still perceives a priest, who is now preaching about the Whore of Babylon, a Christian symbol of evil, who seems to eerily resemble the robot Maria. The image of the Whore of Babylon is replaced by robot Maria who arises on another platform that resembles the one on which the Whore of Babylon was sitting. After the view returns to the well-dressed, frenzied men, an intertitle reads: “All Seven Deadly Sins for her sake!” This is followed by an image of Death (a skeleton with a scythe) and seven puppets, which represent the seven deadly sins. The puppets start moving after Death has played the flute made of bone. Subsequently, there is a cut towards the platform of the robot Maria, and the black men and women who carried it change into the puppets that represent the seven deadly sins. The camera now shows all the men storming at the platform on which robot Maria is situated. Before the scene ends the viewer returns to Freder who sees Death, and, as indicated by a title, exclaims: “Death has come to the city!”

³ The merging of two images in one, resulting in two superimposed images.

There are two narrative strands running alongside each other in this scene: the dancing by Maria the robot that seems to bring her admirers in a trancelike state plus the dreams/visions of Freder that combine the robot's dance with the Whore of Babylon, sin, death and other Christian symbolism. Underlying is a racially problematic storyline of the black men and women upholding the platform and changing into the puppets of sin. Interestingly, the robot Maria seems to signal both the primitive or the "exotic" (nature) in her sexual moves and dress, and the technological as she is here on exposé as an invention of Rotwang. According to Lim, the idea of the "primitive" and the consequential problematic racial aspects of this term will deem Maria the robot as a "primitive woman," and according to homogeneous time as something of the past: "colonized people (like women and the working class in the metropolis) – do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency – the living embodiment of the archaic 'primitive'" (Lim 21-23). Furthermore, she explains how homogeneous time renders the world a clock in which the West, or "developed" world, is the future to which the colonized or "primitive" peoples are the past; as such the future of the "primitive" is one that is part of the past of the West. However, while the exotic dance and the black men and women who carry her platform point to her as a "primitive" woman, and as part of nature – as a past to the "western future" – she remains a machine, and she is both the "primitive" past and the future combined. In other words, she embodies a clash between what in modern homogeneous time would be considered to be different temporal moments and hence she embodies a more heterogeneous perception on time: past and future are part of the present.

In addition to the latter analysis, it is useful to compare Maria the robot to Josephine Baker because there is a similarity in the manner they look and the way in which they are presented; this will provide further depth to the analysis. Furthermore, both their bodies seem to contain past and future at the same time. First, I want to delve into the clash of technology and modernism in Maria the robot by comparing her performance to the performer Josephine Baker, who performed for the first time in Germany in 1925 (Donald 53). Not only do they dress alike, but they also share the duality of their identity; mechanical/modern and the "primitive" are juxtaposed in the identities of the dancers. Baker, who as a dancer was part of the African-American performance group *La Revue Nègre*, was seen by the German audience as representing African "primitivism" and American "modernism" simultaneously (ibid.). Baker is described by her visitors as dancing

like she is in a trance or conquered by a diabolic power, as both the jungle and the skyscraper (Donald 54-56). Similarly as the robot Maria, she seems to represent both past (primitive, the "past" to western society) due to her skin color, gender and future (of progress). Viewers of the film in 1927 might have been familiar with Baker's performance and since the robot Maria resonates Baker's way of dressing and moving on stage, the connection was most likely easily made: further emphasizing the clash between what in modern homogeneous time would be a past and a present.

The confusion of Baker as both past and present is also a confusion over her race, as, while she was born in the United States, her skin color caused (white) viewers to associate her with Africa. Accordingly, she became, for her white audience, a clash of the ultramodern as represented by the U.S. in the 1920s and the ultraprimitive, as represented by Africa in the 1920s (Donald 54). This clash is built upon the idea that the U.S. is the future (the ultramodern) and Africa a past (the ultraprimitive), and, thus reinforces modern homogeneous time as one that is racialized and gendered, as indicated above by Lim. Though the robot Maria is white, the scene still associates her with this racialized discourse by both dressing her in a manner that is reminiscent of Baker and by her moves causing a trancelike state in her male viewers (shown by the eyes and the double exposure) reminiscent of how Baker's performance was described in her time as causing trance or being diabolic (Donald 54-56). Furthermore, the robot Maria is carried by black men and women that associate her with the "primitive." However, they also are below her and serve her modern aspect as a technological invention, one of the reasons why she probably is not black herself, as she is still a product of technology, which is a white, male dominated space (in particular in the 1920s).⁴

Both Baker and the robot Maria exemplify a clash between what in modern homogeneous time is deemed the past and the future within one body. Interestingly, both this "exotic" scene and Baker's performances are often deemed as inexplicable because of a certain "inbetweenness": a hybrid being neither this nor that or, in the case of *Metropolis*, inexplicable in the context of the film (Donald 54; Huyssen 61). Could this inexplicability lie with the fact that, as coined by Bergson, heterogeneous time is inexplicable through language as it works via

⁴ Interestingly enough the current gamergate discussion, which was a controversial online misogynous campaign considering the inclusion of women in game culture, goes back to the idea of the technological space in the context of gaming as a male dominated space, see for instance Keith Stuart, "Gamergate: the community eats itself but there should be room for all," *Guardian*, September 3, 2014, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/03/gamergate-corruption-games-anita-sarkeesian-zoe-quinn>.

abstraction (Bergson as explained by Lim, 26)? If so, this scene critiques or, rather undermines, homogeneous time, by showing that both an idea of future and an idea of past, according to the workings of homogeneous time itself, can exist simultaneously within one body. To conclude, it could be argued that *Metropolis* not only critiques modern homogeneous time by literally manipulating the mechanization of time into the clock and by showing its oppressive workings, but also by showing how the distinction modern homogeneous time creates between past and future can coexist within one body.

The experience of the viewer as a critique on homogeneous time

Before concluding this essay, I would like to explore the way in which the experience of watching *Metropolis* could critique the notion of homogeneous time. Lim perceives cinema to be a clock for seeing: a mechanism that in itself reproduces the notions of modern homogeneous time as it creates by the rapid movement of static images an illusion of continuous movement (20-21). However, when we take the Bergsonian definition of image it could be considered limiting to speak about film simply as a machine (as matter), without incorporating the experience of the viewer as well. The Bergsonian image is more than what in idealism would be called a representation,⁵ but also more than what in realism is called a "thing"⁶ (Bergson, vii-viii). Consequently, Bergson states that: "For common sense, then, the object exists in itself, and, on the other hand, the object is, in itself, pictorial, as we perceive it: image it is, but a self-existing image" (viii). Thus, image exists both in itself and to be seen (ibid.). Accordingly, looking at the experience of the viewer of film apart from looking at the film itself as matter, might aid towards an understanding of how film could be more than simply a machine that reproduces the notion of homogeneous linear time. In the relationship between film and viewer, the film has the possibility to upset the notion of modern homogeneous time in two manners apart from doing it within what it shows and narrates. First, a film can make a viewer "loose" track of time while engaging with a film. Second, in the disjunction between the movement of time in the film, the placement of that film in a certain time period, and the moment the viewer watches a film.

⁵ Representation in the context of idealism is that which is a reflection of the Idea, or the metaphysical meaning of an object. The meaning of an object, hence, lies not within itself, but in a higher, metaphysical construction which it represents. In other words, meaning is not embodied by the object, but is only represented by it.

⁶ A "thing" in the context of realism is an object that derives its meaning and existence from itself, without a higher, metaphysical construction that provides its meaning.

There is a possibility that while watching a film the viewer “looses” track of the modern homogeneous time, and seems to turn to a more heterogeneous experience of time, in which past, present and future merge in the immersion into a film. Instead of wondering how long the film has already been playing, the viewer might be immersed in the storyline. As a result, a film has the possibility to make the viewer forget the passing of modern homogeneous time, and places the viewer in a context in which solely the time of the film, independent of her own position in the modern homogeneous time, matters. Secondly, there is a discrepancy between the time in which the viewer is situated on the one hand, and on the other hand the time the viewer perceives within the film. During the amount of time the viewer spends watching the film, the film can cover several years in its (linear) narrative. Consequently, the viewer forms a point in which two different manners of passing time converge: the passing of linear homogeneous time in the film, and the passing of homogeneous time in the cinema.

The latter argument might become a bit clearer when applied to watching *Metropolis*. The film is released in 1927, but takes place in 2026. Thus, when I watch the film, I watch a film that is made in the past, but discusses a future I do not yet know, and I watch it in my “present” in which past and future are also embedded. When I watch the film, I constantly use previous knowledge: to understand the narrative I will use what has already passed before a specific moment in the film on which I create assumptions. Consequently, the past and the future constantly exist alongside during the viewing process in my “present.” As a result, watching a film becomes an act of defiance of homogeneous time in itself, although it is not often consciously experienced as such. When a film as *Metropolis* in its narrative and aesthetics shows a critique of homogeneous time, by manipulating a clock or by immersing two times into one body, the heterogeneity of time is foregrounded. Nevertheless, as seen above, a reaction to that can as well be that a scene is declared inexplicable, as heterogeneous time is untranslatable, similar as the expressions that started this paper are often hard to translate.

Conclusion

Film, or at least *Metropolis*, has the ability to upset homogeneous time: not only in its narrative and aesthetics, but also in the very workings between viewer and film; homogeneous time can be set and be shown as a construct. It is important to upset homogeneous time (not only through film) and to expose it as a construct, because it reveals how homogeneous time can reinforce problematic discourses on gender, race, colonialism and class. Relatedly, this paper is also an

invitation for others to look for and research the ways in which homogeneous, linear time can be upset.

For further research, it would be interesting to look at how other media, such as games, could have the possibility to upset our notion of homogeneous time. It would also be stimulating to look at a point of convergence between phenomenology and Bergson in the context of heterogeneous time and film. Phenomenologist film scholar Vivian Sobchack argues that film makes time visibly heterogeneous, "Cinematic presence is [...] multiply located – simultaneously displacing itself in the thereof past and future situations yet orienting these displacements from the here where the body is at present" (152). It would be interesting to look at points of divergence and convergence between these theories that appear difficult to combine, as John Mullarkey discusses how phenomenology and Bergson's philosophy differ in their fundamental theories on what constitutes an object and what constitutes a subject (88).

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Where the Garment Gapes: On Objectification, Narrative Structure, and Sympathy in *The Fermata* versus *Cashback*

NIENKE SINNEMA*

Abstract: This essay compares and contrasts Nicholson Baker's book The Fermata and Sean Ellis' feature film Cashback. While the film is not an official adaptation of the book, there is a striking resemblance on the level of the fabula. Both narrative texts focus on a young man who freezes time to undress women. As such, they offer classic examples of Laura Mulvey's male gaze, although there is an evident difference in both men's approach to women. Based on their actions, one would assume to feel more sympathy for Cashback's Ben than for The Fermata's Arno. However, a case is made for the opposite. A sympathetic reading position towards Arno and a lack in willingness to engage with Ben are argued based on four principles: the distinct structures of narration and focalization, the account of readership versus filmic excess, the effects of explicit versus implicit description, and a focus on the pleasure of the text. Throughout the argumentation, an appeal is made for more openness towards what Susan Sontag calls "the genuine spectrum of sexuality" ("Classical").

Keywords: male gaze, narrative structure, adaptation, sexuality, subject position.

Iwould now like to take a moment to say a little prayerlike thing about my life. I am so *very* fortunate to have been able to see all the naked women's breasts I have seen. That's what it really comes down to. I am just shocked by how lucky I am. No life could be finer than mine. No compulsively

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promiscuous actor or pop singer, no photographer for a men's magazine, has a better life, for I can take off a woman's clothes *en passant*, as a momentary diversion, without my tender strippage interfering in any way with her life or mine. (Baker 278)

If a man were able to freeze time, he could use that momentary lack of surveillance to undress women, look at them, and touch them. In the 2006 feature-length version of Sean Ellis' film *Cashback*,¹ as well as in Nicholson Baker's 1994 novel *The Fermata*, he does exactly this. Even though *Cashback* is not an official adaptation of *The Fermata*, and they do not recount the exact same story, there are striking resemblances. Both narrative texts introduce a young man (Arno Strine in *The Fermata*, Ben Willis in *Cashback*) with a simple job, who freezes time and undresses many women. Both Arno and Ben fall in love with one of the women they undress at work, they both tell this girl about their abilities, take them along in the frozen world, and experience true love. In both cases the frozen naked women are stripped of their agency, unknowingly taken as objects for visual stimulation and subjected to a controlling and curious way of looking. As such, both narratives are textbook examples of Laura Mulvey's "male gaze." In her feminist film theory, Mulvey comments on gender power asymmetry in film, in which the camera takes the position of the heterosexual male and objectifies woman as the one-to-be-looked-at. Through their pleasure in looking, we could argue, both Arno and Ben enter perversion.

However, there are two striking differences between *Cashback* and *The Fermata*. First of all, Ben *imagines* that time is frozen, whereas in Arno's case it "really happened" (Baker 91). Furthermore, whereas Ben undresses women and draws them, using them as muses for his artwork, Arno uses naked women for his own sexual stimulation, masturbating in front of them, breaking into their houses, spying on them while they masturbate, and gleefully ejaculating in their faces. We may not ardently denounce Ben's behavior at first glance because he glorifies his women. Meanwhile, Arno's sadistic control and disparagement were largely criticized in the media; "depending on which reviewer's censure one reads, [the novel was labelled as] disappointing, sophomoric, unforgivably sexist, or just plain vile" (Saltzman 85).

While Ben's actions seem considerably less abusive, I nonetheless feel much more sympathy towards Arno while "reading" both narrative texts. In this

¹ Ellis initially made *Cashback* as a short film in 2004. The short was awarded with 14 awards at international film festivals and expanded into a feature film with the same cast and crew in 2006.

essay, I will give four reasons for my different response. First of all, Arno makes better use of his narrative voice and position as focalizer in engaging with me and getting me to appreciate his vision and position. Ben's detached voice and resulting passiveness alienate me as viewer, especially when comparing both beginnings. Second, *The Fermata's* narrator pays specific attention to my position and needs as a reader, whereas the visual narrator in *Cashback* seems primarily busy with impressing through filmic excess. Third, Arno describes in explicit detail why he looks, how he looks, and what he thinks while he is looking, which ultimately relates to my own sexual fantasies. Meanwhile, the description in Ben's focalisation remains implicit and the auditive narrator's voice-over does not repair this. Finally, in *The Fermata*, Arno "unblushingly reveals" (Thompson 154) his personal sexual fantasies and is remarkably specific about their darker side. I experienced pleasure in reading the book through Arno's frankness, the openness about his sexual thrills, and the friction between his obvious appreciation of original language and the vulgar insertion of excessive details. The book is not acceptable by the norms of public sexual discourse; it crosses a boundary which triggers my thinking about my own position and sexuality. By that same measure, the film does not challenge; Ben does not dare to color outside the lines.

Structures of narration and focalization

As Mieke Bal explains about narrative texts, "the focalization has a strongly manipulative effect" (157). Focalization here refers to the question of who looks at what. This colors the story and determines which character should receive most attention and sympathy. She claims that "[o]n the grounds of distribution, for instance the fact that a character focalizes the first and/or last chapter, we label it the hero(ine) of the book" (Bal 152). Peter Verstraten agrees with her when he claims that "logically [the focalizing] character had a privileged position: we feel sympathy for his or her vision or situation" (90). Moreover, "[i]t is the narrative agent's manipulative narrative technique that determines to what extent we will be able to ascertain the logic of [character] behaviour" (Verstraten 32). Thus, narration, focalization, and distribution can influence how we, as readers, see a character and to what extent we feel sympathy.

The Fermata is Arno Strine's autobiography. It "serves as his confession, testament, diary, and instruction manual" (Saltzman 82). As such, he is the exclusive, perceptible character-bound narrator and character-bound focalizer of the narrative. In the first three chapters, he discusses his non-sexual use of the Fold (this is what Arno calls the frozen world). In doing so, he creates space to exhibit his personality: his emotive and original language use, his eye for detail,

his vision, memories, analyses, his pride in his work, his private doubts about his physical features, his pleasures, what he finds important, and what he does to live up to the expectations of others. Through these first three chapters, I start to appreciate him and engage with his train of thought. The fact that all the while he is sitting next to a frozen undressed woman whose pubic hair he strokes intermittently, is something I take for granted.

In one example, Arno discusses how he cares for his contact lenses, the apparatus that both facilitates and interferes with his obsessive gazing. The detail with which he describes his admiration for the lenses, the time he takes to give them the attention they deserve, how he really *sees* them, ultimately make me feel more sympathetic towards him:

I enjoyed the rituals of caring for them – caring for this pair of demanding twins that had to be bathed and changed constantly. I liked squirting the salt water on them, and holding one of them in an aqueous bead on the tip of my finger and admiring its Saarinenesque upcurve, and when I folded it in half and rubbed its slightly slimy surface against itself to break up the protein deposits, I often remembered the satisfactions of making omelettes in Teflon fry-pans. But though as a hobby they were rewarding, though I was as excited in opening the centrifugal spin-cleaning machine I ordered for them as I would have been if I had bought an automatic bread baker or a new kind of sexual utensil, they interfered with my appreciation of the world. I could see things through them, but I wasn't *pleased* to look at things. (Baker 7)

The narrative situation in *Cashback* is different. Focalization is shared between Ben, other characters, and the external focalizer. In the opening sequence of the film, we see in medium close ups how Ben's ex-girlfriend Suzy scolding him in slow motion for not making her happy. This is alternated with close ups of Ben's indifferent face. As Verstraten claims, "The medium close ups of [a] face are important to gain our willingness to identify with him. We need to attach ourselves to a character that functions as our stand-in in the story" (90). But Suzy's outburst interferes with my engagement with Ben's character. As this is the opening sequence, I question if he is worthy of it. Moreover, as he says himself, he lets it happen, "right in front of me," without trying to fix or explain anything (*Cashback* Feature). His general attitude in the film is passive; both him and the camera move in a slow pace. Ben seems to suffer life instead of manning

up and taking charge. On the visual track he is not the active male Hollywood hero that we have come to expect and are willing to engage with, nor does the audio track make up for this lack of assurance.

Ben mostly acts muted. His separate, somewhat monotonous voice-over explains what is happening and provides us with background information. The indirect connection between image and sound enhances Ben's passivity. It adds to a feeling of detachment, as if Ben is not really involved in the course of his life. Moreover, the voice-over does not share explicit traits of Ben's personality. He does not have a striking vision on life, himself, or the world around him, other than that "love is wrapped in beauty and hidden away between the seconds of your life" (*Cashback* Feature), which, as Scott Tobias contests, "sounds more profound than it becomes after a moment's reflection." Whereas Arno wonders, tries out theories, takes charge, Ben just waits for time to go by. This passivity overturns my willingness to sympathize with him, leaving more space to engage with the position of the women he is undressing, exposing the insurmountable question: Yes, but what if these girls do not *want* to be art?

Readership and filmic excess

You would think, if a person really could stop the world and get off, as I can, that it would occur to him fairly early on to stop the world in order to record with some care what it felt like to stop the world and get off, for the benefit of the curious. (Baker 14)

Both *Cashback* and *The Fermata* have perceptible narrators. However, I would argue that in the book the narrator seeks to build a relationship with his readers, whereas in the film, the visual narrator is essentially busy to impress us through filmic excess.

Arno is highly aware of his readers, both those of his autobiography (i.e., us) and of his custom written erotic stories (which he prefers to call "rot"). He understands that as readers, we are interested in grasping how his frozen world works. He tries to imagine our curiosity and addresses it, thereby making us part of his endeavors. He explains how molecules, gravity, electricity, and skin work in the Fold, and continuously adds small explanations in his stories between brackets, as he knows he is our eyes and ears in the frozen world. For example: "(The University of Chicago sticker on her rear windshield was above the Smith sticker, arguing for Smith's temporal priority)" (Baker 228).

His acknowledgement of my existence and my curiosity make me sympathetic towards Arno, and at the same time, the fantasy of (female) readership is his main source of stimulation: "I became interested in the idea of using the Fold to have a woman encounter my very own words. Too undisciplined to write simply for the pleasure of writing, I nonetheless felt able to write as long as it served some specific sexual end" (Baker 92). As John Schmidt correctly concludes, Arno's "voyeuristic impulses are nothing other than fantasies of readership" (43). He is passionately determined about making an impression with his words: "I wanted her to be holding and reading my home-grown smut so, so much! I so much wanted to have inspired a feeling of quickened curiosity in her" (Baker 143). His fantasy of my existence inspires Arno, he takes me into account, he wants to affect me as a reader, and in however a peculiar tone of voice he chooses to do that, this makes me appreciate him.

The visual narrator in *Cashback* primarily functions to show Ben's moderate fantasies. Presumably to spice up the visual track, the visual agent inserted considerable examples of what Verstraten calls "filmic excess." We see, for instance, quite a spectacular transition from a vertical payphone to a horizontal bed; we see a floating lamp, an imaginarily burning photograph, and several surprising transitions to locations of the past. As these shots are certain to impress me, they also take me out of the story. For a moment, I focus more on "wow, how did they do that" instead of sympathizing with Ben's feelings. As Verstraten explains, "filmic excess is created when the style becomes autoreferential to such an extent that it overloads the 'content'" (189). In this case, the filmic style "creates a buffer between the viewer and the emotions displayed on the screen" (Verstraten 193).

One particular visual trick that I could not appreciate as much was that of the digitally added pubic hair. As the 2006 feature film version of *Cashback* is an expansion of the 2004 short film, most shots of undressed women recur. And while they had no pubic hair in 2004, they did in 2006. Apparently, the physical features of the actresses' vaginas no longer corresponded with the visual narrator's concept of beauty. Certainly, the viewer can only notice this if (s)he has seen both versions. In my case, it took me out of the story and into an internal debate on why this floating pubic hair occurred and if it did anything for the women's attractiveness and/or agency. While Arno draws me in by anticipating to satisfy my needs, *Cashback's* visual tricks tend to keep me at a distance and frustrate my commitment towards the story.

Description, looking, and to-be-looked-at-ness

As Mieke Bal proclaims, "The image we receive of the object is determined by the focalizer. Conversely, the image a focalizer presents of an object says something about the focalizer itself" (153). What strikes me in *The Fermata* is that Arno is the master of looking. "Not only women, but colors, meat thermometers, hibernating toads, toggle switches, and tape guns receive his characteristically high-intensity assessment" (Saltzman 89). He does not only describe what he looks at, but all the more, he gives us an impression of *how* he looks, and what the looking brings him. In other words, his description is explicit. It comes as no surprise that Arno proclaims his "happiness [i]s optical" (Baker 120). Both the effort he invests in his looking at women, and the appreciation he feels through this detailed gaze in turn, work for my appreciation towards him.

While the book focuses on Arno's way of looking, the film places emphasis on the object of the gaze. Ben's looking is nondescript. As Verstraten explains, "[e]xplicit description can take place in literature unproblematically, but the expository nature of cinema causes filmic descriptions to remain implicit" (53). Cinema "reveals, but does not explicitly describe [...] except when voice-over is used" (Verstraten 52-53). When Ben stares at a bag of fallen green peas, we see this through his character-bound focalization, but we do not specifically get to know *how* he registers what he sees. His voice-over does not elaborate in depth. It explains: "My first year in art school was boring to say the least, but it helped me to appreciate the fundamentals of still life" (*Cashback* Feature). He then leaves me wondering what this appreciation entails. The same happens when he looks at a naked woman. His voice-over states: "I felt fascination and wonder at the beauty of her nakedness" (*Cashback* Feature). As he does not explain his thoughts further, I am left to determine for myself what the beauty of this woman's nakedness could mean to Ben. This brings me closer to questioning his way of looking than to my desire to be looked at by him. Again, a distance is created which disrupts my willingness to engage with Ben, while in Arno's case, I appreciate his triggering my erotic fantasies.

In *Cashback* (Feature), Ben's voice-over recounts that he "read once about a woman whose secret fantasy was to have an affair with an artist. She thought that he would really see her." This can be interpreted as a direct reference to *The Fermata*, where Arno explains that his ex-girlfriend Rhody's greatest fantasy was to be seen by a figurative painter: "he would really see her and know all that was to be known about the shape of her body – when she undressed for him there would be a thrilling completeness to her undressing. To nobody else would her physical self mean as much as it meant to his eye, and so her own nudity would

feel sexier with him than with anyone else" (156). It seems this woman's ultimate desire is to be desired. This resonates with Laura Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze in Hollywood cinema. She explains how men act and women appear; men look, women are stripped of their agency, objectified and subjected to a controlling way of looking.

In her response to Mulvey's male gaze, E. Ann Kaplan proclaims that "[o]ur positioning as 'to-be-looked-at,' as object of the gaze, has, through our positioning, come to be sexually pleasurable" (124). Even though "the evidence we have to go on is slim," it seems that "women's sexual fantasies would confirm the predominance of these positionings" (Kaplan 126). Herein lies an explanation for the thing I was hesitant to acknowledge. Despite my being influenced by Mulvey's theories on the male gaze, I am conditioned more by the object/subject structure of Western ideology. In other words, I cannot deny that Arno's way of looking triggers my sexual fantasies. I ultimately want to be looked at like this.

The pleasure of the text

As I acknowledged, I experienced a certain pleasure in reading *The Fermata*. This comes in part from Arno's way of looking, setting off my feminine desires, but there is more. Arno is surprisingly honest in exposing his own "contemptible" sexual fantasies. As reviewer Edward Champion contests: "What made *The Fermata* work so well was its remarkable willingness to be absolutely specific about the darker side of human consciousness." *The Fermata* makes the private public, which seems fair in light of Susan Sontag's assessment that "[e]veryone has felt (at least in fantasy) the erotic glamour of physical cruelty and an erotic lure in things that are vile and repulsive. These phenomena form part of the genuine spectrum of sexuality, and if they are not to be written off as mere neurotic aberrations, the picture looks different from the one promoted by enlightened public opinion" ("Pornographic" 222). Arno's experiences in themselves may not be as shocking as the critical reviewers who were quoted in the beginning of this essay contest. Instead, it seems to be his lack of self-censorship that they condemn. In my reading against the grain, it is exactly this uncut frankness which I appreciate in Arno. With his confessions, he might open up the debate for a more genuine and relatable public discourse on sexuality. And by doing that, I feel he opens up space for my own sexual fantasies.

As Arno explains, his writing has two sides. On the one hand, he is clearly intelligent and appreciative of originality in language. We read "pages and pages of lovingly detailed description, idiosyncratic wordplay, and long, carefully

constructed sentences" (Schmidt 42). This forms the backdrop for vulgar anal vibrator penetration and ejaculation in women's faces:

Basically I was feeling for the first time that heady paired combination of satisfactions that the sexual poseur can encounter at the outset of a new enterprise, as his long-neglected artistic ambition, however tentative or internally scoffed at – the wish to create something true and valuable and even perhaps in a tiny way beautiful – combines with basic grunting cuntlapping lust, the two emotions reinforcing each other, and making you, or rather me, feel almost insane with a soaringly doubled sense of mission. (Baker 124)

Roland Barthes explains the significance of such a contradiction for the pleasure of the text: "These two edges, the *compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so" (7). In order for a text to give us pleasure, it needs to resonate with a context, the (dark) space surrounding the "sterile text," which gives it its meaning and informs our possible discomfort: "this shadow is a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject: [...] subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro" (Barthes 32). As the excess in *The Fermata* does not relate to what I am supposed to enjoy, I felt embarrassment upon reading, while what I really wanted was to read more. Despite, or perhaps because, of its social deviance, with "my body as a site of transgression," I came close to experiencing what Barthes calls "(erotic) bliss" (48).

Such pleasure failed to occur when I watched the film. *Cashback* only shows Ben's *imagination*, which offered an opportunity to run wild. However, Ben does not engage us in any true, as Sontag would call them, "vile and repulsive" ("Pornographic" 222) fantasies. His imagination conforms to the rules of self-censorship, even if his world is caught up in a non-perceptible temporal freeze, which seems to represent "a hiatus in the operation of surveillance, and, concomitantly, in the necessity of self-surveillance" (Thompson 157). Ben has every opportunity to blow his mind and explore, cross, and challenge moral and sexual boundaries. But instead he sits and draws. As such, he does not affect me. There is no subject position that unsettles me and makes me want to rethink my position in culture. On the contrary, my sympathy is overturned, because he does not seize his opportunity to be excessive and thus signify my pleasure.

Conclusion

Both *The Fermata* and *Cashback* relate the story of a young man who freezes time to undress women. Both men try to make a case for the moral soundness of their voyeuristic tendencies, but neither of them is very convincing. The politically correct reading position seems obvious. Following Laura Mulvey, we should condemn both narrative texts for objectifying women and stripping them of their agency. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the two texts: the film's protagonist Ben seems to glorify his naked women by translating them into artworks, while the book's voyeur Arno ultimately violates his women through stalking, spying, and ejaculating over their unknowing bodies. Reviewers thus have their reasons to condemn Arno for being "sophomoric" and "just plain vile" (Saltzman 85). Based on their actions, it would make sense to assume that I would feel more appreciation towards Ben than towards Arno upon "reading" both narrative texts. Nonetheless, my experience was the opposite. In this essay I made a case for my sympathy towards Arno and my unwillingness to engage with Ben based on principles of narratology and visual pleasure. My argumentation was four-fold.

First of all, narration and focalization stayed with Arno at all times, while in Ben's case it was often external. This had significant consequences for my appreciation and engagement, especially concerning both opening sequences. Second, Arno revealed remarkable consideration for my position as reader, while *Cashback's* narrator was essentially busy impressing me through "filmic excess." Third, Arno revealed a way of looking that ultimately served my sexual fantasies. In Ben's case, focalization remained implicit. The auditive narrator had an opportunity to make the filmic descriptions explicit, but did not do so. Finally, Arno was remarkably frank about the excesses of his sexual fantasies. He seized the opportunity the frozen world gave him to forget about self-censorship, challenge sexual morale, and share private insights, thereby triggering debate on sexual discourse. Ben did not dare to commit to any fantasies and with that lost my affect.

In this essay, I tried to approach *The Fermata* and *Cashback* with both critical assessment and empathetic identification. I used narratological tools to interpret my personal reading experience, and by making a case for sympathy towards Arno, I marked myself as a certain kind of reader. Through my analysis, I revealed a part of my sexuality that I was hesitant to acknowledge as it may be culturally frowned upon. However, my experience should not be written off as a "neurotic aberration." Following Susan Sontag, it would be of value to rethink the sexual discourse that "enlightened public opinion" ("Classical") upholds.

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Traditions Are Meant to Be Broken? A Review of the *On the Move* Exhibition

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On the Move: Storytelling in Contemporary Photography and Graphic Design, Exhibition, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 29 Aug. 2014 – 22 Feb. 2015.

At first sight, photography and graphic design seem two disciplines that do not have much in common, barring their dependency on visual perception. Traditionally, photography, without taking away from its value, registers and passively displays our perceived reality. It derives its *raison d'être* from the (however recent) past, uncovering already existing but previously unknown narratives. Graphic design on the other hand actively manipulates this reality by creating new forms and shapes, allowing them to establish entirely new narratives on their own account. Both mediums alter the current course of events, but do this in an intrinsically different manner.

But where once the two disciplines were strictly separated, they have become more and more intertwined, especially after entering the digital age. It is the latest produce of this disciplinary overlap that is the subject of the 2014/2015 *On the Move: Storytelling in Contemporary Photography and Graphic Design* exhibition curated by the Stedelijk Museum's curator Carolien Glazenburg (graphic design), junior curator Anne Ruygt, and photography curator Hripsimé Visser. They were part of a jury further consisting of Ad van Denderen, Karin Krijgsman, and Dimitri van Nieuwenhuizen, which selected twenty-eight projects from a total of 471 international submissions that were sent in after the Stedelijk Museum made an open call. It is the latest instalment of the Stedelijk Museum's biennial Proposals for Municipal Art Acquisitions.

Demonstrating a paradigm shift in the relationship between photography and graphic design, *On the Move* invites viewers to explore new constructs of narrativity with unprecedented forms of collaboration between the two

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disciplines. The Kuhnian term “paradigm shift” might have a pretentious ring to it, but in this case it applies because both photography and graphic design have changed fundamentally. The once evident gap between analogue (photography) and digital (more commonly associated with graphic design back in the 1990s) has long since been bridged; the lines between the (analogue) physical and the digital have blurred, forming “phygital” multimediality.

In 1967 already the late media guru Marshall McLuhan wrote that “[w]hen two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result” (McLuhan and Fiore 10). *On the Move* certainly presents some startling discoveries, but not necessarily for the good. While the exhibition houses several top quality pieces – Blokland’s *Reproduction of Family Part 4: Mother’s History*, Steketee and Blankevoorts’ *Love Radio*, and Van Lohuizen’s *Vía PanAm* stand out in their creative cross-over work – other pieces on display seem to miss the exhibition’s point: to show innovative products, expressed in whatever way, that spring from *collaboration* between photography and graphic design.

Take, for instance, the *Between Screens* photo series by Van Breugel and Mudde. However intriguing and illustrative of a curious and widespread phenomenon (tourists taking pictures of artworks even though accurate reproductions can easily be found online), the collaborative link with graphic design is missing. Bluntly put, they took pictures of people taking pictures – where is the graphic design element in this production? Surely the age-old Droste effect in these photos does not account for it? The same goes for *Circling Around To Sang* by Goslinga; in fact it is a very traditional photo series of portraits of ordinary citizens on the street, made with Lee To Sang’s old camera. Stig’s semi-futuristic *Cauchy Horizons* series is another example. It seems strange for an exhibition that aims, as mentioned in the catalogue by director Beatrix Ruf, to show “works combining photography with graphic design” (Ruygt and Van Bracht 5) to display works that leave out the latter entirely.

In the catalogue’s introduction Ruygt provides a historical background for the exhibition. Curiously enough this background only highlights Dutch developments of interconnectivity between photography and graphic design, while the exhibition proudly presents work from abroad as well (Ősz is Hungarian, Peitersen is Danish, Egger and Anhalt are German, et cetera). In what context, then, should these foreign works be seen? Surely not all artists were aware of the Dutch canon at the time of conceiving? What message does this send to visitors from abroad? Many more stories are left untold. It is a shame that, despite the lovely and informative one-minute films on the Stedelijk’s website, context seems

absent at first sight. QR codes (linking to these films) are easy to overlook, even when visiting a multimedia experience such as this. Another pity: the escalator that would have shown *Ruins in Reverse*, a sci-fi inspired installation by Broersen and Lukács, was blocked due to the preparations for the museum's next high-calibre exhibition, Ed Atkins' *Recent Ouija*.

As a whole, *On the Move* feels simultaneously scattered and cluttered. The exhibition rooms are filled to the brim, seemingly to provide the guests as much bang for their buck as possible. At the same time the subject matter of the exhibition ranges wildly, from the light-hearted (Niekus' *REPORT*), to the philosophically deep (Blokland's work mentioned above), to politically charged (Peitersen's *Safe Distance*) and everything in between. This lack of focus inherently reinforces a feeling of perplexity and detachment. This is regrettable, because the individual quality of the displayed works does justify the purchase of an entrance ticket.

Works cited

- McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. 1967. Berkeley: Gingko, 2001. Print.
- Ruygt, Anne, and Marie-Claire van Bracht, eds. *On the Move: Storytelling in Contemporary Photography and Graphic Design*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2014. Print.

Ravens and Emperor

LÉO MASCIARELLI*

Orange desert

The Emperor called and they heard him. Beyond their vault, beyond their grave, the call was powerful enough to shake their limbs and fill their empty lungs with the Emperor's breath. They were alive once. They died once. The Emperor decides. Now is the time to crawl out of the pit they were trapped in, and walk under burning suns. Darkness and rigidity need to disappear from their minds and bodies. They are starving, cold, weak, furious and terrified. They want to exit this underworld where they do no longer belong. The struggle to reach warm, warm suns destroys some jaws, claws and mindless resolutions. Some turn into dust again, but those who come after fanatically keep trying to leave this frozen hell. Their minds are dead and only the call resonates within their skulls. They are not even able to understand the meaning of it, but it is their duty to rise up again and walk under the burning light. The first one to reach the surface is annihilated by the Great Sun, the hottest one. Many of them encounter the same fate and return to dust and sand. No one will ever remember them, not even the parched, parched wind which tries to force them all to lie down for eternity again. It is too late, they are now wide awake. All suns will soon be in the dark red sky, moving through patterns the Emperor drew for them long ago. They were alive once. They died once. They are never the ones to choose their own fate.

The desert is tremendously silent. It will test their strength, their inner determination to join the Emperor. It is a trial for those who wish to stop being dead. Monstrosity lies beneath the sand and above the sky. It will come to them and they will have to face it. They have learned this since their deaths, when they were part of the Monstrosity. They are not monsters anymore but undead. This is how the Great Emperor named them a long time ago, when he put them inside the sand. Sleep, sleep, eat the sand and drink the shadow, die and dream, pray and starve, because you are mine and you must feel blessed for being cursed, oh my undying and unyielding soldiers. After those words, they fell into the ground

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for half an infinity. The underground was freezing darkness; the ground is a blazing world. They have to fight off hungry monsters and eat them to survive. Death blessed the flesh, said the Great Emperor. Kill and burn and devour the monsters of the desert. None shall remain on the surface but them, the glorious and cursed emperor's undead. They remove the flesh from the disgusting desert's monsters, they pierce eyeballs with their sharp claws and they let the colorless blood be purified through the sand. Unfaithful monsters do not deserve to hear the Great Emperor. They finally reach the frontier of the desert. It is still a blazing world but without sand. A dark green ocean joins the dark red sky. There is earth somewhere, but it is too far to see. The Great Emperor left them some small boats and it is their first quest to reach The Great Pole in the Middle of the Sea.

I could not sleep last night. The silence was too noisy, and my head was full of mindless doubts. Inside the darkness, silence becomes stressful and treacherous with all its whispers. I cannot understand any of those murmurs, although one was oddly repeating itself through the night, urging me to stay awake. A meaningless sound with a meaningful message. I am awake and the day starts. I long for the night to come back and allow me to rest. The taste of tiredness is inside my mouth, a weird mix of dense saliva, burned taste buds and bitterness. I know I will not be able to dispose of it for today. Another day is starting and I know how pointless it will be. My brain cannot work properly, I feel like he is yelling and swearing at me for not leaving him time to do his work. I try to laugh at this thought, but I cannot actually find anything to laugh at. I look at myself in the mirror, with a forced smile on my face and I find it rather scary. I am awake and I feel dead inside. The sun outside seems cold; so cold that it is even freezing time. Light is heavy, and nothing, especially not me, will move today.

I have had strange dreams lately, filled with violence and uncanny places. And there are always, always those shadows lurking in the corner of my eyes, waiting for me to look at them, to behold them and then... I usually wake up when I notice them, when we finally stare at each other and I see that their eyes are darker than the shadows surrounding us, but I can see them smiling at me. It is strange how dreams work. I wake up when I meet their eyes, but I know they have this twisted smile. The more they smile the less bright the scene. As if they were breathing light and exhaling shadows. I have already wasted too much time thinking about those dreams. So I go outside. The sun is cold but shiny. I breathe once, twice, filling my lungs with air and light. Someone once said that when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you. I have no idea who they

were but they must have had bad dreams as well. I am breathing light and I pray not to ever see shadows lurking out of my nostrils; or a monster.

Night is near when they start sailing. If they could experience fear, many of them would be terrified. But they cannot, because the Emperor had forbidden them to feel anything other than his warmth, his exquisite wrath. A few are starving again and they dive inside the ocean, hoping to catch some aquatic creatures. They never reach the surface again, and distant and distorted laughs coming from underwater are all that remain. Aquatic creatures might have eaten them. The Great Pole in the Middle of the Sea is close. It is singing from under the abyss, singing from above infinite skies. Boats are shaking, rumbling and thrilling in an unsynchronized dance. The Great Pole in the Middle of the Sea says "I hate the Great Emperor, glory to the Great Emperor, he is the savior of my world and he will destroy everything that surrounds him. Be afraid, countless undead, you are numerous, but it is not enough for his will. You are little to him. A beautiful kite is waiting for those who long for freedom and all you have to do is to climb. Leave the earth, leave the ground, go deeper or higher: do not follow the Great Emperor." They are confused by this song and they do not know if they should listen to it or not. They feel the air's vibration and everything is dissonant. Many jump on the pole in order to reach freedom, but the pole vibrates more and more and they lose their skin, their teeth and then disappear. Hence, it is better to ignore The Great Pole in the Middle of the Sea and leave it alone with its weird talks. They decide that no one should ever listen to anyone but the Great Emperor. They are awake for the second time and they burn the ignominious pole which was the purpose of their first quest.

Days of traveling are uncountable on the sea, because the Great Emperor's power seems weaker. Some say that the pole should have never ever been destroyed and that losing their way and time is their punishment. Some listen. Some do not. But everyone agrees that days and nights indeed have various lengths each time. They starve. They weep. They annihilate the weakest. Those who survive develop skills and tactics. Some can federate a multitude. Some can name things precisely and explain them to others. All can destroy everything on their path that was, is, or will be alive. After some time however, nights and days finally recover their usual length. They know that their sailing is over and so does the Great Emperor. He finally talks to them again and he exhorts them to cross mountains as their final task. "After which", he says, "You will feast for eons in the city of paradise where I will personally welcome you. You will never starve or suffer again. You will be the most glorious warriors this world

has ever seen, and the names of your opponents will be forgotten for eternity. None will ever go as far as you will, oh my brilliant soldiers. You are made to cancel this world and assist me in creating the next. Leave those boats, destroy the ocean, and head beyond the Blue Mountain." They obey him, and soon the ocean is no more. Dry lands take its place, and those who had sunk emerge again from the ground. They are the unbound rage of The Great Emperor, and they walk towards the Blue Mountain while the sky turns an even darker red.

Hallucination

Last night's dream was rather disturbing. There was this huge beast, attacked and turned blind by an army of toothy shadows. It occupies my mind all day long, until I finally head out at dusk to drink something. This is the moment when someone approaches me and asks me if I want to join the council of ravens, but all I want is a drink.

The disturber says that "once upon many times, ravens from all worlds gathered every ten years. They gathered in the mistiest forest of that time, preferably next to the cliff with high pines and cold weather. On the sixth day of the week, to be precise. Once they are all there, the oldest, also known as the Raven of Memories, starts singing. The others join in. It is not a nice song at all, they clash their beaks and they scrape their talons against trees. It lasts for days, sometimes months. They sing and wait for the arrival of the Ageless Newborn, who will be the judge and executioner of every decision made at the council. Ravens argue for defending worlds and their inner knowledge, and if everything is still working so far, it is partly because of them. They always find solutions for everything. For instance, they had to deal with the Redheaded Catman and they managed to seal him in for some time. Rumors said, however, that evil cannot be sealed."

This is how this strange story ends. I suggest for next time an orange rabbit wanting to destroy universes. The storyteller does not laugh and mumbles something before rushing out.

I go back to my place, lie down and sleep. I see the world eaten by burning shadows. The spirit of the Redheaded Catman still surrounds us. He has plans for everything, and he shares them with me. Unfortunately, a vibrating sound does not allow me to understand his words and I wake up because of some croaks from outside. I will go to the forest today and it will have the highest pines one could possibly imagine.

I am inside the forest and it is cold, misty and scary. I do not remember why I chose to be here, except to cure boredom and replay this stupid tale. I

guess I am lost now. A humming sound is rising from the ground and I am afraid of going further, or even to move anywhere. I am scared, lost and powerless. I eat one root to calm down and prevent a panic attack. Everything turns quiet, I start walking again and I reach the middle of the forest, as indicated by the flashing billboard that says "Welcome to the middle of the forest", while pointing down to a sewer entrance. I have no idea what can be found below, but it seems that everything was created around this point: me, the forest, the humming sound in the air and those countless invisible eyes that spy on me. Each time I try to look at them, those eyes disappear, even if I know they are here but avoiding me. Am I the monster no one should gaze into? Or is it them? I choose for the former but it is too late, our eyes meet. I scream, causing the pines to break down around me. I collapse and I hope no monsters will devour me.

I wake up at my place a few days later. My head feels like a broken bell, creating dissonance even after the smallest movement. My arms are itchy and I understand why: one of them has lost its color and has turned grey. In some places chunks of dead skin are missing. I am not sure if this is the reality or one of the root's side effects. I touch it but there is no life in this arm anymore. Asking it to move feels as if I am using an inanimate tool. I go outside, but I have to protect and hide my freshly dead limb. I would never have expected my arm to be that heavy. Each step makes me feel its dead weight, grasping my shoulder and dragging me to the ground. Walking is painful. Standing straight is painful. Each one of my muscles is slowly dying, one after the other. Half of my torso, my right leg, and four fingers of my other arm are useless at the end of the day. I examine my dead parts and try to stimulate them. I realize it is hopeless when I see one of my toes on the carpet. My body is decaying and I cannot stop it. I think my brain will follow soon. I look in the mirror, but my reflection is horrible; a gray rotting body surmounted by a crimson head. My nostrils, ears, eyes and mouth are full of blood, saliva, mucus and brain, but I cannot perceive anything. My last thought is of the Redheaded Catman, and I would have laughed if that were possible. I guess you need a brain for that. The world disappears.

Mountain

The Mountains are gigantic, full of those cold and unstable stones, which could fall and put them to sleep once more. But those who can think lead the way, and they weave ropes which can resist the sharpest claws. They dig their way through mountains and canyons, which are sometimes moving, as if something is alive deep inside. They walk for a countless amount of time and none disappear. Some of them even affirm that they are born from the mountain's flank. They arrive at

the top of the highest mountain and a viscous emerald lake is beneath them. As one, they all jump in and that suddenly awakes the Blue Mountain. It is hurt and it yells from pain while crying and smashing. They cannot understand what the Blue Mountain utters to them, everything is loud and that makes them even more furious. The Blue Mountain cannot stop its noises. The emerald lake is leaking and this begins to wash them back down the mountain. They climb higher so they can empty the emerald lake, which should bring back the stillness of the mountain. It resists and tries to protect the lake, but nothing can resist their strength. They pierce through every obstacle the crying mountain presents them; they dive inside the lake, and when they reach its bottom, carve a tunnel through the living stones. Everything stops moving and the yelling stops. Far below them, under the clouds, they can finally see the Magnificent Citadel of the Great Emperor. The end of their journey is near. They shout and dance on the dying hill before gliding down to the city.

I could not sleep last night. Something was disturbing me, as if a strange sound was trapped in my head. This day will be pointless anyway and I decide to directly go drink something in the local pub. Transport noises cannot completely hide the buzzing sound within my skull. I reach the pub and order the painkiller's liquor, which could put a raging beast to sleep. This is perfect for my migraine, now coupled with nausea. I pass out for a couple of hours until someone violently shakes my shoulder, yelling nonsense about ravens. They tell me I have to go to the forest and find the tomb before the end of the day. I roar at both the complete absence of a forest nearby and the absurdity and stupidity of the words. I finish the painkiller's liquor to calm my wrath and inexplicably wake up in a cold and misty forest. I curse the obnoxious one that put me here, the undrinkable liquor I finished earlier, and the walking I will have to do before reaching something familiar. After walking aimlessly for an unknown amount of time, I reach a sewer entrance. It brings back a funny *déjà vu* sensation and I choose to open it. As soon as the hole is revealed, threatening croaks warn me of my mistake and predict my near death. Mighty winds destroy pines around me, and one of them falls on my torso and breaks my ribs. I cannot breathe that well, but I am still alive. A few days pass and my whole body is numb. I am starving, thirsty, and hallucinating because of the pain. Ravens try to convince me that it is for the good cause. That all of this already happened before, had, and will have to happen in an endless loop to save worlds. One of the ravens points out the increasing difficulty of chasing me from one universe to another. And I remember my previous death, when I turned into a walking cadaver. I was decapitated by a wheelchair a couple of deaths before that. And I remember each time I died, all

painful and ridiculous. I curse those disgusting and pompous ravens in an unknown language and they disappear. I die again.

I wake up fully recovered. I am strapped to a table and one gigantic raven approaches. It presents itself as the Ageless Newborn and proposes a pact: I will be immortal if I agree to stay in this dimension forever. If I refuse, ravens will hunt me, torture me and kill me. I ask their reason for murdering me so many times, but I receive no answers. The Ageless Newborn elusively states that it is for the greater good. I refuse this unfair pact and the raven plunges its sharp beak into my head, which explodes. I reach consciousness attached to a pole in the middle of a room, and I get beaten for an endless time. I can feel the pole vibrating on my back with each blow. I curse the ravens before dying once more.

Killing me becomes a ritual and a very grim spectacle. More and more ravens are coming to see my suffering and final trespass. The worst part is their happiness at the end. I do not know how long it takes me between each massacre to resurrect, but it seems that they always use a new way to destroy me. I guess I am here until I reach my final death. One time, however, the Ageless Newborn grants me a private discussion. Now they have me, it explains, they will never release me ever again. The raven seems a bit tense and anxious, and I ask why. It croaks and looks at me with one of its eyes. "We will never release you", it says, "Because you might disturb us. I will not explain everything to you in detail, because you are an ignorant fool and it is a matter of belief, but here is one reason: when people die, some of them are reincarnated as a newborn. Some do not, and their life energy, or soul or whatever your filthy brain understands of it, reaches this place, where it sleeps and purifies itself before being reused for another new being. You, on the other hand, seem to possess a tenacious soul. You do not reincarnate. You do not let your soul be reused nor purified. You keep foolishly jumping to another dimension every time you are supposed to die. We are tracking you because we suspect you are, or were, the so-called immortal Crimson Emperor. You might have heard of the Redheaded Catman no? We think that was you. Or part of you. What we know for sure is that it was working for the Crimson Emperor, and we had to take care of it. And then you appeared. Your first death was fairly stupid, but you were alive on the morrow, with no remaining memories of the previous day. We acknowledged you on your sixth death, and since then, we... created an accident to neutralize you. But you always appeared somewhere else again and this is both frustrating and worrying. We cannot allow the Crimson Emperor to come back. Some monstrous entities are coming, and we suspect they are coming after you. They appeared the day you heard about us. Do you remember? A thousand lives ago at least. But now they have crossed

multiple dimensions, and they will eventually reach this one. Let me ask you one more time: do you want to cooperate and let us protect you from those monsters? Or shall we continue to delve into your soul until you have no undestroyed fragment of it? It does not matter if you change dimension after you die in here. This place is the backstage of every existing and possible universe. We can keep on murdering you forever here. So, answer me: what do you choose?"

Once they reach the city's doors, a feathered one interferes and tries to block them. It is foolish to be in their way and they eat it. In an instant they take back their beloved and Magnificent Citadel from those ugly feathered beings. Now they must free the Emperor, and give him back his lives, give him their deaths. They run towards each infinite room, but the Emperor appears to be nowhere. The urge to find him is strong among them and they plunge into an indescribable frenzy. Windows explode, walls are broken, feathered ones are devoured, paintings are burned. Realities start to melt under their sheer craziness, but they can finally see the Emperor, along with someone else. They shriek, yell and cry from joy. Finally! The endless army of toothy shadows reaches the emperor, kills the big feathered one, and kneels down. Sound disappears. Light disappears. There is only this dark amount of endless life in front of the Emperor who owns everything. He opens his mouth, and welcomes them inside his body. They were dead, and he was alive. The Emperor demands their deaths and they give them back to him along with their lives, their hopes, their strengths. Everything stops. The Emperor has eaten everything inside every universe. Darkness is everywhere and now, we can die. Light had disappeared forever and here we thrived. There is a smile, after which universes collapse.

Three Stages of Love

CHARLOTTE GIJZEN*

Denial

I am more than you can see,
Much more than you are able
to touch,

While I walk beside you
My mind wanders
Like a cloud,
Or a hawk
In search of prey,

I am chasing thoughts,
Travelling from one world
To the next,
In the instant
Of a single step,

Look at me
But do not judge,
Unless I speak
Do not judge,

For what you see
It is not me

Bargaining

Will you know me,
See me,
For what I am

Look behind my eyes,
Unravel me

My soul laid bare
For you,
In all its deformity

Do not recoil,
Lover,
Demons dwell in us all

Mine play well
With yours

Acceptance

Endless night of
the darkest kind,
With you in my veins
as the blackest of liquid
miseries,

I want you no more than
the scars in my mind
and on my arm,

Yet here we still are,
Me no more me than
any stranger's shadow,

And you no more human
than the demons
that caused these scars

Grant me death then,
For the life of me
I will not save myself,
Drunk as I am on this torture
by your hand

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