

The Achievement of Female Presence on Film

A thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirement of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis examines the different ways films have explored female presence as a narrative and stylistic concern. The role of female presence in the creation of film meaning has often been reductively minimised or altogether neglected within many theoretical approaches to cinema. Depictions of female characters—especially those found in Hollywood films—have been viewed by feminist critics only in terms of the manifestation of sexist ideological principles, whilst more recently, ‘affective’ film theorists have reduced the role of presence to a simple question of fluctuating physical intensity. This thesis contests these limiting and monolithic understandings of the function of female presence by demonstrating how films have produced complex and diverse meanings through their portrayals of women characters. Closely analysing films by six directors from various styles of cinema, including examples from Classic Hollywood film and more experimental or avant-garde works, the thesis contends that films can raise the question of the condition of a female character’s presence as a vital component of meaning. It illuminates how the subject of female presence is advanced, moment-to-moment, as a crucial element in the achievement of these films’ intricately wrought dramas. The thesis therefore shows that female film presence is neither simply a symptom of ideology, nor a vehicle for varying degrees of affective intensity. Rather, it is something which is actively at stake in the drama and the design of films.

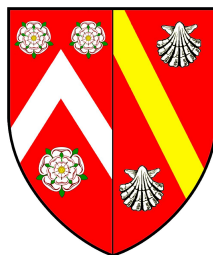
Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my supervisor, Andrew Klevan, who has provided invaluable guidance and encouragement throughout these past years. I would also like to thank the AHRC for their scholarship. This project would not have been possible without their financial support.

I'm grateful to Wadham College for being Wadham.
I have enjoyed my time there more than I can say.

Thanks to Ella Alexander, Ros Holmes, Bryn Harris, Knut Aukland, Alex Taylor, and Rowan Tomlinson for their friendship and for helping to keep my chin up in the home stretch and to Rhiannon Thompson for her attention to detail in the final few weeks.

This thesis is dedicated to my tolerant parents.



Contents

I Introduction: The Achievement of Female Presence on Film

This thesis examines the different ways films have explored the subject of female presence. The status of a female character's presence is a permanently engaged feature of their formal construction and their thematic preoccupations. Sometimes residing effortlessly within fictional and aesthetic environments, sometimes standing out, or sometimes appearing obscure within them, the expressive particularity of the portrayal of female characters can be a central aesthetic strategy for films. Analysing examples by six directors, ranging from Classic Hollywood film to more avant-garde work, this thesis aims to demonstrate how female presence can function positively, as a fount and instrument of meaning in a variety of different styles of filmmaking.

Using the term 'presence', the approach of the thesis will differ from prominent critical understandings of the role of women on film. These other theoretical perspectives have often associated female characters (especially those found in Hollywood film) with the limiting concepts of 'absence' or 'lack', significant only in terms of their invocation of male psychological projects and repressive sexist ideologies. This thesis argues that, contrary to these restrictive circumscriptions, films may produce diversity and complexity of meaning through the exploration of the status of a female character's presence, and that these meanings are not limited to articulations of culturally defined gender roles or ideology.

Rather, the films discussed by this thesis all actively raise the issue of a female character's presence as a subject for narrative exploration and develop it as a central concern of their formal compositions. These films are all structured around the examination of a woman's position within her fictional world, both in terms of how she presents herself and how she may be perceived or misperceived within that context. Their narrative dramas of recognition are further progressed through a stylistic emphasis on the expressive particularity of a female character's presence on screen. The films' specific and varied thematic explorations are achieved through their meaningful narrative and aesthetic delineation of the condition of a female character's presence.

Focusing on the idea of presence, as opposed to overlapping notions of 'per-

formance' or the 'body', the thesis strives to take into account the numerous stylistic elements that contribute to a film's overall presentation of a character. These include notions of performers' personas, physical performance and formal elements such as *mise-en-scène* and montage. Rather than singling out one of these aspects for attention, the thesis, through close analysis, reveals the detail of how films productively relate them to one another in their exploration of a character.

The thesis concentrates on the question of *female* presence, not only because the subject has been of such great significance for many different types of filmmaking, but also because the role of women characters in creating meaning has been so routinely reduced or neglected by other critics working on either gender or the body and film. It sets out to show how female film characters have often been reductively harnessed to generalised theoretical claims which look to reduce their significance to the same sets of pre-conceived ideas. The monolithic nature of these dominant theoretical approaches forces writers into limiting assessments of female presence, as their determinate interpretive frameworks cannot be adjusted to account for the variety and complexity found in films such as those forming the corpus of this thesis. The density and diversity of meaning achieved within these films cannot be adequately described through universalising claims for the overarching significance of particular representational, ideological or ontological paradigms. Rather, it can only be distilled by accounting for the films' moment-to-moment executions of their subject matter, allowing the intricacy of their thematic developments to come to light. Consequently, the thesis adopts a detailed and descriptive approach to film analysis.

The selection of films discussed by the thesis is not intended to be an exhaustive account of works exhibiting this particular subject; the dramatic exploration of female presence is a feature of a vast number of films, and a feature of many different genres. The prevalence of the concern is illustrated by the stylistic and contextual diversity of the films examined in the chapters. However, the thesis does contend that these films constitute some of the most richly achieved examples of this thematic concern. Furthermore, by choosing from classical narrative film, as well as more experimental styles, it becomes apparent that provocative and detailed treatments of this subject are possible in any approach to filmmaking. The thesis argues that, in spite of many critics' assertions to the contrary, complex and revealing depictions of female characters may be found in popular, as well as avant-garde, films. It aims to account for the complexity and variety with which films have considered the subject of female presence, and to show how they have drawn a wide array of

meanings from their invocations of the subject. The thesis strives to reveal the productive and variable role played by female presence in the creation and expression of a film's significance.

In order to contextualise the particular examinations of female presence, the thesis will engage with a wealth of other academic discussions of women and presence on film. The first chapter will demonstrate how existing approaches have critically neglected or limited the question of female presence through the determinism of their theoretical perspectives, repeatedly restricting its expressive role within a film's fiction. In addition to addressing influential and well-known psychoanalytic works by critics such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane and Tania Modleski, more recent contributions by feminist critics Caroline Bainbridge, Lucy Bolton and Catherine Constable are also explored. These later theorists have viewed the filmic articulation of a specifically feminine form of subjectivity as a source of potential disruption for the ideological conservatism of narrative film. However, the chapter will argue that these writers, along with their psychoanalytic forbears, reduce the role of women on film to a question of ideological positioning, which they may either reinforce or subvert. The significance of female presence is circumscribed within the level of the film's political rhetoric, intentional or otherwise. Conversely, this thesis aims to show how it may be developed as an integral part of a film's construction, with its meaning varying according to a particular film's specific set of concerns.

The first chapter also addresses recent work by scholars who have been at pains to counter this abstracting tendency within theory by stressing the *affective* dimension of film presence. While they do not always specifically address women, these critics offer novel accounts of how *bodily* presence operates in film expression. However, the chapter will show that by over-emphasising the affective dimensions of bodies, these accounts elide questions of how physical presence can be stylistically *mediated*, and how this process of expressive negotiation may be of vital importance to a film's narrative and thematic dimensions.

In order to counter the theoretical tendency to generalise around the significance of women and presence on film, the thesis engages closely with the films' moment-to-moment depictions of their female characters. By carefully tracking the unfolding expressive development of a character, this thesis shows how female film presence is continuously and variously advanced as a critical element of drama. It aims to show how the form and style of the films manages to vary and nuance meaning, rather than arguing for a film's overall significance in the abstract.

Following the first chapter's detailed exploration of the extensive critical background to the discussion of representations of women on film, each subsequent chapter considers a particular question of female presence posed by a film or films, and traces how this is developed. The second chapter analyses three films by Josef von Sternberg starring Marlene Dietrich, exploring the idea of 'Artifice' in their presentations of Dietrich's heroines. It advances the claim that in *Morocco* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *Blonde Venus* (1932), Dietrich's highly wrought and glamorous presence creates tensions around the perjorative misjudgments of her characters' depth and sincerity. Other characters are unable to engage with her on any level other than that of her overpoweringly glamorous appearance. The three films simultaneously invite the viewer to comprehend these misinterpretations by offering more complex gradation of her characters.

This chapter also explores the extensive critical discourse surrounding the films in order to show how writers have similarly misread Dietrich's characters. These critics emphasise the iconic metafictional aspects of *Dietrich's* persona, and fail to address how the individual films have meaningfully delineated her specific characters. Appearing as an instance of the fetishisation of the female body in works by Laura Mulvey and others, previous analyses have abstracted Dietrich's presence by reading her symptomatically as a product of the ideological conditions of the films' production. Other writers have focused on the decorative manifestation of Sternberg's distinctive and stylised *mise-en-scène*. For these writers, the apparent artifice of Dietrich's presence signals her status as an exclusively rhetorical or decorative device, but this chapter argues that it is a principal feature of the particular films' narrative concerns and dramatic subject matter.

In the third chapter, the film discussed is Mitchell Leisen's 1939 comedy *Midnight*, which explores ideas of artifice and surface in a different, reflexively comic light. The superficial dimension of Claudette Colbert's presence is developed as the most complex element of her character and the chief engine of the film's comedy. Eve Peabody's presence is characterised by a continual struggle to assimilate within a capricious and changing environment. The film's narrative structure and comedic effects are achieved through her character's playful efforts to repress the singularity of her presence coupled with the dissonant informality of her American persona within a starchily aristocratic European milieu. This process of continual self-reinvention and assimilation is made all the more apparent due to the almost complete absence of any history for the character beyond her friable and improvised

identity. The chapter will argue that *Midnight* foregrounds the transient vulnerability of Colbert's presence, as her character advances exclusively through the depiction of her performative responses to her environment and situation. Devoid of sustained character development, the film's comedy and tension are created instead through the portrayal of her struggle to control the perception of others, as she battles to incorporate layer after layer of increasingly elaborate fiction. While the film has previously been discussed in terms of an aesthetic of 'camp', characterised by a strong emphasis on decor and costume, this chapter suggests that the radical evacuation of stable, innate meanings and identities extends more deeply to the film's depiction of its central character.

The film explored in the following chapter, 'Projection', inverts this capacity for responsive and playful assimilation. It argues that Marylee Hadley's hyperbolic presence in Douglas Sirk's 1956 film *Written on the Wind* expresses her struggle to inhabit the world around her, due to her alienated psychological state. This chapter argues that her potent physicality and vivid appearance in the film are expressions of her character's compulsive desire to provoke recognition. However, her repeated struggle to forcibly project herself into the world around her communicates her profound alienation from it. The film draws on *mise-en-scène* and montage to visually and rhythmically estrange Marylee from her environments. This reading is contrasted with those offered by psychoanalytic feminist critics who argue that the overblown style of melodrama, typified by Marylee's presence, marks the films as unattainable fantasies, implying that female desire is always in 'excess' and that female subjectivity is un-representable within ideologically normative paradigms of Hollywood film. This is compared with Elena Del Rio's more recent reading of the film, which claims that the corporeal hyperbole of Malone's performance operates as a destabilising force for critique within the otherwise conservative ideological context of the film. This chapter, however, will argue that her character's psychological instability is not demonstrative of the failure of female subjectivity within Hollywood films more generally, nor does it manifest an accidental subversiveness. Rather, it depicts her character's exclusion and alienation from the world around her.

The following chapter, 'Evasion', addresses films with a similar interest in depicting individuals characterised by psychological displacement. The portrayals of the female protagonists in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's BRD Trilogy explore the evasion of traumatic or shocking experiences through different fugitive responses. The chapter argues that *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), *Veronika Voss* (1981) and *Lola* (1981)

employ distinctive methods to avoid direct articulation of their characters' emotional disturbances. While the repression of trauma is a theme commonly associated with Fassbinder's films, there has been little attention paid to how this idea is developed stylistically, as critics have tended to focus instead on how biographical or historical issues have influenced their content. The chapter discusses the films' disparate approaches, characterising them in terms of 'Compulsive Composure', 'Brittle Retreat' and 'Destructive Display'.

The sixth chapter, 'Obscurity' explores how Max Ophüls' 1953 film *Madame De...* creates meaning through the manner in which a presence, that of the central female character, is withheld. The film continually finds strategies to obscure Madame De..., the character played by Danielle Darrieux, using both camera movements and an elaborate mise-en-scène to conceal or eclipse her body within the frame. However, the significance of this device develops and shifts as the film progresses. While Darrieux's character is initially seen to blend comfortably into her environments as an admired and popular socialite, later in the film, as she is transformed by a passionate relationship, her obscurity comes to express her alienation from and confinement within the world.

The final chapter takes this obfuscation of presence to an extreme. 'Depersonalisation' suggests that three short films by Maya Deren resist traditional narrative models by displacing the notion of 'character' from presence, highlighting her different methods for achieving this effect in each film. This chapter explores an alternative notion of female film presence than is generally found in narrative cinema. For Maya Deren, who starred in most of her films, dance, play and ritual are essential modes of physical performance and expression. Each of the three films examined in this chapter is shown to draw on these techniques in order to evacuate her physical presence of any connotations of interiority or individual agency: through material abstraction in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, bodily displacements in *At Land*, and gestural dispersals in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. In this way, her presence in the films does not emerge as an individual character but as a movement beyond the personal.

Exploring these films' achievements, the thesis aims to reveal how female presence may be developed as a meaningful aesthetic concern. Rather than serving as a simple cypher for ideology or as a tool for the disturbance of that ideology through a capacity for ambiguity or affect, female presence is deployed in these films as a vehicle for the articulation of complex and varied forms of significance. While revealing how each of the films' female figures strives to *achieve* a certain type of presence for

themselves within the fictional worlds, the thesis also provides an account of the stylistic achievements of the films in their developments of female presence as an aesthetic strategy and a dramatic subject.

2 Negotiating Presence in Film Theory

For many critics, the relationship between female characters and the production of meaning is characterised by factors which are independent of the specific content of a film. They have claimed that the fundamental significance of women's role in film is pre-determined by the uniform influence of either particular sets of representational paradigms or essential ontological traits of the medium. This chapter will examine how these writers have understood, and in many cases diminished, the interrelation between meaning and female presence through their wholesale imposition of reductive theoretical frameworks. In this way it will establish the necessity of a detailed approach to film analysis, as a way of illuminating the detail and variety with which female presence has been explored, both across different films and within individual ones.

The first section of the chapter addresses the area of psychoanalytic feminist film theory and explores the central ideas through which these critics have assessed female roles in Hollywood film, such as the gaze, spectacle, and fetishisation. The second section investigates recent analyses of female characters that have been influenced by French feminist philosophy. These theorists have attempted to move beyond the psychoanalytic association of women with 'lack' and to show how some films' advancement of a specifically 'feminine' form of film characterisation may produce a destabilisation of normative meanings and conventions. The final section will focus on some examples of 'the affective turn' within film studies, and look at works by theorists who wish to redress the perceived neglect of 'materiality' in film expression and film experience. While these writers do not explicitly take up the subject of female presence, they are all responding to the paradigms of 'lack' and absence propagated by earlier feminist critics and attempting to redefine the relation between the bodily dimension of film presence and the creation of film meaning.

This chapter does not offer a comprehensive overview of all other critical discussions of women or presence and film. Accounts of the development of feminist film theory have been offered many times before, so the chapter focuses only on examples which have been definitive of the different aspects of this approach's understanding of the role of female characters in Hollywood film. Additionally, the final section of the chapter does not address all the prominent examples of affective film studies, but

focuses exclusively on those which make general ontological claims for the medium as a whole. Writers such as Laura Marks and Martine Beugnet have produced influential works on film and embodiment or film and sensation, but they address their claims to particular styles of experimental filmmaking that are overtly characterised by an emphasis on the material properties of the film image or on bodily intensity (Marks; Beugnet). This chapter concentrates on the critics who have asserted the universal significance of these properties for all types of filmmaking.

Nor does this chapter set out to demonstrate straightforwardly that the ideas put forward by these theorists are incorrect but rather to reveal that, individually, they cannot offer a complete picture of either the ontological status or expressive function of presence on film. While they may offer understandings of particular types of films or certain aspects of the medium, they limit their accounts by insisting on the overriding significance of either ideologically signifying absence or a universally 'affective' material presence, often ignoring, dismissing or repressing exceptions to their rules. Rather than viewing particular films through the often-reductive prism of specific definitions of the medium's ontology or certain representational paradigms, the thesis will go on to strive to understand how exemplary films have creatively and reflexively drawn on various conventions or aspects of the medium in their narrative and stylistic explorations of female presence.

2.1 Presence for the Gaze: Psychoanalytic Feminist Film Theory

For many feminist film theorists, since the discipline first began to emerge in the 1970s, female presence in 'mainstream' Hollywood film has been the locus of distinctly male forms of meaning. Drawing on psychoanalytic and semiotic frameworks, these critics argue that the films create particular narrative and formal conditions in order to fulfil male (usually oedipal) psychological projects through their presentation of female characters. Female presence is understood as passive and symptomatic of the patriarchal conditions that shape a film's production—an effect of the formal characteristics of narrative cinema in general rather than expressive in its own right of meanings that vary from film to film.

Laura Mulvey's article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*), originally published in 1975, is perhaps the most influential text in the development of this area of film studies. Her formative feminist critique uses psychoanalysis to expose how the 'unconscious' of patriarchal society shapes film form. She argues that Hollywood cinema fosters intrinsically male forms of film

spectatorship, in which a man is the agent of a controlling 'gaze' and a woman is the object of his look (14). According to Mulvey, this 'gaze' is comprised of three constituent elements: the camera's recording of the 'pro-filmic event', the looks of the characters at each other within the film's fiction, and finally the audience's viewing of the film in the cinema (25-26). A male character's look, directed at a woman within the film, is relayed back to and enforced on the spectator via the film's formal construction. Devices such as the shot-reverse-shot (which shows a male character looking in a particular direction, followed by another shot depicting the object of this attention) encourage the audience to identify with the man's subjective point of view and to perceive him as an active figure, whilst reading the woman in terms of her passive state of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (25).

For Mulvey, the formal and narrative arrangement of Hollywood films always results in female presence occupying the same role, regardless of the specificity of its context. Furthermore, the expressive methods employed by films (such as the shot-reverse-shot) always affect the same meanings, as they are themselves manifestations of patriarchal impulses. 'Scopophilia', the depiction of women as the object of a scrutinising male gaze, and 'fetishism', the overvaluation of one or more of a woman's physical features to compensate for the absent phallus, determine every aspect of a film's presentation of women. The inescapable dominance of these specifically male psychological mechanisms guarantees the woman's objectification and subordination, regardless of the specificity of the film's definition of her presence.

The unbending stringency of Mulvey's claims results in readings of films that often either ignore or dismiss any moments that run counter to her arguments—even in instances where these exceptions may affect a film's significance in substantial ways. For example, Mulvey states that Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is 'cut to the measure of male desire', noting offhandedly that 'apart from one flashback from Judy's point of view, the narrative is woven entirely around what Scottie sees or fails to see' (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 24). However, for critics Tania Modleski and Robin Wood, this deviation unsettles the spectator's identification with Scottie, disrupting the film's proximity to his character's perspective. Consequently, by arguing that Hollywood film's always marginalise or omit the experiences of women, Mulvey overlooks an instance in which the presentation of a female character's perspective is used to challenge some of the very notions that she is looking to critique (such as the domination of male over female subjectivity in Hollywood films).

Many challenges have been levelled at Mulvey's original analysis, with other fem-

inist critics arguing that her insistence on the pervasiveness of the male gaze causes her to neglect other possibilities for female or non-heteronormative viewers. Mulvey herself expanded on her original arguments in a follow-up piece, 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', offering an account of how female film viewers may engage with films that address male spectators by identifying with characters of the opposite sex and how the dynamics of identification work in films with female protagonists (*Visual and Other Pleasures* 29-38). However, despite these additions and amendments to her original thesis, the end results and overall framework for analysis remain the same.

For example, in her discussion of the character Pearl (Jennifer Jones) (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*), the wild and tomboyish protagonist of Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*, she claims that the potential subversiveness of having the viewer identify with an active female lead character is resolved by placing her in a narrative scenario that guarantees the annihilation of the transgressive elements of her persona. The implication of this is that when a Hollywood film appears to superficially challenge the conventional operations of the gaze, it will find a way to reinforce the woman's objectification by other means. Pearl's character is unable to find a place for herself within either the civilised world of conformist femininity or the realm of the more masculine pursuits she enjoys (such as shooting and riding), with two competing love interests representing each side of this conflict. She ultimately rejects the security of her law-abiding suitor's offer of wifely domesticity, and dies in a shootout with her outlaw lover, surrendering her rebellious, masculine characteristics in death. For Mulvey, Pearl's demise reveals the ultimate impossibility of a woman's 'masculinisation'. The film temporarily allows the female viewer to identify with her character's active position before reasserting the rule of the woman's exclusion from narrative agency and action.

Another western film with a 'masculinised' female protagonist, Anthony Mann's *The Furies* (1950), could be said to follow a similar trajectory to the one outlined by Mulvey in her account of *Duel in the Sun* (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*). Vance (Barbara Stanwyck), the ruthless and independent daughter of T. C. Jeffards (played by Walter Huston, in his final role), ruthlessly clashes with her father over their relationship, her suitors and ownership of their ranch. Furthermore, the final twenty minutes of the film, in which Vance marries and assumes the role of a wife, could be seen to resolve the earlier issues of her fearsome independence and her usurpation of her father.

Critic Robin Wood has criticised the film on the basis of its neat conclusion: ‘Vance is softened and sweetened, abruptly becoming the ‘good woman’ so that she can accept the generally obnoxious Darrow (also softened and sentimentalized)’ (Wood, “*The Furies*”). Wood goes on to state that, ‘the film’s earlier energy, complexity, and audacity should be allowed to atone for this last attempt at recuperation’, suggesting that the potency of Stanwyck’s performance and Mann’s presentation of her character’s unchecked vitality undoes the potentially recuperative and conservative effects of the film’s resolution, which is comparatively lacking in energy and depth of characterisation (“*The Furies*”). Wood’s reading demonstrates that accounting for only one aspect of the expression of female presence (such as her character’s narrative trajectory), as Mulvey does in her analysis of films by Hitchcock and Vidor, results in only a partial or incomplete understanding of the effect of that presence. Only by attending to the delineation of a character in detail, exploring the relations between the various elements that constitute their presentation as a whole, can broader significance emerge.

Steven Shaviro (whose work I will return to later in this chapter) has noted that the uncompromising nature of Mulvey’s account of Hollywood film leads her to construct ‘an Oedipal, phallic paradigm of vision that is much more totalizing and monolithic than anything the films she discusses are themselves able to articulate’ (Shaviro 25). Many responses to Mulvey’s original arguments have sought to expand on or open up her ideas in order to allow for the identification of more positive or progressive depictions of women in Hollywood cinema. Many of these approaches retain the general premises of Mulvey’s analysis, preserving the assumption that the narrative and structural paradigms of Hollywood films have a fundamentally patriarchal bias (for an early example of this type of reading see Cook). However, they claim that certain ‘inconsistencies’ or ‘ruptures’ can arise in films when these patriarchal structures are forced to include types of expressions that are incompatible with their underlying (male oriented) purposes.

These discrepancies are said to expose flaws or vulnerabilities in their ideological underpinnings, affording critics the opportunity to analyse contradictions and discover means of resisting the otherwise conservative implications of narrative film. Furthermore, these perturbations often arise through a film’s presentation of a female character. If a film’s narrative is said to follow a non-reflexive Oedipal trajectory, a woman who appears to be something other than an object for male character’s scrutiny presents a difficulty. These formal or narrative incoherencies allow critics to

offer feminist readings of films that are said to be structurally incapable of deliberate self-exploration.

Mary Ann Doane's influential work on the 'women's film', *The Desire to Desire: The Women's Film of the 1940s*, claims that this genre offers numerous examples of these revelatory inconsistencies (Doane, *The Desire to Desire*). This is because, for Doane, these films, unlike other contemporaneous Hollywood genres, strive to accord their female characters a determining role in their narratives and attempt to express their emotional lives to the viewer. They are constructed to 'address...a female spectator. The woman's film, quite simply, attempts to engage female subjectivity' (34). However, given Doane's agreement with Mulvey's analysis of the patriarchal nature of Hollywood cinema's formal structures, she does not believe that these films are able to offer fully realised explorations of female psychology; nor can they allow their female characters to adopt a truly active role in the development of their stories. Rather, in lieu of convincingly depicting female subjectivity, each subcategory of the genre (the 'maternal melodrama, the 'love story' and the 'medical discourse') is said to present 'an image repertoire...of classical feminine poses and assumptions about the female appropriation of the gaze' (4). The films express frustrated forms of female presence, and these stifled characterisations illustrate the shortcomings inherent in Hollywood's representations of women and, as a consequence, inadvertently reveal facets of their oppression within society more generally.

Doane explains the incompatibility of female subjectivity with Hollywood narrative cinema in her article 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' (Doane, "Film and Masquerade"). Drawing on the theories of Christian Metz, she argues that women cannot properly engage with the structures of narrative film due to their continual pre-oedipal attachment to their mother. Whereas the oedipal mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism are necessary for men as means of distancing themselves from their mother in order to continually reaffirm their autonomous subjectivity, women experience no such need to remove themselves from the events and persons depicted on screen. By attempting to portray *women's* experiences within a representational paradigm that is organised around the psychological needs of *male* viewers, these melodramas are said to expose the expressive limitations of Hollywood film. It is the specific character of these failures that Doane seeks to identify.

Doane allows for a greater variety of possibilities in representations of women on film than Mulvey, permitting them to mean more than just one thing. However, framing her analysis of films in terms of the success or unintended failure of their ide-

ological coherence, she still views female presence as a manifestation of Hollywood cinema's patriarchal bias and its structural inability to deal with the experiences of women, stating that, 'excesses and the revelation of incoherencies and contradictions are a by-product of the film's mode of address' (Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 4). She therefore retains a monolithic view of Hollywood film by assuming that its *intended* effects are always the same; it is the varying coherent executions of these principles and the application of them to incompatible subject matter that occasionally (and accidentally) lets other ideas shine through. Female presence remains a passive and inert reflection of the films' underlying ideological processes and repressions.

For Tania Modleski, the films of Alfred Hitchcock offer a much more complex picture of Hollywood's representations of women (Modleski 1 & 3). Like Doane, she sets out to provide a more nuanced understanding of both of films' portrayals of women characters and of forms of female spectatorship. However, Modleski allows for an even wider (although still restricted) set of possibilities, arguing that 'some films do allow for the (limited) expression of a specifically female desire and that such films, instead of following the male oedipal journey...trace a female Oedipal trajectory and in the process reveal some of the difficulties for women in becoming socialised in patriarchy' (2). Furthermore, Modleski contends that, rather than arising unintentionally through failures in coherence, these portrayals are products of Hitchcock's deliberate dramatisations of problems surrounding the representation of female subjectivity and the threats posed to male characters and to his position as the director of the films.

Modleski argues that Hitchcock takes up the problem of female subjectivity and pre-oedipal 'overidentification' (outlined by Doane's earlier work) as subject matter. She states: 'many of Hitchcock's films thematize the 'problem' of 'overidentification'—the daughter's 'overidentification' with the mother and, in at least one film (*Rear Window*), the woman's 'overidentification' with the 'textual body' (Modleski 8). In this respect, Modleski accords female presence a vital role in the films' dramas with the capacity to produce meaning beyond purely symptomatic reflections of patriarchal convention. She suggests that Hitchcock explores the issue of female subjectivity because, in its bi-sexual pre-oedipality (which arises because women do not require distance from the maternal female body), it poses a threat to man by reminding him 'of his *own* bisexuality...a bisexuality that threatens to subvert his 'proper' identity, which depends on his ability to distance woman and make her his property' (8). The looming and potentially destabilising

presence of woman's subjectivity is a source of fascination and terror for the men in Hitchcock's films, continually undoing their efforts 'to achieve masculine strength and autonomy' (8).

This tension leads her to state that Hitchcock's films are neither 'utterly misogynistic *nor*...largely sympathetic to women and their plight in patriarchy, but that his work is characterized by a thoroughgoing ambivalence about femininity' (Modleski 2). However, female presence remains a device placed into the service of the man's (or director's) psychological needs—needs that are said to underlie the films' construction—and is only significant insofar as its realisation poses a threat to those needs. The films do not explore female subjectivity for its own sake and are only interested in their female characters to the extent that their presence presents a challenge to the male ones. Rather than therapeutically staging their own 'ambivalence' about women in an attempt to come to terms with it, the films could equally be said to deliberately contrive narrative scenarios which directly confront the problem of expressing and recognising female subjective autonomy within a context that habitually insists on viewing them as objects.

Critic Gaylyn Studlar has offered an alternative psychoanalytic understanding of narrative film, one that rejects the Oedipal interpretation of its structures. In a study focusing on the portrayal of Marlene Dietrich in the films of Josef von Sternberg, Studlar argues that spectators regress to a pre-Oedipal form of masochistic identification in their self-annihilating desire to be absorbed by the overwhelming presence of the screen and, in particular, by the woman as the focal point of the film's spectacle (Studlar). Masochism, as a pre-oedipal form of desire, is available to both men and women and, consequently, Studlar rejects the notion of a privileged masculine/heteronormative viewing position that dominated earlier psychoanalytic accounts. Furthermore, she allows for a more nuanced set of possibilities for female presence on film, arguing that whilst Dietrich is 'the object of male desire...she is not the passive object of a controlling look' (48).

However, despite her rejection of the limiting boundaries of active male and passive female stereotypes, by arguing for the spectator's (and other characters') overwhelming involvement in the image of the Dietrich as fantasy, Studlar ends up neglecting the narrative and psychological elements of the films' presentations of her characters. For instance, in the films *Shanghai Express* and *Blonde Venus*, Dietrich's characters strive to overcome men's reductions of her persona to various facets of

her appearance. The films stage this struggle through their depiction of her reflexive invocation of these superficial roles.¹

These feminist critics limit the expressive possibilities for female presence on film by tending to view it as an effect of aspects of narrative cinema in general (or its surrounding ideological environment). Whilst the norms and conventions of patriarchal society are certainly of great significance to Hollywood film's portrayals of women, it does not necessarily follow that they are powerful enough to make the effect of all of these depictions the same (or nearly the same). Such a claim relies on the dismissal of the specificities of individual films, and the innumerable particulars that differentiate them from one another. Accounting for the detail of examples, I suggest, reveals that narrative film's explorations of female presence and their explorations of women's positions in society more generally are often more nuanced and developed than these monolithic theories allow.

Furthermore, these critics all address female film presence as either the conditional manifestation or repression of female *subjectivity*—connecting presence with subjectivity on a fundamental level. This thesis argues, however, that films may exploit presence to create a wide variety of meanings, which are not bound to either issues of gender or the more or less convincing realisation of character psychology. Chapters on Mitchel Leisen's *Midnight* and the short films of Maya Deren, for example, contend that female presence may be used in different ways—departing from traditional notions of character—to explore issues of identity on a more general, abstract level. Unlike many of these critics, the thesis claims that the successful depictions of female film presence is not tantamount to a successful realisation of female subjectivity. Furthermore, rather than focusing on the ways in which female presence may be deployed as a politically 'positive' device, the thesis aims to reveal the broad scope of meanings that films achieve through its expression.

However, many of the ideas raised by these critics are relevant fetishisation, voyeuristic devices may be used as a means of emphasising the subjective point of view of one character and the imagistic dimension of another performer's body, but it does not necessarily follow that this will always result in the positioning of the woman as a passive object. The narrative and stylistic context of the device's application must be taken into account in order to grasp its effect. Of course, this is not to say that Hollywood films are universally positive or progressive in their portrayals of women, or that there are not any examples which do illustrate some of Mulvey's

¹ This will be explored in greater detail in the chapter 'Surface'.

and others theorist's claims, but rather to suggest that there is a far greater variety of representations than is often implied. While their arguments may hold true for a number of 'mainstream' films, the monolithic nature of these critics' theories makes it impossible for more complex and profound explorations of female characters in Hollywood to be acknowledged as such. The best that can be said for these examples is that they (unintentionally) expose momentary flashes of destabilising incoherence or unresolved ambivalence. This thesis explores both experimental and classic narrative films, but it does not consider the expressive possibilities or achievements of these different works to be automatically forestalled or limited by their form. Hollywood film may often be (rightly) associated with conservative, sexist or racist ideologies, but it does not follow that it should all be judged or understood in light of its worst or most reductive examples.

2.2 Presence of the Feminine: Feminist Philosophy and Film

Recently, a number of feminist critics have looked to the works of feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray or Michelle LeDoeuff for alternative ways of accounting for female presence on film. Rejecting the psychoanalytic understanding of the woman as a signifier of absence or lack in relation to their active male counterparts, they argue instead that certain types of film can offer more positive depictions of female subjectivity based upon an idea of the 'specificity of the feminine'. Rather than reading portrayals of female characters in terms of what they symptomatically reveal about male psychological or cultural attitudes towards women, these critics argue that particular films explore aspects of female experience as a subject in its own right. They attempt to establish a way of discussing female film presence as a positive form of expression and not as an inversion of a male norm.

Caroline Bainbridge's book, *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film*, explores Irigaray's efforts to theorise 'the specificity of the *feminine*' (Bainbridge). She argues that this notion has been neglected by 'symbolic discourses of gender and sexuality' due to their 'insistence on repressing and disavowing the feminine in culture, language and subjectivity' (2). Bainbridge claims that the characterisation of the 'symbolic order' within canonical psychoanalytic and philosophical theories precludes the possibility of any positive conception of the 'feminine' ('based on and in the specificity of the female body') due to its inherent 'phallogocentrism' (2). Even feminist psychoanalytic critics, by focusing exclusively on concepts such as 'lack' and 'disavowal', are said to reproduce the exclusion of the

feminine from language and culture, situating the woman only in terms of absence (8).

Bainbridge uses Irigaray's ideas in an attempt to counter this tendency. She argues that an alternative 'female genealogy' must be developed, one that is based on 'the relation of women to other women as women with non-maternally-based feminine identities' (Bainbridge 11). She advocates, through Irigaray's arguments, forms of expression which explore the 'specificity of the feminine' and create 'a sexual/textual/psychical/philosophical/spiritual economy in which the feminine is defined in and for itself' (2). Bainbridge contends that these forms of expression may only be realised through 'alternative' modes of expression which attempt to escape from 'the masculine notion' of '*logos*' and its inevitable preclusion of the 'feminine' (2). For Bainbridge, this concept of '*logos*' is associated with conventional and 'mainstream' filmmaking and set against the 'certain types of cinema' that 'challenge the limitations of symbolic discursive systems by opening up new thresholds onto spaces for thinking through what it means to be a spectator-subject' (48).

This idea that particular films 'open up' possibilities for spectator identification with women beyond the allegedly standard patterns of objectification and fetishisation reflects the quality of intended indeterminacy that Bainbridge identifies and admires in Irigaray's writing: 'Her deconstructive, metaphorical approach...demands a response from the reader, a response which has more importance on a political level than the texts themselves' (Bainbridge 49). Bainbridge suggests that this same attribute is apparent in the depictions of the female characters in the films she selects for her study, all of which were made by female directors during the 1990s. These films, she claims, exhibit 'an interrelation between film form and narrative content' which 'can be understood in relation to processes of mediation and the opening up of spaces for thinking' (70). It is within these spaces of indeterminacy that fuller and more progressive depictions of female subjectivity may emerge. She suggests that the spaces are created through the deployment of devices which 'disrupt...and challenge...the spectator's desire for identification, repeatedly seeking to alienate us from the potential for pleasure in the film' (56). The result of this is that 'more normative (and, perhaps, passive?) structures of spectatorship are thus thrown into disarray as the spectator is repeatedly challenged actively to work to make meaning in these films' (56).

Bainbridge outlines the techniques films may employ in order to achieve the positive expression of female subjectivity in very general terms. She identifies 'cinematic

strategies such as the close-up, the look-to-camera, the flash-back, inter-titles, the voice-over and the signification of interiority', as devices that can be used to this effect, but it remains unclear how the films she singles out for attention deploy them differently to any other more apparently conservative films in which they might be found (Bainbridge 50).

For example, although she explores the use of some of these formal devices in her discussion of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), the particularity of their application, and how this may be said to produce such radically different effects, remains unclear. Bainbridge argues that the productive tension between 'film form' and 'narrative content' is apparent in *The Piano*'s handling of Ada's (Holly Hunter) muteness. A trait that could be taken as a marker of her disempowerment and exclusion from the 'masculine' realm of language, Ada's elective silence is instead converted into a vehicle for alternative and more 'open' forms of identification through the addition of a voiceover. This is said to alert 'spectators to look out for Ada's non-vocalized responses to those around her throughout the rest of the film', creating a richer, more complex picture of her interiority (Bainbridge 156). However, while this reading of Ada's muteness makes the case for the film's alignment with her character's subjectivity, it does not reveal why another, more apparently conservative film's use of voiceover may fail to achieve a similar effect. In fact, it could be argued that *The Piano*'s use of a voiceover is the more conventional choice, allowing the audience to identify with Ada in a more straightforward way in spite of her muteness. Allowing her to remain remote may have created a more 'complex picture of her interiority', whereas externalising her thoughts gives the viewer a literal and determinate picture of her psychology. Bainbridge argues for the effectiveness of this device on the level of the film's general use of it and as a result it is difficult to discern what is particular about this instance of an otherwise commonplace formal device. In the absence of discussions of moments in which the voiceover may interact with Ada's physicality in order to create particular insights into her interiority for the spectator, the specificity of the film's achievement remains unclear.

Given the lack of clarity around what distinguishes *The Piano*'s use of familiar film techniques and its resulting depiction of female subjectivity, Bainbridge's dismissal of 'mainstream' films' for being 'inevitably recuperated by symbolic discourse and stripped of any political weight' appears somewhat sweeping (Bainbridge 14). Arguing that 'women have largely been represented by men, constructed as objects of the gaze and left with little room for a sense of specificity in the pleasures that

cinema can provide', she takes for granted the inability of these films to depict politically progressive female characters without going into detail as to why *The Piano*—an expensive studio-made narrative film with Hollywood actors—yields such different results (64). Additionally, and perhaps more troublingly, the ambiguity around what a 'positive' depiction of female subjectivity might involve (characterising it loosely in terms of 'excess and plurality') maintains the opposition between women and the production of meaning for which she takes psychoanalytic feminist film theorists to task (20). Rather than being excluded from the expression of meaning, female presence may destabilise it through the 'opening up' of spaces of indeterminacy. Despite being allowed the possibility to take on more politically progressive connotations, female film presence is still only afforded an inverted form of significance, as its supposedly generative ambiguity is set against the rigidity of the conservative conventions of narrative film.

Lucy Bolton's book, *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women*, addresses similar issues to those raised by Bainbridge. She too attempts to identify films which offer 'an appreciation of women as cinematic thinking beings', and suggests that films made by a number of female directors during the early 2000s achieve this (Bolton 9). Also like Bainbridge, she argues that these films 'offer something new and original in terms of the representation of female consciousness', creating 'space for the female characters to explore themselves and others, using language, the body and consciousness' whilst providing 'open, optimistic endings' (2–3). She compares these positive depictions of female film presence to other 'films that offer more standard...treatments of femininity', in an effort to define the specificity of their achievements (1). Additionally, Bolton proposes that the films accomplish this expression of an independently realised feminine partly through an 'immersion in the sensory and the sensual' (3).

Whilst Bolton's discussions of her chosen films' female characters go into greater formally specific detail than Bainbridge's, the question of what characterises their depictions of feminine subjectivity (and also what constitutes feminine subjectivity itself) remains unresolved. Bolton argues in her analysis of Sofia Coppola's 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, that the presentation of Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) invokes the convention of woman as a narrative-arresting spectacle, only to turn it on its head. She cites the tension between moments which seemingly present Charlotte as an object for the gaze (such as the film's opening shot of her lying on a bed in transparent pink underwear), and episodes in which she is shown to be a more re-

flective presence, as examples of this subversion. Describing how Charlotte wanders curiously around Tokyo and the corridors of her hotel, Bainbridge suggests that such sequences establish a sense of her exploratory thinking, allowing her character's subjectivity to come to the fore. This enables the viewer to share in 'to some extent what she is thinking about and experiencing', casting moments of her objectification in a new light (Bolton 110). Even scenes where Charlotte appears in her underwear are said to contribute to this effect, as 'her solitary, meditative state de-sexualises her appearance by naturalising her semi-nudity as a state of dress a woman would be likely to adopt if she were on her own' (110). For Bolton, the film's insistence on Charlotte's contemplative aimlessness, achieved through the portrayal of her impassive physicality and seemingly directionless meandering, both forestalls her objectification as an object for the gaze and emphasises her character's status as a thinking presence within the film.

Bolton attempts to highlight the film's overturning of woman's status as a spectacle by comparing the film's reflexive presentation of Charlotte's femininity to the allegedly more straight-forward depiction of Marilyn Monroe in Billy Wilder's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). She points out that Johansson shares a number of physical characteristics with the star of Wilder's film. Both actresses are 'blonde', 'curvaceous' and have 'full lips' (Bolton 119). However, whilst Bolton views Wilder's portrayal of Monroe's nameless character as the epitome of female objectification, she claims that, in Coppola's film, 'rather than embody the feminine masquerade, Charlotte plays with it' (119). For instance, during a scene at a karaoke bar Charlotte dons a pink wig whilst performing a flirtatious version of 'Brass in Pocket' by The Pretenders. This is said to parody the idea of a showgirl performance (of the sort typified by Monroe in films such as *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953)) by foregrounding its artificiality and setting up a drastic contrast with the taciturn surliness of Charlotte's persona in the rest of the film (120).

Bolton also identifies parallels between the two films in the depiction of Charlotte's relationship with Bob (Bill Murray), an ageing actor staying in the same hotel whilst begrudgingly starring in a Japanese whisky commercial. Where the relationship between Monroe's character and middle-aged family man Richard Sherman (Tom Ewell)—looking to enjoy some time alone in the city whilst his wife and children are on vacation—is presented exclusively in terms of the sexual attraction between the pair, Charlotte and Bob are seen to share an affinity around humour and feelings of being misunderstood or adrift. Transforming the 'cliché of the May-to-

September romance' in this way is said to open up an Irigarayan 'space between', as the film's reflexive 'imitation of expected generic conventions' throws 'light on a female character that departs radically from the stereotype' (Bolton 111).

Whilst Bolton offers a detailed analysis of the film's depiction of Charlotte's presence, accounting for its realisation of her interiority, her claims for its achievement, based on the progressive implications of its formal and generic reflexivity, are not wholly borne out by her discussions. In her comparison of *Lost in Translation* and *The Seven Year Itch*, the former is said to parody the 'masquerade of femininity', whilst the latter is said to endorse it. However, it is equally plausible to claim that Wilder's film's presentation of Monroe and her relationship with Tom Ewell's character are heightened to the point of attaining an element of parody. Bolton points out that Molly Haskell has made this exact claim for some of Monroe's other films and then refutes it in passing, but without providing an explanation of why her own analysis ought to prevail (Bolton 101). Elsewhere, the idea that *Lost in Translation* deliberately evokes the sexist conventions of Hollywood in order to overturn them seems unsubstantiated by her accounts of scenes, which often rely on drastic interpretive leaps. Bolton claims that the apparently objectifying opening shot of Charlotte laying on her bed facing away from the camera in a pair of 'pink-panties' is transformed simply by the imposition of the film's title over the image. She argues that this 'signals that usual meanings of on-screen femininity may be effectively 'lost' in their translation into a new filmic mode that foregrounds female subjectivity' (104). The distinction between one film's 'corruption' of generic stereotypes and another's reinforcement of them remains unclear (101).

One of the ways in which Bolton seeks to distinguish the films she singles out for recognition is by claiming that their emphasis 'is not on the physical appearance of women; rather it is on their interiority' (Bolton 1). However, this very general assertion offers a limited and sweepingly negative view of the depiction of women in all other forms of cinema, as she claims the successful expression of female interiority for a very small number of films. This is especially troubling given the general lack of clarity around the specific characteristics of these more positive presentations of female characters, and how they differ from less desirable alternatives.

Despite her desire to make a case for the effective evocation of female interiority in general, Bolton seems instead to be interested in a particular type of interiority—one that is characterised by a contemplative film style and a quality of reflective indeterminacy. This preference presumably stems from her allegiance to Irigaray's notion

of the feminine as an indefinable manifestation of excess and superfluity. Bolton therefore favours films which present their female characters in terms of a certain psychological remoteness, allowing the space for interpretive ambiguity. However, rather than acknowledging that this style of filmmaking offers an expression of a *certain kind* of interiority, she presents it as the only truly progressive possibility for depicting female subjectivity on film, dismissing all other instances as inevitably conservative in their implications. Instead of revealing these films to be the most successful achievements of female interiority on film in general, her arguments show them to be instead exemplary of her own theoretical perspective.

The claims that both Bainbridge and Bolton make for their chosen films are based on similar notions of ‘opening up’ ‘spaces between’ in order to break with familiar sexist modes of presenting women and create new approaches to realising female subjectivity on film. By transforming familiar formal devices or corrupting ‘generic conventions’, these films are said to establish conditions for interpretive ambiguity, allowing progressive presentations of female interiority to emerge (Bainbridge 48; Bolton 49). However, the precise nature of these films’ achievements is difficult to discern due to the lack of clarity around both what constitutes a successful depiction of female subjectivity (beyond an asserted quality of vagueness or indeterminacy) and precisely how its expression may be achieved.

One obvious, yet mostly unacknowledged, answer to this is that all of the films which are said to present a successfully realised female character, in both Bolton’s and Bainbridge’s books, were directed by women. Both writers acknowledge this fact in passing: Bainbridge consciously looks to redress the exclusion of women from film history and Bolton acknowledges that her choice of films is a predictable coincidence, given her desire to find examples which focus on female interiority (Bainbridge 2; Bolton 5). However, given both writers’ sweeping dismissal of ‘mainstream’ filmmaking (and Bolton’s admission that the more ‘standard’ films she compares with her positive examples were all made by men), this association of ‘progressive’ depictions of women with female directors and more conservative ones with male directors alludes to a potential un-interrogated vein of essentialism in both of their arguments.

This issue is compounded by the fact that their claims for the more progressive portrayals of women on film rely on a cursory dismissal of a hypothetical and never clearly defined form of ‘conventional’ filmmaking (Bolton 1). This is especially perplexing given that both *The Piano* and *Lost in Translation* were successful, award-winning Hollywood films. Both writers wish to impute an experimental formal style

to the films they examine in order to account for their special status and demonstrate their difference from a 'conservative mainstream'. However, beyond a reference to a form of post-modern self-reflexivity that may be found in many Hollywood films, this distinctive formally experimental quality is never detailed or demonstrated. Furthermore, even if this experimentalism were a feature of these films, it would not automatically follow that their depictions of female character would be progressive, just as 'mainstream' films are not all inevitably conservative in this respect.

Catherine Constable's *Thinking in Images: Film Theory, Feminist Philosophy and Marlene Dietrich* draws on the works of Michelle LeDoeuff and Sarah Kofman in addition to Irigaray in order to propose a new understanding of the possibilities for female presence on film. Constable observes that works of philosophy by Nietzsche, Derrida, Baudrillard and others rely on certain abstract 'images' of women drawn from cultural, literary or mythic types, and use these as conceptual or illustrative devices. Constable focuses in particular on the gendering of imagery found in the works of Nietzsche, which she argues capitalise on 'woman's link to appearance and beauty', allocating her 'a series of significant and varied roles, including truth, fiction and the acceptance and enjoyment of life as an illusion' (Constable 3).

For both Constable and LeDoeuff, the concept of the image and its association with ideas of artifice, women, and women *as* artifice provides a source of potentially subversive instability within the theoretical frameworks proposed by these writers. This is because images exist beyond the parameters of philosophical discourse and belong to culture more generally. As collectively constructed abstractions they cannot be said to have any definitive significance and are consequently always 'ambiguous' and 'subject to further interpretation' (Constable 4). She finds that several films directed by Josef von Sternberg starring Marlene Dietrich exploit this relation between women, image, and artifice in their valorisation of the 'radical potential of woman's presentation as an icon of illusion, fiction and fakeness' (4). Rather than depicting the woman as the passive object of a sexist specular regime, she argues that these films 'actually engage with issues of objectification and femininity as spectacle' (4).

Constable refers to the films' portrayals of Dietrich in terms of their invocations of various mythic 'images' of women, which she claims are also found in a number of philosophical texts. She argues that the films consciously explore these roles through their various incarnations of Dietrich's highly distinctive star persona. For instance, in her discussion of *Shanghai Express* (1932), she contends that the depic-

tion of Dietrich's character overtly foregrounds the constructed status of her role in the film. The character is split into two distinct identities: the notorious escort 'Shanghai Lily', and the respectable woman 'Madeleine'. By presenting these two divergent personalities through Dietrich's heightened styles of performance and dress, the film is said to reveal the artificial nature of this feminine dichotomy.

Drawing on Baudrillard's notion of 'the seductress', Constable claims that Dietrich's presence in the film is characterised by the 'play of appearances', as she is constructed 'as an exaggerated image of indecency' (Constable 145). She argues, echoing the approaches of both Bolton and Bainbridge, that the 'overt fictionality' of Shanghai Lily/Madeleine's presence, and her 'hypersimulation' of this 'image on indecency', allow the film to 'open up...a space for critique' (147). Rather than signalling absence through a lack of depth, the adoption of a highly exaggerated and overtly artificial persona becomes an alternative source of productive 'authenticity', allowing Shanghai Lily to undermine the bourgeois values of those around her. The imagistic dimension of Dietrich's persona becomes a positive refutation of the notion of the woman as spectacle, rather than a reinforcement of it. Rather than being constructed by the film as a passive image, her reflexive inhabitation of a series of provocative roles allows her character to 'construct her own perspective' (155).

Constable sets out to ascribe a positive value to the conceptually feminised notions of image, artifice and spectacle. She argues that the indeterminate status of these ideas allows them to function as vehicles for critique: the conventional or conservative notions with which they are commonly associated are re-worked and transformed through exaggerated, self-conscious performance. She claims that Dietrich's invocations of stereotypes move beyond straightforward critique, allowing her character to establish 'her own perspective' (Constable 160). However, her readings of the films never fully realise this step through their emphasis on the reclamation of 'images' and their insistence on her parodic theatricality.

For example, in her discussion of a scene between Lily and her ex-fiancée Doc (Clive Brook), Constable argues that Lily's perspective is established through her 'parody of Doc's nostalgia', as she 'plays up to her reputation in order to challenge [his] idealised vision of the past' (Constable 154-155). While this may be the case, Lily's 'new perspective' is defined exclusively in terms of her destabilisation of another character's ideals. This is because her expressive role is limited to one of performative subversion. Even if the film is said to ultimately endorse Lily's reflexive use of artifice as a new source of authenticity (which Constable suggests it does), her

character is still defined negatively in terms of her inversion of standards and her production of a politically progressive indeterminacy around her multi-faceted feminine identity. Additionally, Constable claims that 'Dietrich's star persona serves to reinforce Lily's use of mocking humour', further distinguishing the effect of her presence from notions of diegetic character (154).

Although Constable attributes this parodic effect to the film's deliberate construction (rather than to unintended fissures in its reproduction of ideological norms), the expressive role accorded to female presence remains just as limiting. The only way for the woman to become a progressive or productive force within the film is for her to occupy an ironising position within it. The type of 'positive' significance she contributes still mostly belongs to the 'meta'-level of the film's discursive self-awareness and not to the dimension of narrative, where a less obviously reflexive form of presence could only serve to reinforce conservative conventions.² Instead, it is said to take up the problem of recognising Lily's interiority as an overt concern—for both its narrative and her character.

Each of these critics has set out to provide an alternative way of accounting for female film presence and to move beyond the restrictive and limited set of possibilities found in other forms of feminist film theory. Bainbridge and Bolton look to identify particular films which offer fully realised depictions of a specifically 'feminine' form of subjectivity, setting them against specific or hypothetical conservative alternatives, where portrayals of women are contingent on uninterrogated sexist conventions. However, in the absence of a clear, positively defined explanation of this 'feminine' mode of film expression, this alternative remains a romanticised abstraction characterised by troublingly gendered and distilling qualities of 'plenitude', 'excess', or 'plurality'. Constable's proposal of the subversive potential of 'images' of women is similarly dependent on a taken for granted, ideologically fixed alternative for its definition.

Consequently, while female presence attains meaning through its capacity to invert cultural stereotypes or representational norms, it only does so through the 'opening up' of 'spaces' for critique or productive indeterminacy. It cannot signify positively in its own right. By staking their claims for films on imputed correspondences between the presentations of characters and abstract theoretical ideas, these critics are not addressing the specific content of the films themselves (narrative, character

² In a later chapter, the thesis returns to this film and argues that the film's portrayal of Shanghai Lily achieves more than a playful refutation of bourgeois morality based on her recuperation of 'images'.

development etc.), nor their stylistic engagement of their female presence. Rather, they are interested in the films' discursively reflexive self-positioning in relation to a set of presupposed and unexamined assumptions about the fundamentally conservative nature of Hollywood, 'mainstream' film. Even Constable's claims for the subversive nature of Dietrich's Hollywood films rely on a notion of ironic distancing from established convention. It is my contention that female presence as a narrative, stylistic *and* discursive concern may feature as a source of multiple forms of significance in both Hollywood and experimental film alike. While films may draw on different types of representational or expressive conventions, the effect of their presentations of women is not predetermined by these choices.

2.3 Affective Presence: Embodiment and Sensation

Many critics have recently attempted to accord the bodily or material dimension of film a more productive role in terms of both film meaning and the viewer's experience of film images. These writers are responding in particular to the perceived failure of other theoretical approaches (influenced by psychoanalysis or semiotics) to account for the physical and sensory address of film images. Proponents of 'affective' analysis argue that this omission stems from the assumption that film images are primarily characterised by properties of 'absence, lack and illusion' (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 59). Contrary to this, these critics stress the material and sense-engaging properties of cinema, emphasising the continuity between images and the physical world, rather than their abstraction from one another.

Given that a great number of film writers now work within the theoretically diverse area of affective film studies, I have chosen to explore the subject through key texts which are exemplary of a particular aspects of the field. However, they all hold that 'presence'—in the sense of an unmediated bodily encounter with materiality—is the defining characteristic of the film medium and film experience.

2.3.1 Sensory Immediacy

Vivian Sobchack has made one of the most significant contributions to the area of affective or phenomenological film studies. Her 1992 book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* continues to influence many critics in its call for greater attentiveness to both the role of the spectator's bodily perceptions and the sensuous materiality of film itself. She argues that both the experience and the expression of film are contingent upon a condition of 'embodiment'. Rather than

emphasising a separation or distance between the film and the viewer, she stresses the interrelation between the two based on a shared ability to experience the world through perception. Sobchack characterises film in terms of ‘experience expressing experience’, as a film adopts a perspective on the world (whilst expressing itself through the world), which is in turn perceived and experienced by the viewer. United by their shared capacity for perceiving and expressing through materiality, she describes the reciprocal process of cinematic communication in terms of ‘the *perception of expression* and the *expression of perception*’ (Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* 5).

Sobchack’s understanding of bodily perception draws on the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. In particular, she emphasises the anti-essentialist character of this approach and opposes it to the transcendental basis of Edmund Husserl’s earlier phenomenological works (Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*). Rather than seeking to uncover the ‘essence’ of an object or phenomenon by stripping away the subjective baggage which muddies our perception of it (such as one’s historical or cultural situation), Sobchack stresses the provisional nature of meaning as it is manifested through embodied experiences. For Sobchack, meaning is not waiting to be uncovered within an object, but rather emerges through the constantly evolving and mutually transforming (and transformative) *encounter* between a sensing subject and sensuous materiality.

The reciprocal relation between film and viewer is premised on their sharing of certain traits which may be characterised as an ‘embodied’ way of being in the world: ‘the cinema uses *modes of embodied existence* (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the ‘stuff’, the substance of its movement’, and consequently, ‘we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as the moved’ (Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* 4 & 10). Whilst for a person this mode of being is made possible through the various corporeally situated senses, for a film it is achieved through mechanical or technical features, such as framing or montage, which create particular perspectives through compositional or editing relations, and senses of rhythm through camera movement. The basic elements of film expression share a qualitative resemblance with the basic elements of bodily perception, and it is this affinity that provides the foundations for the creation and perception of meaning in film.

Sobchack claims that this perceptual encounter between the film and the viewer takes places on an *immediate* and *pre-reflective* level, arguing that the body ‘makes meaning before it makes conscious, reflective thought’ (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*

59). Prior to the film becoming conceptually sensible to the viewer, in terms of characters or narrative, it becomes sensible in terms of its materiality: ‘our lived bodies sensually relate to ‘things’ that ‘matter’ on screen and find them sensible in a primary, pre-personal and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized’ (*The Address of the Eye* 65). Similarly, films are taken to express a fundamental condition of materiality before they manifest more ‘abstract’ concepts such as psychology, plot or place.

This emphasis on the immediacy of bodily perception is evident in Sobchack’s readings of films. In her discussion of viewing the opening moments of Campion’s *The Piano*, she claims that her body was able to physically understand the content of film’s indistinct presentation of Ada’s hand before her mind was able to:

From the first (although I did not know it until the second shot), my fingers *comprehended* the image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, ‘felt themselves’ as a potentiality in the subjective and fleshy situation figured onscreen... (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 63).

She cites this as an example of both the corporeal and reflexive nature of film spectatorship and the fundamentally sensuous and physical character of film expression. Her analysis makes explicit that she understands bodily responses to film materiality to be, in some sense, disconnected from one’s mental understanding. They are both prior to and more fundamental than any other form of meaning that may be experienced by the viewer or constructed by the film. However, in attempting to make the case for the universal primacy of this type of engagement with this aspect of the medium, she actually offers a very limited picture of the ways in which bodies respond to film images.

Bodily feelings of fear or attraction may be based on an anticipation or understanding of a character’s behaviour based on their role within a narrative context, in addition to being instantaneous physiological responses. Yet, because Sobchack insists on the unconditional primacy of sensory responsiveness, her arguments cannot address this aspect of a viewer’s bodily experiences. Furthermore, as she takes sensuous materiality to be an expressively neutral constant throughout film, she does not address the ways in which evocations of senses or physicality may be emphasised or withheld as an aesthetic strategy. Qualities of tactile or sensory intensity are more or less apparent both within individual films and from film to film.

This desire to make a claim for the universal primary role of the body and materiality is also undercut by Sobchack's selective choice of films and exemplary moments. Her chosen films have an overt stylistic and narrative emphasis on tactility and sensory responsiveness as issues of thematic importance. For instance, describing a scene in which Harvey Keitel's character, Baines, touches Ada's leg through a hole in her stockings, she states that 'the immediate tactile shock opens me to the general erotic mattering and diffusion of my flesh, and I feel not only my 'own' body but also Baines's body, Ada's body and...the 'film's body' (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 66). For Sobchack, the scene suddenly reveals the shared state of sensing materiality which unites subject matter, film and viewer. However, given the film's emphasis on bodily and sexual repression, it is hardly surprising that moments of physical contact take on a particular intensity for the viewers who are so disposed. It may be argued that the film strives to provoke just the type of reaction that Sobchack describes, and thus another example would be necessary to demonstrate that this manner of response to film physicality is the general rule. Her description of the moment does not reveal the primary significance of sensible materiality that underlies all film images, but rather her own subjective conviction in the success of its realisation of a quality of intense and intimate tactility.

Furthermore, writing that the moment from *The Piano* 'opens [her] up to the general erotic mattering and diffusion of [her] flesh', she implies that she has chosen the scene because it makes the role of corporeality in the viewer's perception of film images more obviously apparent. However, the very process of selecting this moment (and others) as a *heightened* example of this general state reveals that 'tactility' and 'materiality' on film may be variable in terms of both quality and degree, and are experienced as such. The significance of this potential for variation, however, remains unexplored because her intention is to make the case for the immediacy and universal primacy of bodily perception, ahead of all other ways of comprehending and engaging with film images.

As a result of this focus on films which strive to make their tactile or material dimensions overt, the question of how sensorial immersion may work in films which adopt a less emphatic approach to depicting bodily sensations or physical phenomena is left unanswered. This may be because Sobchack has an undeclared preference for this more obviously sensory style of filmmaking. Tellingly, at one point she quotes a passage from a critic's review which expresses a similar partiality: 'The difference between a movie which makes you admire food and ones that make you love food is

the difference between a dinner table in Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* [1993] and a clove of garlic sliced so intently you can practically inhale its ornery perfume in Scorsese's *Goodfellas* [1990]. One engages the eye and the other arouses all five senses' (Schwarzbaum). This quote reveals the arbitrariness of attempting to abstract sensory identification from other forms of meaning. Where one scene might be said to arouse a viewer's bodily senses in order to create an evocative sense of place and a quality of homeliness (*Goodfellas*), the other strives to minimise sensory engagement by emphasising the pictorial aspect of the image, giving rise to an impression of alienating formality (*The Age of Innocence*).

The bodily perception of a world as expressed through images on screen is of course, in a very basic way, fundamental to the comprehension of film. However, the viewer's actual experience of this world and its material properties depends on the manner of a film's realisation of them. A film may as easily emphasise pictorial surface over physical depth and untraversable distance over material proximity. The sensory and material intensity of film images is not a constant or neutral phenomenon. It is a variable quality that may be more or less significant depending on a film's stylistic invocation of its subject matter. By insisting on the immediate, universal significance played by sensation and materiality, Sobchack reduces the complex and manifold roles they may play in the expression and experience of film meaning.

2.3.2 *Tactile Identifications*

Jennifer Barker's 2009 book *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* explores similar issues to those raised by Sobchack in her earlier work. She also examines the ways in which films may engage their viewers' senses through their material dimension. Contending that the experience of the cinema is a fundamentally tactile one, she argues that the film medium shares many qualities with those of the lived human body. Like Sobchack she claims that both the human body and the 'film's body' are characterised by a 'tactile' 'mode of being in and at the world' (Barker 2). However, Barker sets out to define the precise nature of these similarities in order to discern how they may affect the viewer in different ways, arguing that 'cinematic tactility occurs not only at the skin or the screen, but traverses all the organs of the spectator's body and the film's body' (2).

Differentiating between various modes of cinematic tactility, she identifies three different levels on and through which the viewer may be affected: skin, musculature and viscera. The first of these levels is said to be characterised by the 'tactile

surfaces and textures' which 'permeate the film experience' (Barker 25). For Barker, this tactility is not simply a question of the film's expression of surface and touch, but (drawing on Laura Marks' notion of haptic visuality) one of 'the viewer and the work of art...coming into contact with one another' with 'skin' operating as a permeable boundary between the two (35). 'Musculature' refers to similarities in the ways in which 'we and the film make sense in space by moving through it muscularly in similar ways and with similar attitudes'. The viewer and the film share a 'mimetic, empathetic relationship' in terms of their physical and gestural situation in the world (75). Finally, 'viscera'—understood to be 'the internal organs as we experience them'—describes the 'deepest, most secretive rhythms of the body' which 'resonate between film and viewer in such a way as to intensify what is already an intimate relationship between the two (123). The spectator is said to mimetically experience the temporal structures of a film through the rhythmical responsiveness of their breath or heartbeat.

Barker offers compelling insights into how some films use textural materiality to create significance. In her account of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), she describes the film's attentiveness to different textural qualities of water and argues that they 'come to express a full range of emotions, including joy, longing, fear, and grief' (Barker 43). From a placid, filmy surface that reflects playing children, to the joyous ecstasy of the protagonist's sister frolicking in the of the first rains of the monsoon, to a thunderous and frightening downpour which accompanies her character's subsequent death from pneumonia, the sensory experience of water as a visual, aural and tactile phenomenon takes on great dramatic import for the film. However, whilst this detailed reading reveals the film's dramatic use of various possible textural qualities of water, it does not demonstrate how these scenes necessarily elicit a specifically *tactile* form of response. Indeed, the scene in which the children are reflected in the water could be said to be decidedly un-tactile, as it abstracts the materiality of the children and turns the surface of the pool into a two-dimensional image. Whilst the film may use variations in texture as a device to create meaning, it does not always follow that the viewer's experience of this meaning will be primarily *textural*.

This tension results from the claim that the material basis of film will necessarily elicit some form of corporeally situated mimetic response in the viewer. The film's body and the spectator's body are said to share certain physical and perceptual characteristics, and, as a consequence of this, film is expressed and experienced through this common ground. However, just because a film might use or retain certain prop-

erties of matter in its expression, this does not inevitably result in a primarily tactile or physical response from the viewer. Nor does the importance of materiality for the medium in a general ontological sense mean that it is always one of the most significant qualities in its individual expressive realisations. While there are parallels between the ways in which a film and person might perceive the world and convey themselves within it, by insisting too strenuously on the literalness of these equivalences, Barker reduces the potential for variety in film expression and film spectatorship. Furthermore, this approach overlooks the critical importance of the differences between film perception and film movement and their human correspondences. Although a film and a person may both possess some sort of capacity for a vision, a film's vision may access and reveal things that—in the ordinary run of things—a person's could not. In seeking to affirm the likenesses between the film body and the human body, Barker neglects the divergences which are potentially of just as much meaningful significance.

Like Sobchack, Barker privileges the expression of tactility and the state of being physically affected over other forms of film style and response. Material proximity is said to be more desirable than distance: 'exploring cinema's tactility...opens up the possibility of cinema as an *intimate* experience...rather than as distant observation' (Barker 2). However, while films may exploit their quality of materiality in order to appeal to a viewer's bodily sensations or as a way of expressing meaning through variations in texture or rhythm, they are just as able to abstract our sense of the tactile or the corporeal by turning bodies into silhouettes and the physical world into a two-dimensional image, or allowing it to recede completely into a dissolve. They dismiss the significance of separation, distance and absence in the experience of film, arguing that other critics' emphasise these ideas out of squeamishness: 'most film theorists still seem either embarrassed or bemused by bodies' (Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* 56). While it may be true that the material dimension of film and film spectatorship has been relatively unexplored and is in need of greater critical recognition, this does not mean that it ought to be emphasised at the expense of all other elements of film expression. Furthermore, whilst the impression of materiality is a property of the film medium, it is not its defining one. Rather, this thesis argues (in, for example, the chapter 'Depersonalisation') that the tension between these two seemingly contradictory states of physical presence and immaterial absence may be deliberately exploited and negotiated as a vehicle for drama and meaning.

2.3.3 *Affect and Excess*

Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* sets out to make the case that film images are characterised by a quality of anomalous and excessive presence. He also argues that the works of film theorists who have been influenced by the disciplines of psychoanalysis or semiotics are based on a telling and fundamental misapprehension of this aspect of the medium (Shaviro). Whereas for these writers film is characterised by the condition of *lack* and by its abstraction of appearances from the world, Shaviro claims that it should instead be defined by 'an uncanny, excessive residue of being that subsists when all *should* be lacking' (17).

Shaviro contends that psychoanalytic and semiotic film theorists' emphatic insistence on the notions of lack and absence is actually a displaced, phobic reaction to the medium's ability to *affect* viewers through the potent anomalousness of its images. The attachment of this quality of spuriousness to film is, for Shaviro, another manifestation of the longstanding aversion to the dangerously seductive power of images that is found in philosophy and critical theory more generally. Film images, which he describes to be 'too massively present in their very impalpability', are therefore regarded by these other critics solely in terms of their incomplete relation to a prior, original reality. Their arguments are centred on the supposition that film images are something other than what they delusively *appear* to be. Images are taken to be 'suspect, unreliable, and "ideological," because they presume to subsist in this state of alienation, and even perpetuate it by giving rise to delusive "reality effects," rituals of disavowal, and compensatory fantasies of plenitude and possession' (Shaviro 17).

In contrast, Shaviro stresses the persistence of presence within film images. He claims that they are 'not the index of something that is missing, but the insistence on something that refuses to disappear' (Shaviro 17). For him, the medium's capacity to dislocate appearances from their physical basis in the world does not produce the trace of an absence, but creates something that is entirely new, as 'images on screen are violently torn away from any external horizon or context' (28) The camera does not offer a deficient repetition of a lost original scenario, but rather it generates images which are essentially novel and singular by virtue of their existential independence from any material or cultural referent. Its automatism detaches objects from their physical and symbolic positions in the world and allows them to take on an anomalous and indeterminate status as images.

As a result of their separation of appearances from matter, Shaviro believes that film images are 'devoid of depth and interiority' (Shaviro 32). This stems from the

‘passivity’ of the film camera, which disrupts the order of ‘natural perception’ (subject perceiving an object) and enables it ‘to penetrate, or be enveloped by, the flux of the material world’ (32). Whilst the camera may have a particular perspective outwardly imposed upon its view by a director, in essence it remains radically neutral in its mechanical detachment from subjective perception. Consequently, the viewer is left with ‘the raw contents of sensation, without the forms, horizons, and contexts that usually orient them’ (31). This results in an overwhelming bodily or perceptual experience for the watcher, in which ‘the self is repeatedly shattered by an ecstatic excess of affect’ (56). Denied the ability to readily attribute view to perspective or appearances to real world equivalents, the viewer’s consciousness is subsumed by a glut of ‘unsignifying detail’ and ‘visual excess’ (2 & 243).

Shaviri claims that it is this property of the medium that gives cinema its radical and singular potential to ‘subvert social hierarchies and decompose relations of power’ (Shaviri 60). Rather than reflecting back the Oedipal notion of the ‘split subject’ through an incarnation of absence, film’s detached anomalousness is instead said to offer the viewer a form of pleasurable, masochistic self-annihilation: ‘all cinema tends away from the coagulation of meaning and toward the shattering dispossession of the spectator’ (55). Where ideological and representational conventions rely on the imposition of static forms, Shaviri contends that ‘cinematic vision’ is characterised by ‘a condition of freeplay’ and ‘the incessant metamorphoses of immanent, inconstant appearances’ (39).

Shaviri’s critique of dominant theoretical approaches to the study of film alleges that they are both abstracting and totalising in their imposition of conceptual frameworks based on notions of lack and absence. However, his proposed alternative is just as limiting in terms of both his understanding of the medium and in the number of possibilities for meaning afforded to film expression.

Firstly, by insisting on the condition of absolute neutral presence as the defining property of film and dismissing the idea of absence as a reactive phobic construct, Shaviri reduces the complexity of screen images in the same manner he alleges of Laura Mulvey. Whilst film images are, of course, in some sense anomalous and detached in the manner of their connection to reality, their relation to the world—both material and symbolic—cannot be dismissed so easily. The signifying and material qualities of an object may be *transformed* in the process of its realisation on film, but that object cannot be said to lose all trace of its original properties. Additionally, a viewer’s recognition of an object or situation will always factor into their experi-

ence of it when depicted on film, regardless of the affective intensity of its visual presentation. A film may place more or less emphasis on the indexical or material contexts from which it draws its images, but an object cannot automatically be rendered symbolically neutral (and perceived by a viewer as such) simply by virtue of its conversion onto film. In spite of the elements of expressive independence film images may possess, they still bear the indelible trace of the original scenarios from which they were drawn. Furthermore, specific images from films cannot be interpreted in isolation from their broader chronological, narrative or expressive contexts. Film meaning is a cumulative effect, and the viewer experiences particular images or moments in light of significances that have already accrued.

As a result of this one-sided understanding of the medium's characteristics, Shaviro forecloses on the number of expressive possibilities that are available to film. His argument looks to distinguish between moments of productive visual excess and those of imposed conservative representational convention. The former is said to result in the exposure of the flux of raw materiality, allowing the viewer access to the 'mysterious life of the body, and the latter in the reinforcement of the fallacy of 'natural perception' and dominant cultural power relations' (Shaviro 258). However, this is the full gamut of possible outcomes allowed for by Shaviro's conception of film because its images are said to be always in the process of either revealing or repressing the same thing, regardless of the specificity of their content. Consequently, it is possible for Shaviro to claim that films made by directors as seemingly divergent as Andy Warhol and Robert Bresson are almost identical in terms of their effects. The expressive restraint of Bresson's style is said to produce an equivalent effect to the mechanical detachment of Warhol's static camera: both are said to allow the 'unsignifying details' of the film image to come to the fore (243). Despite their vastly differing subject matter and styles, their films are ultimately the same in their achievements, as they 'deny any intrinsic value or meaning to images' and look to evacuate them of 'depth, interiority, significance, symbolic reference' (251).

Consequently, whilst Shaviro takes Mulvey and other psychoanalytic theorists to task for their 'monolithic' theorising and their foreclosure of 'whatever potential for resistance and subversion, or Deleuzian 'lines of flight' that may lie 'latent within mainstream, Hollywood film', his own arguments lead to a similarly delimited situation (Shaviro). Shaviro's ideas are based on the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi who understand 'affect' not in terms of bodily experience but as a

pre-subjective phenomenon. Despite allowing for the possibility of forms of radical expression in film, Shaviro's understanding of the medium's characteristics necessitates that these moments of resistance all take precisely the same form. Escape from otherwise all-encompassing 'social hierarchies' or dominant 'relations of power' is experienced indirectly by the viewer through the shattering of the artificially imposed 'signifying' dimension of film images, exposing the flux of raw materiality which lies beyond the grasp of their consciousness and can therefore only be registered as bodily affection.

As with Sobchack and Barker, by trying to artificially and preferentially distinguish between affect and other forms of meaning, and visual excess from other forms of expression, Shaviro severely limits the number of possibilities available for film and the spectator's experiences of it. He takes up one aspect of the medium's potential—that of eliciting affective engagement through the sensory and rhythmical dimension of film images—and presents it as its definitive and most desirable characteristic. His single-minded insistence on the obvious affective presentness of images at the expense of all other elements of their status and composition echoes his own critique of other theorists' myopic focus on absence and lack. The later chapter 'Projection' explores how this affective bias skews another critic's interpretation of a female lead in *Written on the Wind*, as the performer's physical intensity is said to intermittently subvert both the expression of character and the innate conservatism of the film's narrative. Rejecting the assumption that film images refer to anything outside of themselves, Shaviro not only fails to acknowledge the complexity of the medium (which holds the poles of presence and absence in tension), but also neglects the many ways in which this tension may be *creatively* deployed by films. Rather than just passively allowing the medium's innate characteristics to become apparent, or working via representation to repress them, films may draw upon these properties as vehicles for the expression of a variety of different meanings.

This chapter has so far demonstrated how some theoretical approaches to cinema have resulted in limited understandings of film expression. Rather than drawing on films in a general way to illustrate broad claims for certain styles of filmmaking or the medium as a whole, this thesis aims to account for the originality and the specificity of a film's content – in particular with regard to the subject of 'female presence'. In so doing, it draws on the tradition of close, detailed analysis in film studies, advanced by writers such as Charles Affron, John Gibbs, Andrew Klevan, George Toles and Douglas Pye. Following on from their approach, the thesis attempts to reveal the

particularities and the *effectiveness* of a film's presentation of subject matter, rather than reducing it to theoretical or ontological generalities.

As this chapter has already argued, the tendency in some areas of film studies to produce reductive and abstracting readings of films has been especially evident in theoretical accounts of female characters. Women on film have often been viewed in light of a film's perceived ideological stance – as manifestations of social and political conventions, rather than a potential source of other forms of meaning. The thesis attempts to counter this trend by demonstrating the complexity and variety with which female characters have been explored in individual films, as well as across cinema more generally. It sets out to achieve this end, and, indeed, argues that this end can only be achieved, through a method of close analysis, which it characterises in terms of attentive engagement and responsiveness.

The thesis claims that the significance of a film's presentation of a female character can only be revealed through the close examination of the means through which it is expressed. Central to this approach to analysis is the principle set out by John Gibbs and Doug Pye in their work *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film*: 'Interpretation has to be rooted in the concrete details of the text (its style) because it is only through these that we gain access to the film's subjects' (Gibbs and Pye 10). In order to account for depth and specificity of the films' explorations of female presence, the chapters strive to unpick and relay the intricate tapestries of significant details through which they are achieved via the creative manipulation and interrelation of many stylistic elements (framing, performance, colour, sound, and so on). Closely tracing the ways that these threads are weaved together into a meaningful, unfolding, and cumulative relation, brings the nature and complexity of a film's exploration of its subject matter into sharp focus.

For this reason, the readings of films presented in the subsequent chapters go into descriptive detail, accounting for nuances of composition and following the progression of scenes from frame-to-frame. However, in addition to providing thorough insight into a film's handling of its subject, this method is also crucial to this project in several other respects. Firstly, by substantiating their interpretative claims through the specifics of a film moment, the chapters provide a basis for either a reader's shared comprehension of those claims, appealing to their own experience of that moment, or informed contestation. The writers discussed earlier in this chapter often rely on generalised stylistic observations or narrative abstractions to support their readings, leaving the reader with little sense of precisely how they arrived at their conclu-

sions regarding a film's meaning. Articulating interpretive claims through nuanced accounts of particular moments allows the reader to follow the processes through which the films produce meaning and the critic identifies it. As Gibbs and Pye note, 'A central advantage of rooting interpretation in the detail of the film ... is that it provides a material and verifiable basis for discussion' (Gibbs and Pye 4).

The other, less straightforward reason for the importance of close-analysis for the thesis stems from my wish to account for the achievement of the films explored in the chapters. I argue that the density of meaning offered by these films cannot be summarily reduced to pithy thematic abstractions, gleaned from a general sense of their narrative, genre, or stylistic conventions. It is my claim that, as well as offering various explorations on the subject of 'female presence', these films provoke and reward close scrutiny through the rich intricacy of their designs. The complexity of meaning achieved by these films cannot simply be stated in the abstract; it can only be demonstrated by attending to the detailed and myriad processes through which it is expressed.³

By describing in detail the composition and progression of particular moments, the thesis strives to do much more than straightforwardly recount the content of a scene. Through a process of evocative description, it strives to invest the reader's comprehension of the film with a sense of the chapter's interpretive perspective. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (Stern and Kouvaros) have stated that, in their work, 'description is seen as something far from self-evident, or simple, but central to critical practice', and that it is 'a question of how to bring into existence, how, in the

³ In its attempts to account for the overall effect of a film's stylistic and narrative investigation of the issue of female presence, the thesis does not explicitly focus its discussions around the creative achievements of particular individuals, either directors or performers. While its subject may suggest a performance based study, its understanding of the theme of presence extends beyond issues of physicality and gesture. These films' explorations of their fictional heroines' are developed through numerous, synthesised aspects of their form, encompassing narrative, mise-en-scene, and performance. Given the collaborative and manifold processes underlying the production of film expression, it would be difficult to untangle these elements in order to acknowledge their specific originators. In this respect, the thesis follows on from Andrew Klevan's understanding of the place on 'intention' in close film analysis, and the acknowledgement of achievement through appreciation: 'The result of all the interactions on set, conscious and unconscious, manifest and mysterious, some documented, some forever hidden, is (what we call) 'the film'. A strikingly significant gesture may be a spontaneous, even unconscious, improvisation of an actress, or it may be a carefully planned out and executed instruction given by a director. However, this uncertainty does not prevent a critic from recognising the effect of the gesture, thereby tacitly acknowledging the creative agent or agents which brought it about without reductively assigning credit to particular individual. John Gibbs has likewise noted that 'every frame, every cut, every element of performance and every note on the soundtrack results from pursuing one option and refusing many others' (Gibbs and Pye 5). Consequently, the process of tracing the detail of film expression and its effectiveness may be seen as a way of appreciating the innumerable of choices and actions that led to its creation.

course of analysis, to evoke for a reader that lost object...' (15). The thesis strives to achieve this textual revival of a particular film's exploration of presence through the process of describing the meaningful collusion of certain elements of its expression. In this way, the method of the thesis is intimately connected to its theme, as the process of trying to 'make present' a film's drama through writing echoes the films' artful negotiations of their heroines' presence. By drawing closely on the details of a film's expression, moment-to-moment, the thesis strives to articulate and acknowledge their complex explorations of the subject of female presence.

3 Artifice: *Morocco*, *Shanghai Express* and *Blonde Venus*

The study of Marlene Dietrich's film performance, especially in relation to her work with the director Josef von Sternberg, has often presented a problem for critics. James Naremore has aptly expressed this difficulty, faced by those attempting to account for the role she plays in the expressive realm of her films: 'She...challenges our ability to judge her acting skill, because her image is unusually dependent on a controlled, artful *mise en scène*' (Naremore 131). This is compounded by a propensity to discuss Sternberg's *mise-en-scène* in terms of its pictorial quality, attributing the legibility of his films to the composition of static images rather than to organisations of montage or movement. For instance, this can be seen in the title of Aeneas MacKenzie's early study of the director, 'Leonardo of the Lenses' (Mackenzie), or in Carole Zucker's more recent study in which she likens Sternberg's oeuvre to that of 'a medieval icon-maker' (Zucker 7).

Consequently, it is often the case that the writing devoted (Oms 64) to the analysis of Dietrich's performances focuses on static framing, costume, lighting and make-up, while the films' development of her presence as a mobile and variable vehicle for the expression of character remains unaddressed. When references to the film's portrayals of her characters do occur, they frequently seek to emphasise the apparently choreographed or artificial nature of Dietrich's performance style, reducing the expressive significance of her presence and stressing the importance of the director's general stylistic designs. It appears that the elaborate and often stylised nature of her exteriors in these films can present an obstacle in terms of viewing her as a performer of credible characters. This is perhaps because the critical tendency to view Sternberg's *mise-en-scène* as a question of static and pictorial tableaux is extended into the discussions of Dietrich's presence. This type of analysis seems to suggest that the expressive capacity of her figure is diminished or contained by the ornate, decorative and 'theatrical' use of *mise-en-scène*, which appears to decidedly favour composition of image over choreography of movement. In this light, Dietrich is not considered to be an independent or generative expressive entity within her film environments, but rather a carefully wrought construction that has significance im-

pressed on it from without. Dietrich emerges through these analyses as a synthetic entity to be deciphered in terms of the film's mediation of particular ideologically loaded 'images' of women, or in light of the omnipotent director's totalising vision. The highly circumscribed nature of her appearance often forestalls critical recognition of the expressive role of her presence in several of von Sternberg's films.

However, attention to Dietrich's characters in three of these films reveals that they consciously address the tension produced by the apparent artifice of her personas. The question of the authenticity of Dietrich's heroines, and the relation between her outer appearance and her interior depths, are taken up as principal narrative and stylistic concerns. The notion of Dietrich's artifice is consciously posed and explored by the films. In particular, these ideas arise through the central performances of Dietrich as expressed through the *mise-en-scène*. The cycle of films made between 1930 and 1932, consisting of *Morocco* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1931) and *Blonde Venus* (1932) are especially concerned with this dynamic between artifice and authenticity. These early Hollywood films by Sternberg precede the stylistic excesses of his later work, such as *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) and *The Devil is a Woman* (1935), in which design, décor and costume come to play a far greater and more dominant expressive role.

The narratives of each of these earlier films revolve chiefly around the failures of other characters, principally the male heroes, to recognise the integrity and sincerity of Dietrich's heroines. This generally occurs as a consequence of the positions her characters occupy within the fictional worlds: a showgirl escaping from an enigmatic past in *Morocco*, a transient professional escort in *Shanghai Express* and a mother turned cabaret performer fleeing from her husband in *Blonde Venus*. Dietrich's roles in all of these films are associated with performative professions; they are predominantly women's careers and all involve the production of one's own image as a spectacle for men. Consequently, the films take up the question of the relation between their female characters' presence and artifice at the most basic narrative level. This idea informs the development of the films' narratives more generally, as their respective male leads all struggle or fail to acknowledge Dietrich's presence beyond the apparent 'superficiality' of her surface. However, the films refute this opposition between depth and artifice, rejecting the moralistic condemnation of their protagonists for their professions; they do not attempt to redeem the women from their association with or investment in spectacle. Rather, they reveal the authenticity and depth contained within the apparent artifice of Dietrich's screen presence.

Before examining the films in detail, this chapter will explore some key examples of the wealth of critical discourse surrounding Dietrich's presence. The emphasis on artifice as the most significant aspect of Dietrich's performances extends throughout the decades of criticism devoted to the discussion of Sternberg's work. For example, Marcel Oms' 1970 discussion of Sternberg suggested that the interaction between psychology and behaviour in the representation of Dietrich depends upon the director's use and manipulation of light: 'Sternberg had perfectly understood that the spirit proper to cinema resided in its aptitude for seeing the interconnexions [sic] of the outward and inward, and that its function was to *show* them by the play of light'. Ten years later Claude Ollier proposed a comparable analysis, stating, 'For Sternberg, light... is the only matter whose existence he does not question' (Ollier 949-50). Similarly, Barry Salt has written that 'the pulsation of light and dark' (Salt 112) is the key element in Sternberg's presentation of Dietrich. These various auteurist studies all elide any discussion of the role of Dietrich's presence beyond the use of her bodily surface as a canvas for Sternberg's idiosyncratic approach to film lighting. Her significance is credited to the director's presentation of her through other elements of the *mise-en-scène*. These critics highlight illumination and shadow as being of special importance for the film's depictions of their heroines, thereby attributing the expressive contribution of Dietrich's body to a non-corporeal and externally determined aspect of her presence. Dietrich's nuanced physical performances are altogether ignored.

The issue is further compounded by biographical issues, arising from the director's own self-proclaimed influence over the actress, exemplified by the now famous boast made by Sternberg: 'Don't tell me that Marlene fills my work...Marlene is not Marlene in my films, let's get that clear, Marlene is me' (Collective 90). Rudolph Arnheim agreed with this assertion, commenting on the extent of Sternberg's control over an actress whom he described as 'an extremely malleable woman' (Arnheim 39). The problems of discussing performance in terms of the relation between actor and director are particularly apparent in the discussion of the Sternberg/Dietrich collaborations. Consequently, another level of abstraction is introduced into the readings of Dietrich's roles, as she is constantly read in light of the latent presence of Sternberg. Oms' article makes the following statement in relation to *The Devil is a Woman*: 'The idea of love that haunts Pygmalion is fundamentally onanistic, and Galatea is in the end no more than a mannequin for assuming the metamorphosis of the creator's fantasies' (Oms 72). This comment seems to reflect the most preva-

lent understandings of the function of Dietrich in the early auteurist studies of her films with Sternberg. She is seen as a fantasy construction, placed in the films and constituted almost entirely by her stylistic realisation at the hands of the director.

However, the degree to which Sternberg may have practically controlled or influenced Dietrich's performances is ultimately unknowable, regardless of how much biographical detail one amasses. Furthermore, while (male) directorial control over (female) performers is not necessarily at odds with a film's capacity to contain thoughtful explorations of female presence, by stressing the relevance of the auteurist extra-textual construction of Dietrich's roles, these roles are reduced to secondary exemplifications of a particular filmmaker's style of production, disregarding the specificity of their content. The meaning of a performance within a film is not necessarily related to the way in which it may have been developed through the relation between an actor and a director. These critics view the films in terms of an externally determined notion of the filmmaker's style, derived more from an anecdotal sense of personalities and relationships than from anything within the films themselves. This discussion, therefore, will attempt to focus on the description and evocation of presence within the films. It may be the case that Sternberg was in fact highly influential in the development of Dietrich's performances, but by imposing this circumstantial detail onto the actual content of the films, these writers miss the complexity of their stylistic and narrative explorations.

Similarly, Dietrich's notoriety as a screen actress and an off-screen icon has also imbued critical readings of her film roles. The spectator's awareness of her as the extra-narrative construction of 'Marlene Dietrich' can be said to exceed her 'character' function in the films, sometimes to the extent of engulfing it entirely. She is often said to undermine or to exceed her context within the films, disrupting the fluency of the spectator's apprehension of her within the fictional world. For example, Carole Zucker, in her auteurist study of the director, presents Sternberg as a medieval iconographer attempting 'to impose a sense of the non-material—the un-earthly, the divine—on that object [Dietrich]' (Zucker 182). This goal is, according to Zucker, achieved through the disavowal of the physical dimension of Dietrich's presence, using lighting, costume, sustained close-ups and a slow pace to create an environment in which the central female figure may become an object of veneration. She exists neither as an expressive element within the narrative fiction (which is virtually incidental), nor as an entity endowed with physical or tactile impact, because her meta-dramatic presence takes over and exceeds the film world: 'her presence is

an on-going force that dominates any individual role' (143). For Zucker, 'Dietrich relinquishes her roles; she does not *need* to act. She is revealed as a 'pure' image, independent of the fiction that envelops her' (144). Consequently, Zucker understands the true significance of Dietrich's performances to be abstracted from their specific and contingent realisations within the films themselves. Again, Dietrich's presence is divested of its capacity for expressiveness within her surrounding fictional environment because of its excessive investment in its own image. Rather than residing harmoniously within the context of the film itself, Zucker states that she is 'independent' of it. As 'pure image', her presence also supersedes her body, and other non-static or non-imagistic dimensions which may contribute to the overall effect of her roles. Her distinctive voice and her gestures, for example, are sidelined or subordinated to a purely pictorial understanding of her appearance.

Lutz Koepnick goes even further, choosing to emphasise the constructed nature of Dietrich's face in terms of the combination of the technical with the corporeal that occurs, for instance, through use of make-up and lighting. Her sentiments echo Zucker's reading of her as an excess of presence which seems to deny individuation or specificity; her role within the contextual world of the film is subordinate to her image as an extra-narrative construct: 'Dietrich's face was a face without qualities...To read her face either as a sign of subjective expressiveness or as an auteur's text and language misses the point' (Koepnick 46). She continues, 'Dietrich's face invited viewers to brush aside...concepts such as authorship, expressiveness, authenticity, and intentional meaning' (46). Thus, for Koepnick, Dietrich's roles in her films ought to be read as synthetically produced incarnations of her meta-fictional iconic status, or as products of the star system and its technological machinations. Her image does not even enter into a relation with ideas of artifice or authenticity because its hybridised status bypasses such notions altogether. Furthermore, her face is said to have been so controlled by externally determined factors, both technical (in relation to the film's style) and cultural (in relation to the public dissemination of her visage), that it ultimately 'did not exist' (47). The upshot of this, for Koepnick, is that the prosthetic and stylised condition of Dietrich's face enacts a rejection of stable meaning. It overturns any idea of authenticity and subverts the centrality of expression usually accorded to the body in film through its transformative malleability, undermining 'the dominant metaphysics of identity' (58). Thus, her roles within the films can only be read as disavowals of themselves, and their significance is established solely in terms of their relation to non-narrative abstract concepts.

The understanding of Dietrich's film presence as being imagistic or abstract is continued by the branch of Sternberg studies informed by Laura Mulvey's famous essay 'Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 14-26) and other feminist, Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches. Mulvey's renowned piece proposes an exclusively masculine audience afforded two equally reductive means of achieving pleasure: sadistic voyeurism, as exemplified by Alfred Hitchcock, and fetishistic scopophilia, found in the works of Sternberg with Dietrich. Aside from the general criticism that this argument leaves no space for a female spectator position as (an issue subsequently raised by Mulvey herself), the work neglects to allow for the possibility that the films *consciously* encourage these types of reflection on the role of spectacle and artifice in gender relations (29-38). Moreover, this approach again casts the role of Dietrich as a symptomatic surface or image. She is consciously or unconsciously constructed and controlled by the will of the director, for the benefit of a male spectator. Her body itself is therefore divested of any independent expressive capacities, read as an expression of ideological processes or as a symptom of (male) psychological states.

Elizabeth Cowie, following on from Laura Mulvey's seminal essay, seeks to emphasise the 'constructedness' of Dietrich's film performances, highlighting the flawlessness of her appearance and the contrived nature of the films' choreographies of looks or the use of props (Cowie 272). However, for Cowie, Dietrich is not understood in terms of fetishism but as 'the phallic mother of the mirror phase', a product of the process of idealisation enacted by Sternberg's execution of the *mise-en-scène* through lighting, costume and make-up (271). Clare Johnston inversely singles von Sternberg out as a director who consigns women to a state of perpetual absence by repressing Dietrich's characters as sexual and social beings in order to confirm the position of the man as central in the film world. She suggests that through the repeated allusions to androgyny in the films 'the image of a woman becomes merely the trace of the exclusion and repression of woman' (Johnston 211 & 208-218).

The spectrum of the literature on Dietrich's films with Sternberg, though theoretically diverse, shares an inclination towards reading Dietrich's presence as a manifestation of Sternberg's complex visual style, either to appreciate it through auteurist analysis or to demystify it through psychoanalytic or feminist critique. Consequently, the dynamic engagement she has with her specific and differentiated narrative contexts is overlooked. In these arguments she exists as a product or paragon of fetish, a venerated icon or a tool for Sternberg's aesthetic program, set apart from or

raised above her context. As much as Mulvey's argument had neglected to take into account the films' *conscious* exploration of gender relations through dominance and submission, the majority of these discussions neglect to acknowledge that rather than purely fetishising Dietrich's image or condemning it to a state of absence through superficiality, they engage with these ideas by design. The negotiation of her presence, within which imagistic artifice is part of her characters' expressions of authenticity, is central to both the films' narrative and aesthetic concerns.

This is achieved through a number of different stylistic approaches which distinguish her individual characters, while still reflecting similar themes. For instance, in *Morocco*, Dietrich's central character, Amy Jolly, is distinguished by a marked slowness or lethargy which contrasts sharply with the frenetic setting of Sternberg's *Morocco*. Zucker has argued that this slowness produces a stylised effect which raises the question as to whether 'what is created *is* a character' (Zucker). However, setting her apart from the economy of interactions that surround her even as she participates in them, this torpor allows for the affirmation of her independence and autonomy. It depicts her immunity to the behavioral rhythms and gestural patterns of the people around her, which determine the often self-servingly exploitative nature of their relations. Her heavy and measured bearing also endows her presence with a jaded and melancholic timbre, suggesting a degree of insight into others born from hard-won experience. She staunchly maintains this recalcitrant slowness as a means of resisting integration into the world of affable hypocrisy exemplified by Monsieur La Bessière (Adolf Menjou), her tenacious suitor whose apparent courtesy and generosity mask his obsessive desire. The seemingly artificial manner of this performance is central to the film's characterisation of Amy's uncompromising independence.

Dietrich's character in *Shanghai Express* is most often discussed in terms of an apparent split into two irreconcilable roles: Madeline, the past fiancée of Captain Harvey (Clive Brook), and Shanghai Lily, the notorious escort or 'coaster' she became following their separation. This extreme divide, it is suggested, has the effect of undermining any coherent sense of character by imposing two very different personalities onto Dietrich's presence.

Captain Harvey similarly struggles to reconcile these divergent identities with the women he encounters in the present. Dietrich's overtly glamourised appearance poses a further challenge to the recognition of the sincerity of Lily's character. However, rather than diluting her credibility, the film uses elements of artifice and spectacle in its presentation of Lily to create an impression of her self-determination

and confident individuality. However, it simultaneously shows how these crucial features of her presence may forestall the appreciation of her depth due to the prejudices which surround them. Furthermore, at certain points in the film, Lily overtly performs the apparently dual aspects of her persona in order to expose their reductive inadequacy. The film explores how the artifice of Lily's presence is taken by other characters to be synonymous with a lack of authenticity, while also revealing the injustice of this assumption.

Similarly, *Blonde Venus* has most often been considered in terms of Dietrich's seemingly discontinuous dual personas as a mother and a successful cabaret performer. Ann E. Kaplan, for example, has suggested that this uneasy meeting of two usually mutually exclusive roles involuntarily creates a tension that, albeit in a crucially limited way, exposes the patriarchal norms which govern the woman's position within the nuclear family (Kaplan 53). However, throughout the domestic scenes during the first part of the film, Dietrich's presence takes on an uncharacteristically perfunctory quality. Her character's muted appearance and physicality during these early sequences (in spite of their apparently 'realistic' tone) seem to be distinguished by a stiltedness or an expressive frustration that is later remedied once she resumes her work and identity as a performer. This impression is underscored by the discordant stylistic shift from the erotic vitality of her character's introductory scene to the subdued ordinariness of her subsequent domestic setting. The apparent 'authenticity' of the depiction of her family life seems artificial in its restrained inertia when compared to the vivid dynamism of the film's previous moments. When in the final scene, Dietrich's character chooses to resume her maternal role in the family, she does so as the glamorous and fulfilled individual she has subsequently become. The positive reconciliation of the family rests on the affirmation of the legitimacy of Dietrich's roles as a performer and a mother, and the incorporation of the 'artifice' of her appearance within the seemingly more 'authentic' realm of the domestic environment. In this way, each of the films raises the status of Dietrich's presence and artifice as a critical aspect of their drama.

3.1 *Morocco*: Performance and Detachment

The initial encounter between Amy Jolly (Marlene Dietrich), a cabaret performer in recently reduced circumstances, and La Bessière (Adolf Menjou), a European upper middle class artist, is illustrative of her gesturally parsimonious performance style throughout much of the film. However, rather than emerging as an example

of an overtly choreographed or non-naturalistic performance style, this slowness asserts her independence within the narrative context of the film by allowing her to reject La Bessière's terms for their interaction. Her indifferent and languorous physicality manifests neither contempt nor gratitude towards his offers of service to her, but rather shows her to be immune to influence and defiantly resistant to the exploitative relationships he obviously represents. Her lethargic insolence both rejects La Bessière's offer of assistance and affirms the independence of character in the film, not her expressive independence from it.

The scene takes place on a boat arriving at the port of Morocco. Jolly enters on the right of the frame, swinging herself around an object lying just out of shot.



Her loose coat flows around her as she sidles forward, slouching her shoulders and swinging her arms. This shapeless black costume conceals her figure and her half veil renders her facial features indistinct. Shrouded by both her apparel and the shadows, she appears on the darker side of the shot, as the lighting of the scene seems to favour La Bessière, who is dressed in lighter clothing and standing to her right. Although her mute costume suggests an unwillingness to attract attention, the composition of the image clearly emphasises her separateness or independence from the crowd to her right. Her loose comportment in these introductory moments seems unaffected and unself-conscious. She moves freely, with a slack posture. This limp physicality imparts a resigned despondence, an attitude which is explained at the end of this sequence as the ship's captain refers to her as a 'suicide-passenger', a woman with a one-way ticket who never returns from Morocco. This suicidal journey is thus a dénouement for an earlier but never disclosed story.



Her manner abruptly changes as her suitcase suddenly falls open and her posses-

sions tumble out onto the deck of the ship. Her careless demeanor is transformed by self-consciousness, as she looks around anxiously to see if anyone observed her accident. Upon noticing La Bessière's rapid approach she reaches down to begin hurriedly packing her belongings back into the suitcase before he reaches her. As he kneels to assist, she half closes the suitcase to block him. However, La Bessière places his hand on the lid to pull it away from her grasp.



The low camera angle makes his intrusion into her space clear, as she bends down into the frame. Rather than objecting to his incursion, she passively permits his assistance while remaining silent and indifferent to him. Without acknowledging his presence, she stands, allowing him to gather her belongings at her feet. This apparent submission on her part allows her to avoid entering into any dialogue or interaction with him. By choosing to allow his help, but also to ignore it, she refuses to participate in the circuit of service and remuneration that later comes to define the type of relationship La Bessière wishes to enter into with her.

This moment has been referred to by a number of critics in terms of its sado-masochistic connotations (Naremore 140). The masochistic element of the Sternberg/Dietrich films has been most thoroughly developed by Gaylyn Studlar (Studlar). Her psychoanalytic study of the director suggests that the films are imagistic in nature, due to an emphasis on sustained visual metaphor as a mode of signification opposed to conventional linear storytelling (144). This point of view is different from that of a critic such as Laura Mulvey, for example, for whom linear narrative functions as the unassailable formal principle of Hollywood film, with a male-driven story temporarily arrested by the appearance of the fetishised woman in order for her image to be looked at. For Studlar, however, the visual metaphor becomes itself a fetish, as the revelation of meaning is always delayed or suspended. Recurrence and repetition are necessary for its significance to become apparent (Studlar). Studlar reads this delay in understanding or waiting for knowledge as a parallel for the state of suspended desire which characterises masochism.

Whilst Studlar's emphasis on the imagistic nature of Sternberg's narratives is an illuminating way in which to address the cycle (especially the later films), once

again it approaches their visual style in terms of the manifestation of unconscious processes. The significance of Dietrich's presence is reduced to an endless repetition and restaging of the director's masochistic fantasy. Furthermore, within this framework, the role of the imagistic metaphor as the force behind the suspension of knowledge is equated with the position of the woman as the object of suspended desire. Thus, both are necessarily and continually unrealised, never attaining a state of fulfilment or actualisation in order to perpetuate a state of narrative (and sexual) frustration. For Studlar, within the masochistic drive of the narrative, La Bessière functions directly as a means for the director to play out or reflect his own fantasies. Amy Jolly's (Dietrich's) presence is understood as the reified object of La Bessière's (Sternberg's) suspended desire. In the context of this shot, he has forcibly positioned himself in a subordinate role by imposing his assistance on Jolly. The shot emphasises his position, as Dietrich's body remains unrealised by remaining out of shot, fetishistically drawing attention to only her legs and heels.



However, in the context of the scene as a whole, an alternative reading of the moment emerges. Rather than engaging in a limited number of static moments which only become significant through a symbolic relation to one another, Jolly's presence in the scene develops continuously in terms of her gestural rejection of La Bessière's advances. For example, as he continues to gather her possessions at her feet, she is shown drawing her coat tightly around herself, suggesting that her loose and easy manner in the opening moments of the scene has developed into a greater sense of self-awareness and insecurity. Her privacy has been intruded upon and by pulling her coat and her arms around her body in this way she appears defensive and guarded, emphasising the unwelcomeness of his imposition and her internal response to the situation.

A close-up of her face (the first in the film) shows her turning resolutely away from La Bessière with a muted yet hesitant expression. The blankness of her face suggests cautiousness and signals an unapproachableness that La Bessière goes on to ignore. The indistinctness of the background contrasts with the sharpness of her features and the detail of her veil, emphasising her separateness and internal remote-

ness further still. The straight-on angle of the shot disassociates itself entirely from the perspective of La Bessière, who is crouching on the ground to her right. She seems suspicious of his act of spontaneous chivalry and shows no signs of appreciation or gratitude. She then looks down towards him, seeming to half-smile to herself before turning away once again. La Bessière does not see this moment, and her wry expression intimates her awareness of his possible motives in readily offering her assistance, suggesting that she finds his gentlemanly performance amusing and tiresome.



As he rises to hand over the suitcase, she begins to slide and stretch her gloves between her fingers, creating an air of anxiety or nervousness at the intrusion of this stranger and their impending exchange. Her loose posture has now been replaced by a state of physical tension exemplified by gestures which draw her body in on itself. Her arms, which before swung freely, are now stiffly clamped close to her body; her shoulders are tensed. Her occupied hands also suggest a desire to avoid the conventional formality of shaking hands with him, as well as creating an impression of distracted preoccupation. In this shot, her whole body expresses a reluctance to be drawn into any type of exchange with this stranger, as she faces away from him whilst pulling her arms around herself. This state of physical tension, depicting both her bemused alienation and anxiety, does not coincide with the construction of her as the static and psychologically two-dimensional object of the film's masochistic desire.



She maintains this position, staring away from La Bessière as he stands with the restored suitcase, forcing him to draw her attention by saying "There you are". The characters are now framed together in a two-shot, as she turns to face him in a left profile position. She looks down at her suitcase before briefly looking up to him and

then looking down once more. She appears reluctant to maintain eye contact and establish a rapport with him. The protracted nature of her eye-movements and the time she takes to respond distances her from the playful civility of La Bessière's tone. Thanking him very formally, "Merci, monsieur, you are very kind", she returns to her former frontal position looking away from him.



Ignoring this gesture of disinterestedness, he inquires, "Is this your first voyage to Morocco?" She turns her head slowly whilst keeping her body still, making her unwillingness clear by showing the degree of effort she is expending. Again she glances up and down at him before answering with an expression of suspicion and disdain, lengthening the pause. This sense of her weariness is extended into her response to his question. She eventually answers "Yes", the delay implying her struggle in extracting a reply for him. Her tone is wary and almost accusatory. Her response pronounces her mistrustful and tentative attitude towards him. Consequently, the utterance also emerges as an expression of a past haunted by experiences of similar men gone awry. The delay between his question and her answer and the stilted and drawn out tone of her reply has the effect of greatly distancing the two individuals involved in this brief exchange. It appears that they are communicating on two entirely different registers, his casual yet eager small talk clashing with her guarded, almost recriminatory, defensiveness as she refuses to participate in the back and forth of casual conversation.

This conflict of tone is exacerbated further as La Bessière continues, "Perhaps I can be of some service". Once again, Jolly looks away to the right. A very slight smile appears on her face, perhaps as her suspicions have been partly confirmed, as she pauses briefly once again before replying, "I won't need any help". Here, her framing, gesture, expression and voice operate together in a rejection of his attempted intimacy, verging on rudeness. Returning to a close-up of her face and thereby separating her from her interlocutor, she turns away from him with an expression of cold disinterest reflected by the flat and matter-of-fact tone of her voice. She physically turns away from him at the same time as rejecting his tone of polite intimacy with her terse and blunt repost to his offer. The dynamic between the two-shot, which has

a greater depth of field and includes details of the background, and the close-up of Dietrich, which blurs out the surroundings, has the effect of stressing her reactions to La Bessière and evoking an impression of her interior states.



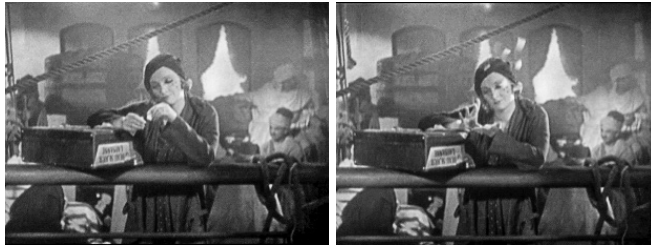
Following this, there is a return to the two-shot as La Bessière reaches into his pocket, takes out his wallet and produces his card whilst Jolly remains completely immobile, her hands tightly gripping her suitcase. She eventually accepts the card, having first eyed it suspiciously. As she removes it from his hand, her posture slackens and a sardonic smile briefly crosses her face. Her look seems to simultaneously suggest her over-familiarity with this type of scenario and a rueful humour.



She looks to the left without returning La Bessière's gaze, dryly and almost mechanically replying "Merçi, Monsieur", before slowly and despondently walking out of the frame to the left, failing to notice La Bessière's tip of his hat as she strides away. Again, rather than refusing the card, she accepts it passively before rejecting him. She declines his offer by remaining utterly implacable and disengaged. Her actions leave little doubt as to whether she will take him up on his proposal. Dietrich's performance of indifference continues as she then enters the frame to the right, approaching the ship's railing. She loosely swings her suitcase up onto the rail, resting her right arm on the bag as her left hand cups her face and supports her chin. Holding La Bessière's card, she turns it around casually in her hand whilst looking at it with an expression of blank disinterest.



As a fog horn sounds she tears the card into small pieces, rhythmically and systematically, before placing them in the palm of her hand and carefully flicking them forwards.



Jolly's measured resistance of La Bessière's affable offer is made more apparent through the manner in which dispenses with his card. She coldly and methodically tears it into pieces before taking her time to flick them purposefully into the water. Her systematic and methodical performance of rudeness subverts La Bessière's good-humoured friendliness. Throughout the sequence, she does not respond to or reciprocate his genial demeanour in any way. She engages, instead, with the intentions which she recognises are implicit in his actions. The film evokes this sense of her interior responses through the use of close-ups, singling out her reactions and enforcing an impression of her thoughtfulness. In this sequence, Amy Jolly enacts a sustained rejection of La Bessière's attempt to exchange with her through all elements of her physicality. The minimal use of gesture and a slow physical pace imply a weariness and a sense of struggle in responding to his persistent civility. Her use of eye movement repeatedly rejects any reciprocal looks as she constantly either looks away from him completely or surveys him with a suspicious and doubtful expression, questioning his motives and assessing an adversary. She takes pains with her glances to avoid looking at La Bessière, so as to discourage his advances. Her vocal intonation is frosty and her responses always seek to deter further questioning. His persistence seems to tire her, and the sense of fatigue increases as the scene progresses. Furthermore, the manner in which her presence is realised by the scene, using close-ups which blur out the background and separate her from La Bessière, emphasise her outlook on the situation by alluding to her processes of private reflection.

In his discussion of this sequence, James Naremore has suggested that it involves a 'deliberate showing off rather than a transparent "being there"...an ostensiveness that makes us more than usually aware that we are watching a performance' (Naremore 139-140). This is true in as much as the *character* is offering a performance of disdain in order to eschew La Bessière persistence. However, Naremore's claim

that the scene strives to assert the constructedness of *Dietrich's* performance is unfounded. Both her physicality and the film's depiction of her undergo a marked transformation upon La Bessière's arrival, signalling an investment in creating a sense of character responsiveness. The use of close-ups and the subtle modulations in Dietrich's expression produce an impression of interiority and convey her character's independence. The suggested state of reflexive and meta-fictional self-awareness Naremore identifies in Dietrich's performance seems to reproduce the misreading of Jolly's impassiveness as deliberate coyness by La Bessière. The change in her demeanour and the austerity of her performance do not imply a kind of artifice which transports her outside of the fiction but, inversely, show a responsiveness to her environment which anchors her to it.

The listlessness of Dietrich's performance and the film's emphasis on her sensitivity and responsiveness create the impression of a distinct character with a past. Her lethargy in relation to La Bessière asserts her independence and her rejection of his terms for their interaction and relation. The apparent artifice of her behaviour in this sequence does not signal Dietrich's performative undermining of the credibility of the fiction, but her character's pronounced dismissal of La Bessière.

3.2 *Shanghai Express*: Autonomy and Irony

Shanghai Lily, Marlene Dietrich's character in Joseph von Sternberg's 1932 film *Shanghai Express*, first appears at Peking train station just before the eponymous train is due to depart. In the preceding moments, the scene established the station as a frenetic, pulsating and chaotic environment. Crowds of people laden with all manner of luggage struggle to move and find their way through the throng.



Lily arrives in a large chauffeur driven car, obscured in the shadowy back seat. She climbs down from the vehicle effortlessly, as the chauffeur holds open the door. Without pausing, she strides purposefully and casually over to the ticket collector, carelessly stroking a large pillar with the tip of her gloved finger as she passes by.



She emerges into this flurry of activity, composed and controlled. Even the camera, which has until now appeared unsteady and highly mobile, appears more fixed. Employing a leftward and forward motion, it echoes and reinforces the smoothness of her movement. As opposed to the anonymity of the other people on the platform, who cross the camera at various angles while constantly getting in each other's way, there is no sense of hindrance. The camera follows her unimpeded progress through the crowd. She approaches the ticket collector and there is a cut to a medium close-up. She turns her head to the train and then looks forward, wryly taking in her surroundings with ease and confidence. The partial veiling of her face and the shrouding of her hair and shoulders in black feathers makes her expression appear all the more vivid. The rich black of her fitted hat and boa combined with the brightly illuminated lower part of her face offer a sharp contrast and stand out from the grey of the background.



This sequence sets Lily apart from her surroundings, detaching her from the rest of the action. In amongst the hubbub and confusion on the platform, she has her own temporality and rhythm which remain immune to the confusion. The tumult borders but does not touch her. The combination of her languid way of walking and the ease with which she moves asserts her imperviousness to the disorder of the immediate environment. It appears as though the scene were artificially orchestrated to accommodate her presence. Before, the seemingly uncoordinated movements of figures in and out of the shot and the use of double exposure to emphasise the confusion of the scene suggested a permeable frame and image. However, when the camera comes to focus on Lily the shot has a far more closed and composed quality. The boundaries of the frame are now adjusted to fit to her shrouded face and shoulders. The density of her black costume and white face contrasts with the

ephemeral transparency of the scene's earlier use of double exposure. Her presence is clearly and vividly delineated within the otherwise disordered and confusing setting of the train station.

The obvious stylistic contrivances of the scene's presentation of her character stress her singularity within her environment and heighten the impression of her autonomous individuality. The transparent artifice of the film's introduction of Shanghai Lily does not rhetorically detach Dietrich's presence from the diegetic fictional world, but defines her character's confident and uncompromising independence within it. The scene subtly furthers its presentation of her character through the inclusion of a brief moment of tactility, as she brushes a pillar in passing. This gesture anchors her to her immediate physical environment, asserting her character's presentness to her surroundings. The seemingly heedless spontaneity of the action is juxtaposed with the obvious orchestration of the scene's portrayal of her elaborate figure. It briefly demonstrates that the artifice of Lily's presence in film is continuous with a sincerity of characterisation.

This tension between the apparent superficiality of Lily's glamorous appearance and the acknowledgement of her character's depth and authenticity forms the basis of the film's drama. She is repeatedly and reductively misjudged by the film's other lead, Captain Harvey (Clive Brooks), her ex-fiancé, whom she encounters on a train bound for Shanghai. Harvey, whom Lily affectionately calls 'Doc', cannot reconcile his knowledge of the notorious escort 'Shanghai Lily' with his idealised memories of his past lover 'Madeline'. He imposes these abstract personas, one generated through gossip and the other through his nostalgia, stubbornly failing to recognise her in the present and on her own terms. Simultaneously, Lily sets out to demonstrate the reductive inadequacy of each of these personas' concern which is also taken up through the film's stylistic depiction of her. The film explores this tension between spectacle and depth, revealing how the artifice of Lily's presence is both the source of various characters' misjudgements of her and the locus of her self-determination.

Numerous discussions of the film have argued that the narrative division of Lily into two seeming unrelated and irreconcilable personas signals the film's rejection of believable characterisation. Carole Zucker analyses this split, alongside the apparent superficiality of Dietrich's performance, as evidence of the obviation of the character's sincerity (Zucker 143). Dietrich's choreographed gestures foreground their status as acts and her highly wrought appearance emphasises its own artifice, undercutting any sense of authenticity (142). Her presence in the film is deliberately

constituted neither to invoke the impression of a real physically lived body, nor any authentic emotional or mental states. Without any sense of the cumulative development of a character, Zucker reads Shanghai Lily as a non-linear procession of superficial roles. However, as this chapter will show, this reading privileges the perspective of Captain Harvey, by reproducing his dualistic division of her characters' misjudgement which both Lily and the film work to overturn. This interpretation fails to recognise the ways in which the film carefully subverts and undermines Harvey's point of view, by showing how Lily's presence supersedes either of his imagined personas.

Catherine Constable's more recent study of the film also understands Lily's character in terms of this split (Constable 144). However, she rejects the idea that this renders her character as essentially 'inauthentic'. Instead, Constable proposes that Madeline/Shanghai Lily enacts a complex 'play' between the two roles which allows for the generative creation of new meanings (145). Constable argues that Lily's superficiality or lack of depth is not an end in itself but a means of creating an original and progressive perspective. For Constable, surface need not be understood solely in terms of absence of depth, as Zucker suggests, but may be viewed as a way of establishing an alternative path towards meaning and expressivity. Constable's mostly understands this 'new perspective' to be a critique of the bourgeois values which define the film's other characters and a refusal to be defined within these reductive terms (147). Constable's argument affirms the authenticity of Shanghai Lily's presence by allowing the false to become a site for the creation of new meanings rather than eliding meaning altogether. However, for Constable, the unique authenticity of Lily's character is achieved through the affirmation of her dual persona, as the 'doubled aspect' allows the film to set up 'a complex relation between the two different roles' (144). Despite her suggestion that the apparent artifice of Dietrich's presence can become a vehicle for critique and self-expression, Lily is still read in terms of character breaks or shifts which 'play' (145) against one another. Rather, the film demonstrates that Lily cannot be reduced to one or both of these abstract personas through its complex dramatisation of her presence.

This critical focus on the notion of two distinguishable performative roles fails to recognise that the Madeline/Shanghai Lily split is a dichotomy that is repeatedly imposed on her from without and one which she is shown to routinely struggle against. She strives to achieve an acknowledgement of the irreducibility of her character by exposing the fallacies of 'Shanghai Lily' and 'Madeline'. During the moments where

Lily does seem to adopt an affected persona of some sort, she does so in order to parody other character's judgements of her or to highlight their reductive assessments of her. Ultimately, however, her presence is always shown to surpass or exceed the invocation of any one role.

This dynamic is particularly apparent in the scene that reunites Harvey and Lily for the first time in five years. While the eponymous train prepares to depart, the two are shown in a wide shot, occupying neighbouring train windows. This arrangement inscribes the separation between the characters, as the bar between the windows divides their figures within the frame. While they are clearly sharing the same physical space within the train carriage, the shot's composition creates an impression of a solid and untraversable boundary.



Lily is obscured by shadows and her elaborate costume, while Harvey is more clearly illuminated on the left side of the frame. While Harvey leans out of the window to look to the right, Madeline gazes straight at him from behind, without making any move to attract his attention. This arrangement introduces the dynamics of recognition which will go on to characterise the scene and the film more generally. While Harvey's presence to the camera is clearly delineated, Lily appears more indistinct. Furthermore, where Lily seems to have immediately recognised the individual beside her, he is yet to notice her. The composition stages the challenge of acknowledging Lily's character, which is developed as a central narrative concern of the film.

Harvey then quickly turns his head, suddenly becoming aware of her presence behind him.



The process of Harvey's turning around and recognition of Lily is drawn out for ten seconds, highlighting his uncertainty. Lily immediately mirrors his adjust-

ment of his position by quickly turning to the left, feigning ignorance of his presence and obliging him to instigate their interaction. They shake hands around the window frame which divides them. Whilst continuing to hold hands, Madeline comments that ‘Doc’ hasn’t changed at all. He replies, “Well, you’ve changed a lot...”, explaining the delay in his recognition of her. The two remain almost entirely static during this exchange, until the point at which they release hands and turn away from each other. They both appear reluctant to overcome the distance between them without invitation. The sequence seems to affirm their separation and distance from one another both through the composition and the restraint of their physicality. However, Lily’s initial attentiveness to Captain Harvey and the rapidity of her response when he turns to look at her belie her cool insouciance and hint at the true nature of her feelings for him.

In the moment of silence which follows, Madeline reaches around the window and takes a drape from the side of the train between her fingers.



This tactile gesture imparts a sense of Lily’s emotional state, as she attempts to deflect her attention away from Harvey by distractedly stroking the fabric. The anomalous spontaneity of the action breaks with the otherwise highly composed arrangement of the frame, suggesting that her outer composure is working to conceal her true reaction. As a consequence of this, Lily’s presence in the scene seems to go beyond Constable’s suggestion of ‘playing up to her notorious reputation’ (Constable 147). Neither does it seem to belong a style of performance which seeks to stress its own disingenuousness, with every gesture affirming its status as an act. Similar to the moment in which she brushed the pillar in her first scene, it suggests an impulsiveness and a thoughtfulness which cannot be reconciled with a notion of overtly superficial characterisation.

Their visual separation in the frame is now extended into the cuts between the two windows as they begin to discuss their past. They now appear even more isolated from one another. She responds to his coldness with provocation, reacting disbelievingly to his declaration that he has thought of nothing but her for the last five years: “You were always polite, Doc. You haven’t changed a bit”. Indeed, his

rigid physicality and cool attitude do not correspond to his passionate declaration. During this exchange, Lily's wry self-deprecation evokes a more vivid sense of personality than that which is expressed through the stifled chivalry of Harvey. Her mocking demeanour conveys a defensiveness, echoed by her slouched posture, and a self-consciousness that is reflected in her toying with the curtain.

The film then cuts to the original medium shot as the two characters step back to face one another in the corridor. Doc observes that she has changed a lot before backing away from her; Lily then challenges his uncertain reaction to her by asking whether she has lost her looks. Following Doc's reply that she is "more beautiful than ever", she steps forward across the window boundary that has divided the two figures up to this point.



This breaking of the compositional symmetry that had previously characterised the scene emphasises the confrontational nature of Lily's behaviour. As she steps into his frame, bridging the divide between the two windows, she assumes a provocative stance. She challenges Harvey to directly acknowledge her, refusing to allow him to retreat into his nostalgic idealisations or to be shamed by his potential judgement of her altered state. She demands, "how have I changed?", placing her left hand on her hip and extending her shoulders forward whilst looking him straight in the eye. It is at this point that Constable claims that Lily is 'playing up to her reputation' (Constable 146). However, given that this moment immediately follows Harvey's withdrawal from her presence, there appears to be more at stake in her question than teasing provocation. The idea that she is simply flaunting her disreputable status or self-consciously performing a particular persona is challenged by her obscurity within the image. The shadowy lighting, her elaborate costume and the frame of the window all impede her presence, highlighting its elusive irreducibility rather than showing it to be the straight-forward incarnation of an abstract notion of a 'seductress', as Constable claims. She challenges Harvey to recognise her as she is, rather than allowing him to view her through the equally distorting and two-dimensional personas of Madeline or Shanghai Lily. The compositional obfuscation of her presence reflects the film's rejection of simplistic judgements of her character.

Harvey then asks whether she is married, and Lily responds by laughing and resuming her position in the window on the right of the frame. The film cuts into a close-up and she leans out of the window saying slowly, “It took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lily” while turning her head towards Harvey.



Constable comments, ‘the use of the significant pause before she drawls her new name heightens the theatrical effect’, thereby once again allowing Lily to ‘play...up to her notorious reputation’ (Constable 146). However, there does not appear to be any significant pause before she pronounces her new name. Her drawn out statement does not seem like an expression of ‘delight in playing up to her reputation’ (146). Rather, her heavy, ironic tone once again imparts a wry self-awareness, as her cynicism seems to defensively anticipate Harvey’s moralistic judgement of her character. The close-up shot highlights her sardonic expression, as she waits for Harvey’s response. He replies, “So you’re Shanghai Lily”. His awareness of her reputation incites Lily to challenge his judgement of her further. Proclaiming herself, “the notorious white flower of China”, she reaches her hand around the bar between the windows, provocatively staging herself for his critical gaze. Her tone is once again characterised by a bitter humour, as she deflects his transparent disapproval of her through her defiant attitude.

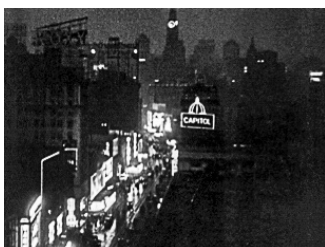


The film’s framing of her through close-ups, separating her presence from the perspective of Harvey, emphasises her cynical attitude towards his formulaic and moralistic behaviour, singling out her sardonic expressions. In this way, it also stresses his failure to fully acknowledge her or appreciate her reactions through the exclusion of him from the frame. This idea is expressed throughout the scene through the compositional division of the two characters in the neighbouring windows. Lily’s ironic behaviour and her deliberate positioning within the frame do not signal her

(or Dietrich's) detachment from her scenario, as Constable and Zucker have suggested. She is not simply performing an exaggerated version of her reputed and infamous persona in order to send up Harvey's bourgeois values. Her cynicism is shown to be the means through which she deflects and negotiates other character's judgements of her appearance and her actions. Just as the stylistic contrivances of the film's opening sequence delineated her character's self-determination and singularity, her ironic self-presentations and the stylised compositions in this later scene defines her defensive resistance of Harvey's disapproval of her lifestyle. Furthermore, the inclusion of seemingly spontaneous moments of tacility in both of these scenes fall outside of the notion of a self-conscious theatricality and anchors her presence to her environments. The apparent artifice of both Lily's sardonic behaviour and the film's stylised presentation of her figure vividly and carefully express her character's individuality and uncompromising independence.

3.3 *Blonde Venus*: Authenticity and Artifice

Many of the ideas that emerge through the presentation of Dietrich's character in *Blonde Venus* are briefly crystallised in the moments preceding her first performance as the showgirl, 'Blonde Venus'. Helen Faraday has decided to return to the stage to support her son and pay for her terminally ill husband's experimental treatment in Europe. After she is shown leaving her unknowing family at home to go to her first shift at a nightclub, the film cuts to show a shot of Broadway at night. Flashing neon signs puncture the darkness, contrasting sharply with the grey domestic quietude of the previous sequence. The sudden introduction of loud swinging jazz music also distinguishes the two environments. In opposition to the quiet, subdued lethargy of the Faraday home, the Broadway setting is marked by rhythmic music and pulsating lights.



The film then cuts in to reveal a particular neon sign, which vividly announces the transformation in Helen's persona. Her muted status within the confined private environment of the home is upended by this luminous and prominent assertion of her presence as public spectacle.



This image then dissolves to show Helen in close-up in the centre of the frame, getting ready for her performance in her dressing room. As the two shots fade into one another, the neon 'Blonde Venus' sign is briefly super-imposed onto her reflection in her vanity mirror. The overlaying of these shots, projecting her stage name onto her visage imbues her appearance with her status as a showgirl. This fluid transition is suggestive of the importance of her new identity for Helen's character, by connecting the proclamation of her role as a glamorous night club performer with her presence in the frame.



In the mirror's reflection, she is shown concentratedly preparing herself, while her physical body is obscured by shadow in the foreground. In earlier scenes, her appearance is often muted by the relatively flat lighting, her functional dress and simple styling. She is also often seen to be absorbed by the performance of various practical tasks for her family (sewing, reading bedtime stories, and so on). Here, she is shown to devote considerable attention and energy to her looks, with the scene's composition underscoring the effects of her efforts. Her frontally lit face is luminous against the black backdrop of her dressing room. Her prominence is highlighted further by the tight framing, cutting out most of her surrounding environment. The strong use of contrast distinguishes the space from the grey tones of the domestic sequences. She appears altogether more vivid and defined within the shot. In this scene, her presence is not a self-evident or straight-forward feature depicted within a clearly delineated physical space. Rather, it is carefully and complexly manifested through the use of the dissolve, the chiaroscuro lighting and the reflection. These devices stress her self-conscious negotiation of her persona while she prepares herself for a performance, at the same time as making her a more vivid and expressively redolent

figure in the image. As in *Shanghai Express*, elements of artifice and spectacle are shown to be intimately related to her character's identity and self-fulfilment.

This is underscored by the camera's angle, which loosely echoes her own perspective. Her active role in positioning herself as spectacle is made clear, as is her self-awareness and careful manipulation of her public image. She is shown adjusting her hair with a strong and resolute expression on her face. The speed with which she moves alludes to her familiarity with the process. Her obvious absorption in the task is suggestive of the satisfaction she draws from it, implying that her decision to return to the stage is not motivated purely by self-sacrificial love for her family. This is alluded to by an earlier scene in which she gently informed her husband of her desire to return to the stage before the revelation of his sickness necessitated the move. The tension that drives much of the remainder of the film is a product of her husband's insistence on her actions being motivated solely by maternal or wifely sacrifice, and his inability to accept or understand any behaviour which does not conform to this principle.

This eventually causes Helen to flee from New York with her son to avoid a custody battle she knows she will lose, because of her career and reputation. However, she manages to evade discovery for a considerable time thanks to her ability to manipulate other people's perceptions of her. Additionally, her notoriety as a hyper-glamorous showgirl, perpetuated by the use of publicity stills on wanted posters and in newspaper article, interferes with characters' readings of her physical presence. The superimposition of her stage name onto her image at the beginning of this sequence, and the abstraction of her image from her body via the mirror, allude to the distorting effects of her public persona. Her real-life appearance does not always correspond to the exaggerated fantasy image of 'Blonde Venus', and as such detectives fail to recognise her.

While she prepares herself at her dressing table to go on, a picture of Helen's son is visible in the bottom left corner of the frame. This connects her appearance as 'The Blonde Venus' to her role as a mother, establishing the tension that runs throughout the film. Helen struggles to transcend the reductive opposition of these two personas in the eyes of those who repeatedly cast her into one at the expense of the other. In this shot, the 'Blonde Venus' is presented through the neon sign and her reflection, while her maternal identity is represented by the photograph. Her body, however, is obscured in the foreground of the image. By linking these two sides of her identity, at the same time as detaching her physical presence from them,

the composition suggests that although both roles are crucial to her character, she is not absolutely reducible to either.



This tension between Dietrich as a showgirl and Dietrich as a mother has been regarded by many critics to be a irresolvable and awkward contradiction in the film. Christian Viviani has written that in Hollywood cinema, ‘femininity was organised between two poles: the pin up ...and the mother’ (Viviani 169), and Dietrich is assumed to fall resolutely into the former category. The seeming incompatibility of the two sides of her character might also explain why the film has been one of the most critically neglected examples of Sternberg’s work. The director himself considered the film to be a failure for this very reason. (Kaplan 53) Given that Sternberg criticism is so dominated by auteurist discussions of the director’s intentions, his own distaste for the film might explain these writers’ reluctance to make claims for its achievements. Zucker, for example, holds that the film is ‘not distinctive enough to warrant the close attention lavished on the other films’ (Zucker 19).

The few critics who have discussed the film have explored it in relation to other examples of the sub-genre known as the ‘maternal melodrama’ (Viviani 172), exemplified by works such as *Stella Dallas* or *Madame X*. As with numerous other examples of this group, the glamorous and illicit aspects of the central female character come into collision with her role as a mother. However, unlike Barbara Stanwyck or Lana Turner (the respective stars of these other films), Dietrich’s persona has been almost exclusively associated with qualities of artifice or spectacle. As such, the crucial tension at the heart of film’s maternal melodrama is said to be unconvincingly rendered. Ann E. Kaplan’s study of the film suggests that this tension arises as a consequence of casting Dietrich, who is ‘a fetishized object’ (Kaplan 55), in a maternal role. The ideas of fetish and motherhood are fundamentally irreconcilable from Kaplan’s psychoanalytic perspective. An overlapping of these contradictory notions could facilitate a challenge to the desexualised ideal of the nuclear family and the mother’s position within it (44-45).

Crucially for Kaplan, however, the film does deliberately not set out to achieve this radical potential. Instead, its conflict of identities arises completely ‘uninten-

tionally' (Kaplan 56). She states that the film is constructed around a narcissistic male spectator, and cites historical anecdotes regarding Sternberg's control over Dietrich to substantiate her claims. Consequently, the director's hatred of the film is said to speak in its favour. Any transgressive potential the film may possess arises from the failure of his original intention. The ideological contradiction embodied by Dietrich in the film appears as a consequence of the dynamic between the inescapable 'fetishism involved in von Sternberg's representation of her' (53) and his practical obligation to make the film with Dietrich as a mother, despite his strong reservations.

However, as is the case in *Morocco* and *Shanghai Express*, the film seems to be quite consciously exploring these issues through both its narrative and expressive dimensions. Helen's struggle with the duality of the 'pure' wife/mother role and the cabaret performer and the perceived illegitimacy of attempting to occupy both at the same time forms the crux of the film. Her attempt to inhabit the two apparently irreconcilable roles condemns her to a half-light world of transiency on the road with her son as she is denied a valid identity and place in society. Moreover, the tyrannical behaviour of her husband is shown in a negative light. Therefore, once again, the film enacts an exposure and rejection of the available ideologically constructed roles for women. She is caught between her husband's desire to cast her only as a wife and her eventual lover, Nick Townsend (Cary Grant), who wishes to have her as a kept woman. Neither are the references to prostitution or exploiting one's body for profit (however nobly) confined to her alone. Before making the decision to return to the stage, her husband tries and fails to sell his ailing body to science to raise money for the family. Thus, following Robin Wood's suggestion that 'With regard to women, I find the film...far more complex and positive than it seems to be given credit for' (Wood, "*Venus de Marlene*" 60), tracing the ways in which this tension is developed once again enacts a validation of Helen's perspective in the film. The forces that attempt to cast her as either mother or showgirl are represented in an unambiguously negative light, exposing the inadequacy of all the roles which are available to her. Likewise, the transformation of Helen's appearance and physicality throughout the film seems to suggest fluidity between the roles which is contrary to the idea of them being mutually exclusive.

For Kaplan, as for other feminist critics of the maternal melodrama genre, a problem arises as the heroine's potentially transgressive behaviour, which belies conventional Hollywood representations of sacrificial motherhood, can always be safely

situated within and assured by what Wood has termed ‘the rightness of a mother’s love’ (Wood, “*Venus de Marlene*” 60). This is compounded further by her eventual restoration to her husband and social conformity at the end of the film. Thus, Kaplan states that the film ‘in no way [supports] the non-symbolic, subversive side of mothering’ (Kaplan 55). Whilst Kaplan is correct to suggest that the film does not attempt to subvert the ‘rightness of a mother’s love’, it constructs this love in terms of a successful and mutually fulfilling mother and son relationship completely outside of the conventional paternal nuclear family unit. In addition, it portrays the mother as an independently desiring subject capable of self-determination and self-mutation, irrespective of the paternalistic machinations of the male characters around her.

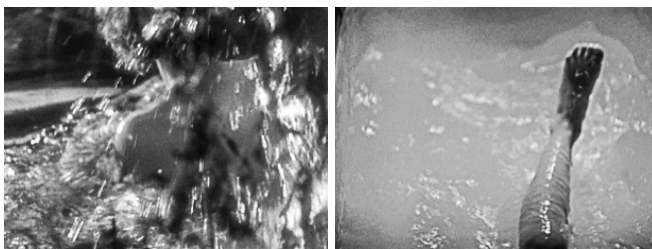
Further to this, the use of the structural repetition, which frames the beginning and the end of the movie, alludes to an alternative assessment of motherhood and the presentation of Helen. The issues raised by the dressing room scene are extended across the film through this use of parallel scenes. They depict a ritualised reenactment of the couple’s first meeting, told in the guise of a much-loved bedtime story for their son. The development of Helen’s presence in each of the scenes can be read in terms of her depiction and eventual refutation of those assumptions that force women into one of two apparently mutually exclusive roles. The first depicts her as an unfulfilled figure by contrasting her blank physical state in the domestic space with the erotic dynamism of her presence in the previous sequence. The second, in which Helen elects to restore herself to her family, appears to reassert the dominance of patriarchal convention. However, her appearance in this sequence is irrevocably transformed and realised in terms of her glamorous showgirl persona, in contrast with her earlier dejected condition. She does not reenter the family to resume the role of the doleful and semi-vacant mother figure of the first scene, but as a self-determined entity without making any concessions.

The opening sequence in the film depicts the first encounter between a naked yet abashed Helen swimming with friends and a flirtatious Ned in the Black Forest of Germany. The scene is charged with ludic eroticism and Dietrich’s performance of Helen is full of energy as she splashes around vigorously in the water whilst squabbling provocatively with Ned.

She appears with her perfectly made-up face framed by two branches on the riverbank, her bare shoulders bobbing above the surface, as Ned shouts down to her from above.



Following this, the first family sequence emerges as a mundane portrayal of everyday life for the Faradays some years later. The connection between the two places is made through a visual link relating an offended Helen splashing the water behind her as she swims away from Ned and her son's childish games in the bath, as she helps him wash.



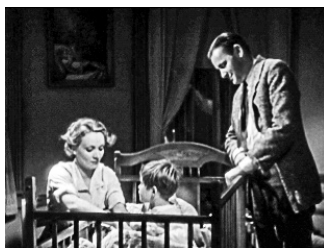
Thus, the eroticism of the opening sequence, and its presentation of Helen, is displaced onto an image of the son, standing in for domesticity and maternal activity. The link also introduces the son as the focal point for the displacement of this erotic energy, as his parents' activities are confined to the realm of practical necessities. Throughout the film, his games (splashing water, riding rocking horses and playing with guns and trumpets etc) echo the energy of the first scene, emphasising its absence in the domestic humdrum world of his parents.

Consequently, it is the son who triggers the reminiscence of this initial encounter between his parents in the form of a bedtime story. It is also the son who forms the focal point of the retelling of the story, as the erotic relation between his parents is diffused into the pragmatic telling of a fairy tale to lull their child to sleep. Despite appearing to be a highly conventional and idealised conservative vision of family life, the scene seems to simultaneously be implicitly working against such an understanding. Wood has suggested that, 'nothing in [this scene] is calculated to disturb the Thirties audience's sense of family normality, yet every detail can be read as critical of that concept' (Wood, "*Venus de Marlene*"). This is achieved primarily through the emptying out of Dietrich's presence. Contrasted with the heightened expressive style of the first scene, her flatness or lack of energy in the following sequence and the functional economy of her movements belie this apparently straightforwardly idealised vision of domestic life. This absence of dynamism in Dietrich's presence

when confined to the domestic space is carried forward into the energy of her first performance in the nightclub, the tenacity with which she avoids the police and, eventually, the determination of her pursuit of stardom and riches in Europe. These activities allude to the repressed energies which her blank and mechanical physicality in this sequence conceals.

Dietrich's movements in this sequence contrast sharply to her expressive physicality in the two previous films, as the stylised lethargy of *Morocco* and the provocative composure of *Shanghai Express* are replaced by practical and perfunctory actions performed in relation to her child. She asks which story he would like to hear, and he requests that they tell the "Germany" story again. Failing in her attempting to dissuade him ("But you've heard that one so often!"), she calls for Ned. The story itself is an obviously well-practised, formulaic and sublimated re-telling of their first encounter and subsequent courtship. The sequence only seems to emphasise the discontinuity between the film's opening moments and the world of muted domesticity that follows.

During the telling of the first part of the story, Helen busily tucks in her son, occupying herself wholly with him. Her appearance is very domestic; she wears a crinkled white shirt with an apron and her hair hangs loose about her face. She is characterised by her maternal function within the family unit.



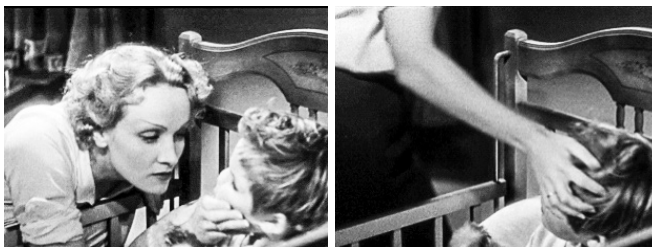
She tucks Johnny in vigorously as she begins to narrate the tale, her hurried and pragmatic tone belying the romance of the words ("It was springtime in Germany and the air was full of blossoms"). Ned then recounts coming across "half a dozen princesses taking a bath", as the eroticism of the film's playful opening scene is transformed into a practical task of bathing. Helen's motherly attentiveness to her son and rather blank expression continue to express her detachment from the story, as she seems to be paying little heed to her husband's words. Answering Johnny's excited inquiry as to what she did upon being discovered bathing, she says dryly "Oh, I told them to go away" with an indifferent and flat tone of voice.

This contrasts sharply with the rapt tone of her husband's reminiscences and fanciful inventions, as Herbert Marshall uses the expressive timbre of his voice to

full effect. As he describes his pursuit of “the most beautiful princess”, Helen looks between her husband and son warmly, but with a slight expression of wry amusement, again alluding to a degree of distance from the events Ned is referring to. The son asks, “and did he?” in relation to his mother’s prior statement, to which she responds, “He did not!” with a tone of mock outrage and indignation, once again suggesting that the storytelling is a well-rehearsed affair. This heightened yet mechanical style of performance continues, as the sexual nature of their encounter is alluded to, but also masked by, mock gestures of illicit behaviour. Helen’s whispers furtively to her son “I met him later that night...” whilst shielding her mouth with her hand.



Johnny demands that his parents physically act out the moonlit walk that followed. Helen replies, “Okay skipper!” vigorously rubbing the child’s head and ruffling his hair. Given the subdued nature of Helen’s physicality in the domestic scene so far, this moment emerges rather abruptly as a sign of frustrated energy. These eruptions of forceful tenderness or affection in relation to her son recur throughout the film, as reminders of this frustrated desire, stifled by her confinement to either the role of dutiful wife/mother or objectified cabaret spectacle. It also emerges in contrast to the rather formulaic or blank retelling of their courtship, which seems stripped of its original erotic charge.



Helen’s pragmatic physicality persists as they begin to walk around the room together. Ned describes a “tremendously large yellow moon”, as Helen turns away from him in order to fix her hair, dispelling the romance of their original meeting by appearing disinterested and distracted.



She then describes how they kissed for the first time. Her account of it is delivered with mock coyness, verging on sarcasm, as she assumes a childlike pose of innocence by placing the tip of her finger in her mouth. This references her abashed modesty in the first scene in the forest, but it now emerges as an ironic gesture of a since lost state of naïveté within its fairy story context. The emotions referred to by the story are repeatedly invoked through the use of static poses or ‘stock’ gestures such as these, as though the story has been stripped of its emotive content and distilled into static tableaux.



The sequence’s depiction of the emptying out of Dietrich’s dynamic and energised presence demonstrates the stultifying effects of her being confined solely to the position of a mother in the home, contrary to her express desires. However, when this story sequence is repeated during the film’s conclusion, both her appearance and the nature of her position have been transformed. As Dietrich arrives at the apartment, intending only to see her son before marrying Nick Townsend, she is shown wearing the most extraordinary ensemble of the film. The gleaming collar on her long silk black dress and her tightly fitted black turban accentuate the luminosity of her face. The softness of the fur which adorns the cuffs and the sleeves of her dress adds to the textured nature of her appearance, as the brightly sparkling diamante contrasts with the sleek silken material of her dress. Compared to the plain indistinctiveness of her clothes and appearance in the earlier scene, here she seems the embodiment of a fully realised star. The combinations of tones and textures ren-

der her appearance rich and remarkable within the flat dull context of the modest apartment.

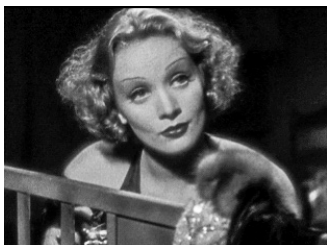


Furthermore, Dietrich's performance of Helen is also transformed. The impassivity of the first scene has been replaced with a powerfully emotive physicality. As she waits to be granted admittance to the home, she paces to and fro outside with a stricken expression flashing onto her face as she hears her son's voice.

The subsequent re-telling of the story that facilitates this reunification of the family also unfolds in this manner. As their son leads his unwilling father through the story, Helen tells her part with a quiet sincerity whilst looking intently towards Ned. Her tone of voice and facial expressions emerge as emotive appeals to Ned, encouraging him to look at her, something he is yet to do in the scene.



Once the story has drawn to a close, she begins to sing for Johnny, accompanying herself with his little music box. She performs the song to Ned, and the externally defined roles of mother and cabaret performer are thereby merged in this moment. It is this appeal through song which finally draws Ned's attention and instigates the reunion.



That she resumes her maternal role in such a way almost seems to parody the suggestion that she sacrifices her independence in order to resume her role within the family. Far from sacrificing the claims to a selfhood or identity facilitated by

her work as a performer in order to legitimately regain her positions as a wife and mother, she reenters the domestic space personifying this process of self-realisation. In this sequence her presence reveals the continuity between these two roles. The film's conclusion thereby emerges as an expression and affirmation of Helen's self-determination.

In all three of the films, Dietrich's presence develops a tension between the artifice of her surface appearance and her characters' emotional and psychological interiors. The film's narratives simultaneously take up this dynamic as a principal concern. The performed lethargy of Amy Jolly, read as coy flirtatiousness by La Bessière and performative self-consciousness by other critics, expresses the uncompromising independence of her character. *Shanghai Express* uses Madeleine's presence to dramatise and resist the reductive pigeonholing of her character by Captain Harvey, drawing on elements of tactility to affirm her corporeality. Similarly, the depiction of Helen Faraday or 'Blonde Venus' reveals her transcendence of conventional oppositions between spectacle and authenticity, which are imposed on her by the prejudices of other characters. Her presence reconciles the apparently contradictory positions of mother and glamorous showgirl. Rather than redeeming her characters from the artifice of their appearances, or using artifice as a means of subverting character authenticity altogether, each of the films draws on the notion in order to stage dramas around the (mis)recognition of Dietrich's heroines.

4 Assimilation: *Midnight*

Mitchell Leisen's *Midnight* (1939) opens as a train pulls onto a rainy Parisian platform. Following the conductor's path down the carriages, the camera arrives at a sparse third-class compartment. Lying on a bench within is a huddled figure in a luminous evening dress. As the bewildered conductor attempts to rouse the woman from her sleep, she wearily dismisses him, telling him to "call me in the morning". Mysterious, dressed with inappropriately extravagant glamour, the woman apparently believes herself to be in a hotel room, addressing a servant. Her face, only partially visible behind the gleaming hood of her wrap, crinkles with distaste as the reality of her situation begins to dawn on her. She slowly, sleepily rises from the bench before staggering towards the cabin door. Jauntily craning herself out of the train, she looks around with a jaded smirk and drawls, "Well, so this as they say is Paris, huh? Well, from here it looks an awful lot like a rainy night in Kokomo, Indiana".

The woman's casual and frank manner is at odds with the intriguing and discordant circumstances of her sparkling appearance within the shabby railway carriage. Although her style of dress plainly contradicts the meagreness of her surroundings, she accepts this obvious incongruity with wry good-humour. Her posture expresses a cheery insouciance, indolently propping herself up against the carriage door that frames her view as she resignedly surveys the grim-looking world beyond. She is simultaneously anomalous and at ease within her environment. Responding sarcastically to the baffled conductor's offer to take her luggage ("I wish you would!"), she then informs him that it can all be found at the "municipal pawn shop, Monte Carlo". Bidding him farewell ("So long handsome!"), she declares her intention to "wade in" before putting up her glittering hood and running off along the dark platform.

The abrupt introduction of Eve Peabody (Claudette Colbert) on the train platform introduces a number of themes and devices that come to characterise her presence in the film. It establishes a tension around the way in which she 'fits in' to the world around her, as she appears both to belong and to stand out from her environment. The contradictory signals created by the film's initial presentation of her character give no clues as to her background or identity, so her behaviour and her immediate responses to her surroundings take on greater expressive significance. She is

developed solely in terms of her moment-to-moment engagement with the scenarios in which she happens to find herself. While her stunning appearance is clearly out of place within the spartan third-class compartment, her easy and loose physicality announces her character's relaxed acceptance of her destitute circumstances. She does not appear to be in the least affected by having woken up to find that her hotel room is really a train compartment and that the city of Paris might as well be a small town in the United States. Withholding any unambiguous signs of her character's history or status, she is instead presented in terms of her willingness to adapt to the capriciousness of the world around her.

The assimilative responsiveness of Eve's character introduced by the opening scene becomes the overall focus of the film's narrative; her lack of a personal history and the adaptive spontaneity of her behaviour are central to its structure and development. Once she has ventured out onto the streets of Paris, it becomes immediately apparent that she has truly left all aspects of her former life behind her. The film offers no insight into what that life might have been. She spontaneously resolves to take up work as a club singer, despite not being able to sing and enlists a charmed taxi driver, Tibor Czerny (Don Ameche), to ferry her between her auditions. Eve finds herself increasingly attracted to Tibor, and decides to suddenly flee from his cab. She is then almost immediately yet mistakenly ushered into a glamorous Parisian soirée. Once inside, she adopts Tibor's name and poses as the Baroness Czerny, wife of an ailing Hungarian nobleman, in order to avoid detection, and her unusual behaviour attracts the attention of several male partygoers. One gentleman, Georges Flammerion (John Barrymore), immediately sees through her ruse and enlists her to use her assumed aristocratic identity to detach his infatuated wife from her paramour, Jacques Picot (Francis Lederer). The remainder of the film revolves around the elaborate lengths both Flammerion and Eve must go to in order to protect her invented persona from the suspicions of other characters, such as the jealous Helene Flammerion (Mary Astor) and her socialite companion Marcel Renaud (Rex O'Malley), who attempt to expose the 'real' Eve Peabody.

This description of the plot demonstrates the structural significance of Eve's adaptive and improvised persona within the film. The film's narrative is a cumulative product of Eve's spontaneous responses to the capricious circumstances within which she finds herself. The depiction of her moment-to-moment reactions to her changing situations provide both the film's structure and its subject matter. Eve's character is not given a clear identity within the film, save for the one which she

falsely assumes and has imposed upon her within the world of the fiction. Following this, the desire to either disclose or avoid the revelation of her never fully divulged 'real' identity motivates the characters' behaviour and generates the film's dramatic organisation and comedic tension. The success or failure of these attempts to expose Eve's true background are all worked out through the portrayal of her struggle to assimilate to her constantly changing circumstances and to incorporate layer after layer of fiction into her already fictional persona. Her adaptive, assimilative presence is the film's main focus.

Throughout the film, Eve malleably inhabits the transient and provisional environments through which she passes. The sense of place created by the film is highly discontinuous, with its action taking place in many different locations which are rarely shown more than once. This sense of spatial disjointedness emphasises the drama of Eve's adaptations, as she seems to be constantly encountering novel and various surroundings. Her presence is characterised in terms of its perpetual mutability, as she reconfigures her behaviour in accordance with her changing position within the film. Given the film's compositional and narrative emphasis on the adaptability of Eve's behaviour and appearance, her presence is divested of the impression of interiority beyond her spontaneous reactions to her immediate external circumstances. Outside scenes in which she is shown to be overtly attempting to negotiate and control her public persona, she is depicted only in terms of her observational humour (as is the case in the film's opening scene). Consequently, even in her private moments, the film's expression of her character continues to be determined by her playful engagement with her direct situation.

The particularity of Claudette Colbert's appearance in the central role intensifies the drama of her character's assimilations. Her strikingly round and soft facial features do not belong obviously to any class or social milieu, while their girlishness makes her age very difficult to determine. The plumped and curvaceous look is very striking, yet carries no clear associations (unlike Katherine Hepburn's aristocratic haughtiness, for example). Her large features are almost childlike in their impish, expressively transparent quality. Her huge eyes, sculpted brows and puckered mouth betray dramatic changes in expression which she struggles to contain or suppress. Her efforts to integrate herself frequently involve attempts to stifle and manipulate her animated facial features. Her physicality in the film is similarly irrepressibly frank. She inhabits her environments with a comfortable, gestural candour that allows her to look equally natural when dancing with taxi drivers in a shabby Parisian

bar (as she does during her evening with Tibor) and when waltzing with aristocrats in a mansion in Versailles. However, in circumstances where she wishes to remain discreet and therefore inhibit her natural bodily directness, her attempts to assimilate herself develop as battles to contain her own unruly and expressive corporeality. The anomalousness of Colbert's elfin appearance and her bodily candour render her constant process of adaptation all the more tangible, as she struggles to overcome her conspicuous singularity. Her forthright physicality and transparent expressiveness also contribute to the lack of discernible interiority for her character, as all of her emotions and thought processes are manifested by the surface and the movements of her body. Consequently, the specificity of Colbert's presence contributes to the film's drama of assimilation by emphasising the changeable, expressive dimension of her face and body. Furthermore, her unusual and ambiguous appearance allows her to appear both remarkable and natural within the film's various environments. This tension between anomalousness as a means of integration and as a marker of difference facilitates the drama and the comedy of assimilation.

The film's interest in the perpetuation of illusory surfaces, rather than more profound themes or complex characterisations, has been identified by many critics as exemplifying a fault lying more generally within the work of the director Mitchell Leisen. He has often been regarded as a purveyor of campy Hollywood romances in which preoccupation with ornate style takes precedence over substance. Billy Wilder, who wrote several scripts for Leisen, referred to him simply as 'a window dresser' (quoted in *Wilder and Cameron* 262). Critics such as Gilbert Adair have also branded him a 'fabricator of agreeably unpretentious trifles' and 'a minor, decorative filmmaker' (*Adair* 180). Likewise, film historian Steven Bach has commented that 'Leisen was competent and stylish at his best...He could always make a picture *look* better than it was, but never *play* better, for he had no sense of material' (*Bach* 266). This inclination to focus on his lavish décors and flamboyant costumes for their own sake has resulted in his being treated as an empty stylist who, 'unlike Wilder and Sturges', was 'incapable of forging a personal vision out of the Paramount look' (*Adair* 181). Averse to the apparent superficiality of his films, critics have been reluctant to account for or acknowledge the ways in which they might overtly explore ideas such as the constructed nature of identity or the qualities of a particular film star through their rejection of 'deeper' or more 'serious' meanings. Rather than concerning itself with the revelation and exploration of psychological states or social and economic themes, *Midnight* instead adopts an almost experimental approach in its

portrayal of Colbert's presence. Depicting the moment-to-moment creation of her fictional persona, while divesting her of any sense of an underlying character, the film highlights the performative dimension of her presence.

More recent critics have understood Leisen's films in a similar light. David Melville describes the director's style in terms of Susan Sontag's definition of 'camp' as 'decorative art, emphasising texture, sensuous surface and style at the expense of content' (quoted in Melville, "Senses of Cinema"). Melville claims that Leisen's preoccupation with mistaken identities, role-playing and illusion render his films practically post-modern in their invocation of ambiguity and indeterminacy. Appreciating the films for their 'fervid artificiality, their feverish riot of costume and décor' ("Senses of Cinema"), Melville associates Leisen with contemporary directors such as Kenneth Anger, Baz Luhrmann and Pedro Almodóvar. Despite Melville's admiration for Leisen's aesthetic, the specificity of *his* invocation of this camp style (which obviously differs vastly from the kitschy excesses of Luhrmann or the melodramas of Almodóvar) remains unaccounted for. Furthermore, despite his recognition of the role of indeterminacy in Leisen's fictional worlds, the most experimental feature of *Midnight's* 'fervid artificiality' is not a product of the emphasis on costume or décor but rather its development of Colbert's reflexive presence. Rather than serving as a vehicle for psychological or emotional revelations pertaining to an *a priori* characterisation, her presence unfolds in terms of constant adaptation and reorientation in accordance with shifting circumstances.

4.1 Surface Deflection

The scenes prior to Eve's assumption of the false identity she inhabits until the film's conclusion establish the absence of any authentic or underlying sense of character. They dramatise her attempts to manipulate her behaviour and appearance in order to achieve her spontaneously determined ends. Furthermore, the film's portrayal of her stresses these processes of improvisation and adaptation (at the expense of an impression of interiority) by highlighting the changeful and lambent surface of her presence. The scene reveals the spontaneous and reactive manner through which Eve engages with the world, as she tries to persuade a taxi-driver to transport her around the city for free.

Having exited the station and made her way through a baying mass of taxi drivers clamouring for her attention, she is shown walking with her back turned away from the camera. Her presence is characterised by the intense reflectiveness of her cloak.



The luminosity of the garment dominates the otherwise grey and dreary *mise-en-scène*. She appears as an iridescent surface, a mirage-like apparition in the grim setting of the sodden taxi rank outside the Gare du Nord. The changing patterns of light on the dress's fabric animate her appearance and reflect the illusory play of surfaces that will constitute her persona in the film more generally. The material's shimmering and fluctuating appearance echoes the amorphous, transformative nature of her presence. As with the film's opening moments on the train carriage, she is immediately distinguished from her environment by this anomalous radiance. She is also brightly lit in order to appear all the more vivid within the otherwise dim and rainy street setting. By so emphatically stressing the visibility of her surface, the composition diminishes the impression and significance of anything beyond that dazzling exteriority. Additionally, the draped, hooded wrap conceals her body entirely from the camera. This opaque and luminous shroud alludes to the absence of anything beyond her striking and changeable façade. Her sparkling presence interacts with her environment through its reflective properties, while also standing out from it due to its singular luminosity.

4.2 Behavioural Transformation

Having highlighted the significance of Colbert's dazzling surface appearance, the scene goes on to dramatise the process of her adaptive and assimilative behaviour. She is shown overtly to assume distinct personas, shifting between self-characterisations in order to achieve the most effective results. The scene devotes little time to depicting Eve's thought-processes or actions outside of these adaptations, moving quickly from her exiting of the station to her attempted manipulation of the taxi driver, Tibor. Withholding these interim moments in which Eve would be devoid of a self-consciously contrived persona, the film once again minimises any sense of an original or underlying personality, beyond her attitude of playful responsiveness. Even when Eve eventually discloses the truth of her situation to Tibor, her pleas still have the effect of a manipulative strategy, undermining the impression of character authenticity still further.

Framed from behind as she passes Tibor's taxi, the distracted and thoughtful Eve initially rejects his offer of service with a cold and direct "No", waving a hand dismissively in his direction as she speaks. Her reaction is direct and brusque. Her attitude prior to her adoption of a particular behavioural approach to her situation is minimal and perfunctory. Subsequently, however, her stance undergoes a radical transformation. Following the driver's sarcastic retort ("Madame enjoys the rain, uh?"), the film cuts in to a medium shot to reveal her neutral facial expression as she turns to inspect the man addressing her. Her expression evolves from one of remote inscrutability to one of flagrant, predatory cunning.



As she slowly approaches the driver, her measured pace, guileful expression, and gesture of sly self-assurance as she strokes her chin, create an impression of a seasoned and confident manipulator. Despite the viewer knowing nothing of Eve's background or history, Colbert's performance conjures a clear sense of the spontaneous yet scheming manner of her character's interactions with the world. Furthermore, even this moment of demonstrative thoughtfulness (as Eve is clearly formulating a plan) seems to forestall any sense of interiority through its gestural transparency. Her thoughts are obviously and directly physicalised; her reflective processes appear to take place through her bodily expression, thereby explicitly dramatising her responsive adaptations. The extended duration of this moment dwells on the artificially heightened style of her performance, while also emphasising the scheming deliberation which underlies the artfulness of her subsequent conduct.

Following a cut, Eve reappears within the frame in front of Tibor having undergone another obvious behavioural transformation. By having her shift in attitude take place in the ellipsis between the two shots, the scene reinforces the impression of the artificiality of each persona by breaking the continuity between them. All signs of guile have been eliminated as she smiles beatifically up at the taxi-driver, the tensed predaciousness of her earlier movements replaced by a relaxed and breezy demeanour. The angle of the shot also emphasises the contrivance of this transformation and the manipulative intent that underlies it. The medium shot adopts a

45-degree angle on the action allowing it to include enough of Tibor's profile in order to give a sense of his reaction while also showing Eve's face from the front. In this way, the composition emphasises the directed performativeness of her behaviour towards Tibor at the same time as revealing the effectiveness of her attempted manipulations. The comedy of this moment is partly achieved through the arrangement of this shot, as it simultaneously depicts her transparent attempts to manipulate Tibor and his apparent immunity to her witty charms.



Her assumption of a humorous and frank manner during their subsequent exchange seems to match the tone of Czerny's previous address to her. She appears to adopt a persona of straight-talking ingenuousness, affecting the very guilelessness she is attempting to take advantage of in him. She explains: "Here's how things stand: I could have you drive me around town and then tell you I left my purse at home on the grand piano." "There's no grand piano, no home!" As she speaks she slouches her shoulders and gesticulates loosely, indicting in the direction of his car and her purse as she mentions them. This physicalisation of her speech both seeks to substantiate her story by drawing on the material objects, whilst attempting to give an impression of sincerity through her candid, transparent gestures.

The artificial status of the friendly, happy-go-lucky persona she here invokes is complicated further by proximity between this obviously strategic behaviour and her character's actual status in the fiction. Rather than framing this disclosure of her friendless, penniless state as a sincere revelation of the truth of her situation, the film depicts her admission as a self-consciously, deliberately staged appeal. The moment consequently underlines the dubious status of any apparent expressions of an authenticity, as even the reality of her character's condition is portrayed as a superficial ploy, utilised spuriously in order to elicit empathy. Consequently, the notion of any 'authentic' or non-mediated self is revealed to be another equally vulnerable illusion, just as likely to be called in question and exposed as any lie or deception. The task of identifying or locating a 'truth' in Eve's presence in the film is under-

mined through this characterisation of authenticity as another mode of deliberate, contrived self-presentation.

4.3 Reactive Spontaneity

Given this absence of an authentic or coherent interiority, Eve's progress throughout the film is characterised in terms of her passive acceptance of whatever circumstances she happens to find herself in. Rather than deliberately deciding on and then pursuing a distinct goal, she simply re-orientates herself behaviourally and physically in order to integrate and suitably inhabit whatever her immediate surroundings happen to be. This process of trying to fit in with her environments and suppress any aspects of her presence which might make her stand out or declare her impostor status in a particular situation is one of the most significant sources of comedic effect for the film. Colbert's expressive face and demonstrative, candid physicality can often work against her character's efforts, even though her glamorous appearance allows her to seem at home in the aristocratic world she is accidentally thrust into.

Her entry into the world of Parisian high-society comes about completely by chance as she finds herself mistaken for a guest attending a musical soirée. Having fled from Tibor's taxi just seconds before, Eve's character is almost immediately swept into another randomly chanced-upon situation that has no connection to the film's preceding events. Significantly, she does not actively choose to try to manipulate her way into the party. Rather, she is presented with an opportunity to get out of the rain (which appears to be the only specific goal she has in mind at this point) and chances her luck by trying to mimic the behaviour of those around her and so gain entry. The only form of intentionality her character displays (apart from her desire to escape from the life of stasis threatened by Tibor) is an assimilative acquiescence to the chance movements of the world around her. As she is shuffled from one space to the next, she struggles to control her appearance and behaviour in order to fit in to her novel and changing situation, while the film's depiction of her presence creates comedy and tension by revealing the vulnerability of her efforts. Having run away from Tibor's taxi, Eve is initially shown running confusedly along a rainy Parisian street. Pulling her wrap around herself, she stops, starts and hides under doorways in order to look around. The rapid cutting back and forth, between Czerny's taxi and her changing position of the street, highlights her state of uncertainty and her lack of a specific direction or orientation at this moment. Following this, the film cuts away from both characters in order to reveal an entirely new and seemingly unconnected

environment. Luxurious cars are shown depositing glamorous individuals outside a grand hotel. Cutting in closer, a shot reveals a perplexed looking doorman looking out of the frame to his left. Returning to a shot of Eve's clumsy progress down the street, it become apparent that he is staring in her direction. In spite of her stumbling awkwardness, he takes her to be an arriving guest and walks quickly out of the frame to greet her. The structural organisation of this moment discloses Eve's destination before she herself has become aware of it, thereby alluding to the passive role she plays in her own spatial and narrative trajectories. The machinations of the external world are repeatedly shown to be outside of Eve's control and to take place without her awareness, thereby necessitating her improvisational, in-the-moment responses to them.

Her response in this instance, once the doorman has reached her, also reflects her adaptive submission to her changing circumstances. She adopts a bewildered expression as he approaches her with an offer of an umbrella. He forcibly escorts her to the door as she lets out an indecorous "Huh?" Trailing ungainly behind him, the frank manifestation of her bafflement belies her chic appearance. Though she appears to be forcibly manhandled onto the carpet, slack-jawed with confusion, she offers little resistance to the insistence of this stranger who grabs her out of the blue. She is passively jostled from one scenario to the next, without actively asserting herself or offering any reaction other than one of perplexed mystification.



As she arrives outside the entrance of the party, she is shown in close-up; her expression is wide-eyed and hesitant as she loiters cautiously on the periphery of the milling crowd. She is shown as a neutral observer of the world before her, as other partygoers jostle around her whilst she passively lurks on the sidelines. Her lips parted, she wears a slightly neutral, vacant expression.

Her face does not impart any clearly identifiable emotional states, such as anxiety or confusion. Rather she appears blank and irresolute, as she looks around from side to side, withdrawing from the spectacle of the arriving guests.

The tentative uncertainty of her countenance in this shot and her passivity across

the sequence, underscores the indeterminacy of her presence outside of her self-consciously contrived personas. Furthermore, the film's presentation of environments before has entered into them, anticipating her movements, underscores her lack of intentionality and the impression of spontaneity in her reactions to them.

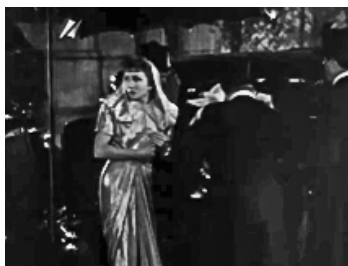
4.4 Bodily Adaptation

During the remainder of the scene, she attempts to manipulate her presence responsively in order to disguise herself as a guest and gain access to the party. Once she succeeds in getting inside, she strives to avoid detection. Her struggle to assimilate takes on a variety of forms in the sequence, as she re-orientates herself in accordance with each new section of her environment. The differing methods she draws upon in order to continually fit in with her changing circumstances reflect the general mutability of her presence. The film's contrivance of various situations and difficulties for Eve to traverse emphasise Colbert's performances of exaggerated assimilations. Never remaining too long in one place, she has to continually adjust her behaviour to suit her circumstances. However, all of these adjustments involve an effort to suppress the specificity of her own presence through bodily discretion and gestural imitation. These attempts at mimicry and subtlety are, of course, repeatedly challenged and undermined by Colbert's striking appearance, clothing and out-of-place, frank American demeanour. The film's depiction of her presence stresses her struggle to blend in to her environments, while simultaneously and continually underscoring her obvious singularity. The scene generates a good deal of comedic tension through this conflict between her assimilative efforts and the recalcitrant anomalism of her conspicuous and distinctive presence.

The specificity of Colbert's own film persona plays an essential role in the development of the sequence. Her idiosyncratic physical appearance, in combination with her aura of lightness and spontaneity, facilitates the film's emphasis on surface reflexivity over character depth. Her demeanour has a quality of playful practicality that forestalls the impression of emotional or psychological intensity, contributing to the light-hearted, improvisational dimension of Eve's presence. Furthermore, her irrepressible and frank physicality alludes to a lack of control over how she presents herself to the world, creating a tension around the success of her assimilations. *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges: 1941), a film made two years later, also depicts a wily woman who moves through the world by deceiving and tricking those around her. However, it creates a very different sort of comedic tension through its heroine's

adaptive talents because of the absolute authority and obvious intelligence of Barbara Stanwyck's presence in the lead role. Whereas Stanwyck always appears to be in control of how the world receives her image, Colbert's self-presentations seem more fragile and less thought out. Her lighter, more chaotic persona and her lack of gravitas directly contribute to the condition of reflexivity that shapes Eve's role in the film. This quality is particularly significant in this sequence, as her improvised performances lack any stable or clearly defined underlying personality. Her lack of depth allows her to transform her surface appearance from one moment to the next, quashing her presence through bodily discretion or gestural conformity. However, it also raises the stakes of the comedy, as without any strong persona to fall back on (as would be the case with a performer like Stanwyck), the shattering of Eve's assimilated persona would leave her character entirely devoid of purpose and identity.

These tensions are played out overtly in the first section of the episode. Eve attempts to assimilate herself into her new situation by adopting an unobtrusive and inconspicuous physicality, attempting to minimise her bodily presence altogether. She moves hesitantly, slouching over slightly and dodging out of the way of passing guests. The camera's wide shot highlights her struggle to mitigate her intrusion within the environment, while also stressing her gleaming presence by placing her within the broader context of the dark street, surrounded by men in dark suits. She does not assert herself physically or expressively onto her surroundings. She is shown to be looking around cautiously, unsure of what to do next. She adopts a reticent posture, with her shoulders slouched and her arms brought into to her torso, where she clutches at her purse. Rather than adopting a self-determined strategy, she waits for an external change in circumstances to dictate her next move.



As two conspicuous partygoers emerge from their vehicle, Eve quietly and immediately slips behind the pair as they step forward. The monocle-wearing rotund gentlemen and his ostentatiously dressed female companion both fail to notice her directly behind them. The success of Colbert's evasion of notice appears to be more a product of the pair's comical self-absorption than of her own covert bodily tactics.



The extravagantly dressed woman, Simone (Elaine Barrie), wears a strikingly tall and abstract feathered hat, her imposing presence blotting out Eve's within the frame. Stalking passed the unseen stowaway, only centimetres behind her, the woman is consumed by her catty remarks, quipping: "It always rains when Stephanie gives one of her dull parties; even nature weeps". The poised arrogance of Simone as she sweeps confidently towards the entrance with an air of absolute entitlement contrasts vividly with Eve's attempt to conceal and suppress her presence. The slightness of Eve's body is more apparent beside Simone and her adjacent corpulent companion, who rummages distractedly in his pockets. Simone's commanding ensemble renders her a stiff and angular figure within the frame, the pointed rigidity of her clothing asserts itself within the surroundings. The couple's self-involved and haughty air also underscores the impression of Eve's self-consciousness. Her tensed and minimal physicality, diminishing her movements and her body by tightly drawing her arms into her torso, allows her to slide along furtively behind the couple.

As Eve approaches the threshold, she is forced to change tack in order to get past the doorman. Rather than trying to hide and relying on the conspicuousness of others to conceal herself, she attempts instead to mimic the behaviour and demeanour of the other partygoers. The scene depicts the processes of her gestural imitations while emphasising her deployment of her dazzling appearance in order to deflect notice away from her status as an intruder. This transition from bodily distraction to assimilative mimicry is initiated when Eve overhears Simone's reference to the party's strict entry policy, as she comments that all the guests must present an invitation to the porter in order to gain admittance. Upon hearing the remark, Eve slows to a halt, looking anxiously ahead of her. A cut reveals the object of her apprehensive gaze to be a belligerent looking rotund doorman closely inspecting entry cards in the building's antechamber.

Having been shown to be covertly hiding behind the couple on the way up, she is then detached from them by a cut to a close-up, revealing her to be once again loitering hesitantly on the periphery of the action, unsure of what to do. Examining the contents of her clutch purse whilst nervously glancing at the passers-by, she

produces a card that is revealed to be her pawnshop slip in a further close-up. As the film cuts back to reveal her reaction, a slight smile appears on her face before growing into a look of gleeful cunning. She raises her head from looking down at her purse, pushes back her shoulders to create an air of self-confidence and transforms her conspiratorial grin into a haughty smile.

Her demeanour of easy confidence and entitlement is reminiscent of Simone's arrogant bearing. She then attaches herself to the procession of guests handing their cards into a doorman. Mimicking the amiable superiority of the other passers-by, she gently hands him the pawn slip. Flashing a breezy smile, she glances at him briefly before looking down, coyly drawing his focus to her face. She smoothly glides past him with an air of easy self-assurance. The doorman regards her with a startled look, too preoccupied with her striking appearance to pay any attention to the card she slipped him.



As the guests mill around her, she appears to fit in perfectly with the stream of similarly dressed and vivacious people trailing through the hallway. In this moment, her adaptive physicality allows her to take on the physical demeanour of those around her, while her striking exterior deflects any attempts to penetrate or scrutinise her dazzling façade.

4.5 Environmental Assimilation

As she enters the foyer of the soirée, the film cuts to a wide shot and a porter arrives to take her cloak. This camera position, combined with the removal of the outer protective layer that had allowed her to somewhat conceal her face, highlight her exposed position within this strange and novel environment. The cluttered and confused arrangement of the composition, with characters milling from all directions, creates a sense of uncertainty around what she should or will do next.



Once Eve enters into the main room, the camera continues to keep its distance from her, maintaining the impression of her exposure and hesitation. This arrangement also produces an effect of comic awkwardness, as she nervously stands at the threshold of the large, crowded room before setting her sights on an (apparently) empty chair and striding anxiously towards it. The wide shot emphasises the tension of this moment by including a large number of onlookers looming threateningly in the background, while Eve attempts to cross the room without drawing their notice. She moves rapidly, determined to minimise her time in the centre of the room. Arriving at the chair, she sits down immediately in order to blend in with the crowd. However, in her haste, she neglects to check the seat first and finds herself to be sitting on an irate small dog.



Her demeanour of serious concentration is obliterated as she jumps back up instantly. Turning around, she attempts to stroke the offended animal in an attempt to recover her composure and mitigate the spectacle she has caused. Having built up tension through the previous moments as she anxiously tried to avoid notice by moving smoothly and silently across the room, the film hilariously expels this strain as she inadvertently draws attention to herself in almost every possible way. The camera also moves in closer at this point, creating a more claustrophobic sense of space as she awkwardly bumps into everyone around her while trying to escape.

When Eve eventually does locate a chair, her relief at finding a place to hide and relax is palpable. Her whole posture transforms from one of nervous tension to relaxed contentment, as she sinks deeply into the cushioned seat.

However, she subsequently notices that the doorman who had mistakenly allowed her entrance into the party is consulting anxiously with the hostess, with her

pawnshop card in hand. Once again, she strives to nervously blend into her environment, first by minimising her presence and then by conspicuously mimicking the behaviour of those around her.

The film reflects and amplifies her feelings of conspicuousness as the doorman moves towards the hostess by cutting to a slightly wider shot. She appears exposed, standing out from the sombrely dressed crowd around her. She attempts to sink down further into her low chair, shrinking from view.



The hostess calls a halt to the musical proceedings (much to the annoyance of the comically frustrated pianist), and calls out for ‘Eve Peabody’ to make herself known. Her voice drips with disdain as she articulates the less than aristocratic sounding name. The name itself points to the emptiness of Colbert’s character’s ‘real’ persona in the film—‘Eve’ is the name of the original proto-woman and ‘Peabody’ recalls the word ‘nobody’. As her incongruous name resounds through the expectant room, she slouches further into her chair adopting a demeanour of strained indifference. While she tries to appear relaxed, by casually stretching out her arm and absentmindedly stroking her face, her body seems stiff and her widened, alert eyes make her facial expression appear nervous. As the party guests look around the room for a sign of the impostor, Eve mimics their looks of bored curiosity, craning her neck from side to side in a mock show of blasé interest. Having completed her cursory inspection of the room, she looks straight ahead with a dreamy smile, striving to appear as unperturbed as possible.



The steady medium close-up shot of Colbert’s face reveals the adaptive processes she performs in order to blend into her environment. Rather than using a wide shot to highlight her negotiation of her exposed vulnerability within the crowded

room, this arrangement stresses the detail of her attempted physical and expressive assimilations. However, by disconnecting them from the wider context through a close-up, her assimilative efforts are made to seem transparently conspicuous to the viewer. While Eve is trying to escape from notice, the film simultaneously makes her presence as prominent as possible, creating an effective comedic tension.

4.6 Playful Deferral

As the party progresses, Eve draws the attention of several of the guests. While she initially assumes that this is because her impostor status has been discovered, it transpires that it is in fact due to her striking appearance. She is then invited to join a group of attendees who would rather play cards than listen to the music. Consequently, it is no longer enough for Eve to merely attempt to evade notice; she must assume a false identity and avoid discovery. As such, the film's strategy for both depicting her presence and creating comic effects alters from emphasising her reactions to her environment through physicality, to highlighting the strained and fragile processes of her behavioural improvisations, as she invents and develops a fictional persona for herself.

Eve's struggle to preserve her newly invented aristocratic identity is initially enacted through her attempts to stall and put off her companions' curious questioning. Her position is, however, made far more secure thanks to an unlikely turn of events in the hunt for Eve Peabody. As she comes to take her leave of the party (with her glamorous new acquaintances in tow), she overhears the hostess reveal that the mysterious party-crasher "Eve Peabody" was discovered to be "a horrible old woman" posing as the "Archduchess of Mendola", who was found hiding in the powder room and promptly ejected from the gathering. The real Eve is shown listening to the exchange from behind in the foreground of the image, as the infatuated Jacques gazes at her from the side.



This development points to the general fragility of identities and personas within the film world, as a character's ability to appear as if they belong in a particular environment is more significant than whether they actually do belong there. This is

compounded further by the composition of the shot. Eve is shown from behind, standing at a slight remove from the hostess's revealing conversation while Jacques (one of her new acquaintances who will be the target of her subsequent scheme with Flammerion) gazes at her with an infatuated expression from the left of the frame. This alludes to the ways in which her presence is 'overwritten' by those around her, as while she seems notably separate from the other groupings within the arrangement of the frame (perhaps attempting to back away from the danger of exposure), the characters all take the appropriateness of her presence for granted. This dynamic stages the tension around her status as an unrecognised impostor. Jacques' clueless admiration of her also demonstrates how appealing looks may deflect other forms of scrutiny or attention. Despite the film's portrayal of the obviousness of her attempts to fit in (as the camera picks out her alienation from her environment and the awkwardness of her physical adaptations), the other characters do not seem to look beyond her immediately dazzling exterior. Her sociable demeanour, glamorous dress and attractive youthful appearance make her a more likely and desirable guest at a high society party than a "horrid old woman" sitting in the powder room. The credibility of one's identity is contingent upon one's capacity to suitably inhabit a particular role.

The tension between how she appears to the camera and how she appears to the world within the film continues as she struggles to maintain her false identity in the face of her companions' piqued curiosity. The film highlights the strained process of her improvisations as she battles to deflect their questions. After overhearing the hostess's account of the ejection of the impostor 'Eve Peabody', the film cuts back to show Eve's already straining composure reach breaking point. She reacts to the story with a spurt of panicky, appreciative laughter, before hastily making for the exit. Her nervous reaction highlights the absurdity of the situation while also underscoring the vulnerability of her position and her desire to avoid the danger of exposure.



In the following moments Eve utilises her playful, circuitous humour as a diversionary tactic in order to avoid questions and defer decisions. Having exited the

party, the crowd gathers on the street and her companions begin to vie for the opportunity to drive her home. She slows down apprehensively and clutches her purse to her body in a nervous, defensive gesture. Her physicality connotes anxiety and trepidation, as she once again timidly reduces her bodily presence, fearful of over-asserting herself in this precarious scenario. The encroaching crowd seems to enclose her, pressuring her into making a choice as to whose offer she will accept. The cramped composition of the image reinforces this sense of her entrapment, and the impending inevitability of her having to surrender her passive spontaneity and make an affirmative choice.

However, when Marcel informs her that his car has a hole in its roof, she seizes on the opportunity to transform the direction of the conversation from one orientated towards the future to one that merely revels playfully in the moment. Adopting a nervous, laughing demeanour, she pauses to turn towards him and retorts: "Over which side?" Rather than responding to any of their requests directly, she reasserts a playful, non-committal mode of interaction. Again, the wide shot highlights the humorous dynamic between her desire to flee from notice and the fascinated crowd of admiring gentlemen who are determined to stay in her company. Their obvious misreading of her anxious prevarication as coy flirtatiousness heightens this comic effect.



Following this exchange, a car pulls up to the curb at the precise moment she reaches the end of the carpet rolled in welcome from the entrance. Just as the doorman coincidentally spotted her and took her for a partygoer, instigating this scenario, the arrival of Jacques' car forestalls the necessity of her making a decision for herself. Once again, the machinations of the film world preserve the impression of her fragile insubstantiality by suggesting her movements result from capitulation to capricious happenstance rather than intentionality. She bows her head in a gesture of compliance and accepts his insistent offer.



Subsequently, she resumes her prevaricating playfulness in order to put off any further commitment to a particular course of action. As Jacques enquires as to where she is staying, the film cuts in closer to reveal her laboured smile as she evasively and laughingly replies: “Why! At my hotel!” Taking on a jovial tone, she once again attempts to maintain a light and indirect style of conversation, favouring teasing circuitousness to any unequivocal statements. As she speaks, she gesticulates towards him playfully with her purse, in a gesture of coy coquettishness, while also trying to physically push him away in an attempt to stall his inquisitiveness. Grinning appreciatively at her seemingly flirtatious behaviour, Jacques asks for the name of her hotel. Hesitating very briefly, her eyes widen and she arches her eyebrows before saying with a tone of increasingly strained good-humour: “I’ll give you three guesses...” The mental effort behind her improvisation here is made physically tangible through the slightly drawn out tempo of her speech and motion. Her face remains static and expectant as she awaits his response. She waves her purse towards him in an invitational gesture, attempting to casually elicit a response from him. As Jacques tentatively offers “The Ritz?” she explosively exclaims, “Right the first time! The Ritz!” in a giddy, high-pitched voice. Her willingness to allow the outside world to randomly govern her movements is demonstrated once again by her jubilant acquiescence to his first suggestion. Her shrill exclamation betrays her demonstrable relief at having been provided with a destination. Her simultaneous physical reaction also communicates her eagerness to comply, as she appreciatively taps his chest with her purse before climbing directly into his car.

In this scene, she converts her state of fraught uncertainty into a performance of teasing prevarication. She adapts her behaviour in order to simultaneously match the flirtatious tone of her exchanges while also using this coquettishness as a way of avoiding potentially exposing questions to which she has no answers. Here, rather than physically assimilating herself into an environment through mimicry or self-effacement, she draws on the witty light-heartedness of aristocratic repartee to evade any direct or assertive forms of communication. At the same time, the film’s depiction of her presence raises the stakes around her improvisational evasions through

its use of a cramped composition, with her bright figure surrounded by a group of men in dark suits pressing her to make a decision.

The film's attention is centred on the depiction of Eve's responses to her environment. This focus, in combination with the complete absence of any backstory for her character, means that the success of her assimilations is the film's main source of drama and comedic tension. The depictions of her reactions to changing situations are what drive the story forward. Were Eve to be exposed as an impostor, there would be no identity left to take the place of her assumed one, and the film's narrative momentum would cease. As the film progresses, Eve's false identity becomes increasingly elaborated and the lengths she must go to in order to protect it become more and more absurd. In addition to assimilating to the world around her, she must also assimilate new details and quirks into her persona. Consequently, the constant and unfolding development of her presence is a central feature of the film's construction and its chief preoccupation.

The scenes discussed by this chapter illustrate this aspect of her significance. The capricious movements of the film world mean that Eve is forced to adapt to her relentlessly shifting circumstances without making any active choices. By removing the impression of her decision-making agency (along with a personal back-story), the film stresses the immediate dimension of her characterisation and establishes her as an exclusively reactive figure. Rather than creating a cumulative sense of interiority or psychology, the film instead stages a drama of perpetual adaptation through its stylistic emphasis on Eve's position within the *mise-en-scène* and on Colbert's continual performative transformations.

5 Projection: *Written on the Wind*

Within the already overwrought expressive environment of Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957) Dorothy Malone's performance as Marylee Hadley still distinguishes itself through its restless intensity. Her provocative sashay, her exuberant dancing, her hyperbolic seductions, even her moments of private reflection, are all permeated with physical and emotive force. She is distinguished by a lurid use of colour, through her bright costumes and make-up, her yellow blonde hair, and her richly tanned skin. Her physical demeanour is powerfully magnified, as she erupts into emotional outbursts and episodes of wild dance. Her presence is amplified further still by the contrasting appearance and physicality that characterise the film's other female lead, Lucy Hadley (Lauren Bacall). Malone's extreme exteriorisations of emotional and psychological states are juxtaposed with the cool restraint of Bacall's screen presence. Next to her contained comportment, slender frailty, and pale almost greyish skin tone, Marylee seems all the more animated as her appearance vigorously pronounces itself within the film environment.

Discussions of Malone's role in the film have most often focused on this conspicuously intense aspect of her appearance and physicality. Her overstated presence is taken to be a manifestation of the expressive 'excess' associated with the genre of melodrama. Feminist psychoanalytic approaches, building on Thomas Elsaesser's notion of 'displacement', have understood the aesthetic extremities of melodrama as indirect expressions of Hollywood film's essential inability to articulate concepts such as female desire and subjectivity (Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury" 62). According to Elsaesser, the domestic scenarios of the films brim over with emotions and desires that appear only indirectly through the intensity of the films' mise-en-scènes and musical scores. Critics such as Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama") have also suggested that this overblown style marks the films as unattainable fantasies, implying that female desire belongs to the realm of the imaginary and is always in 'excess'. In the context of this approach, Malone's presence is indicative of the film's failure to properly articulate her psychological state, and the intensity of her presence demonstrates the essential inadequacy of Hollywood cinema's representational paradigms.

More recently, Elena Del Rio has attempted to accord female performers in

Douglas Sirk's melodramas a more generative role. In her chapter on the director, she accounts for the sensual address of the female performers and explores how they are expressed as visceral and corporeal presences by the films. Del Rio contends that Malone's performance, especially during her father's death scene, exemplifies a wider tendency in the director's work to allow performers to escape from the underlying conservatism of their representational character functions and to become 'catalysts for the emergence of affective-performative events' (Del Rio 29). Reframing Mulvey's notion of excess as fetishised arresting spectacle, she suggests that Marylee's hyperbolic physicality (a manifestation of her 'wild and uncontrollable desire') offers up examples of 'pure *kinetic and gestural situations*' (51 & 29). The extremity of the performance operates as a deforming contagion on 'the values and categories that keep both the narrative and the ideological levels in check under their self-censoring regimes' (30). Rather than appearing as an inert static fetish, her physicality serves to undermine the assumed ideological conservatism of the film through affective distortion. This change in emphasis allows for spectacle to become a positively disruptive force in relation to narrative. Once again, Marylee's presence is said to attain its true significance through its failure to express a coherent character; instead of revealing the inadequacy of the film's representational conventions through her (apparently) anomalous intensity, she exceeds and shatters them.

Both of these approaches focus on the idea that Marylee's presence is somehow in 'excess' of the film's narrative context and eschews any sense of psychological realism. They both imply that her significance stems from the manner in which she exceeds and surpasses her fictional and discursive scenario. The potency of her performance cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of its relation to the immediate environment of the film. The extremity of her physical and psychological characterisation prohibits the creation of a coherent or credible interiority. Consequently, her presence is understood in terms of the film's failure to provide her with a fulfilled role within the narrative fiction. The first approach views her as a symptom of repressive representational structures which can only articulate the woman in terms of absence or difference, manifesting them as distracting spectacle. Alternatively, the latter approach views her as a generative force by liberating the presence from all forms of significance apart from those that relate to 'affect'. Both conceptions rely on a dichotomy between spectacle (imagined either as a tool of oppression or a means of liberation) and narrative, suggesting that Malone's role in the film is defined entirely in terms of an antagonistic relation between the two.

By insisting on 'excess' as the most significant quality of Marylee's presence these critics limit their accounts of the film by focusing exclusively on the question of its (conservative) rhetorical and ideological positioning. Through its conspicuous exaggerations, Malone's performance highlights its own artifice while the film underscores her affectively aberrant status. However, Marylee's potent presence may be read in an entirely different light *within* the context of the film's narrative and thematic concerns. Instead of manifesting an antagonistic position in relation to the film's rhetorical stance, her presence reflects her character's unstable position within the film's fictional environment. Her corporeal dynamism operates as an assertive and provocative way of inhabiting the world, seeking both to emphasise her visibility and extend her physical presence. Given Marylee's marginal, largely unacknowledged status among the other characters in the film, the intensity of her physical and stylistic portrayal could inversely be seen as one that vigorously (if disfunctionally) strives to elicit recognition. Rather than expressing the *film's* failed rhetorical incorporation of her as a psychologically coherent character, her presence reveals *Marylee's* struggle to incorporate herself into the social and physical world around her.

The extremity of Marylee's physical expressions of her emotional and psychological states and the film's heightened depictions of her interiority (which include the only instance of a voiceover and a complexly wrought use of *mise-en-scène*) distinguish and alienate her presence from the other characters. She is differentiated from them at the level of the film's stylistic depiction of her presence and its narrative positioning of her character. Her transparently demonstrative and provocative physicality communicates a desire for recognition from those around her while simultaneously undercutting this possibility through its estranging intensity. Through her gestures and movements, she projects herself into the world with a forceful potency that separates her from the demure restraint of Lucy, the steady sturdiness of her childhood sweetheart Mitch (Rock Hudson), and even from the brooding inwardness of her depressive brother Kyle (Robert Stack). The demanding expressiveness of her presence reveals her character's wish for acknowledgement at the same time as isolating her in its destructive extremity.

The daughter of a wealthy oil magnate, Marylee occupies a solitary position within the already claustrophobic world of 'Hadley', a town named after her family. Left resolutely outside of the love triangle that constitutes the film's primary narrative movement, she is repeatedly rejected by Mitch, who is the object of her unyieldingly furious infatuation. The manner of his rebuffs, as he repeatedly stresses

the fraternal nature of his feelings for her, intensifies her performance of exaggerated and frustrated sexuality, as she demands that he recognise and reciprocate her desire for him. Both Kyle and Lucy are subject to her jealous and destructive ire because of their closeness to Mitch. Unlike the other characters, Marylee is never seen outside of the confines of Hadley. The film continually underscores her frustrated and suspended position, and she reacts against this state through her corporeality, which repeatedly and assertively projects itself outwards, while the film underscores this through its formal and stylistic execution of her presence.

5.1 Projecting Alienation

The film draws attention to her isolated condition through the use of claustrophobic compositions and devices that abstract or remove her physical presence from environments inhabited by the other characters. Mirrors are used on several occasions to portray her on a separate plane within the image. Her extensive physicality is situated within these restrictive arrangements and is consequently suggestive of her attempt to overcome this state. She vigorously extends herself into her surroundings through both her use of space and her gestural performance, an effect compounded by her frequent transgressing of the boundaries of the film frame. Reacting against her position within the Hadley world, she asserts herself within her environment by forcibly extending herself into it.

One such instance, in which both the framing and blocking of shots emphasise Marylee's marginal status, occurs during her first scene. Her condition as an outsider in relation to the film's other characters is immediately alluded to by having her first appearance occur almost forty minutes into the film. Furthermore, while the other characters arrive in the town of Hadley midway through the film, she is confined there for the duration of the narrative, seemingly cut off from the world beyond her family. During the sequence, the space of the bar is depicted through oppressive and restrictive compositions, which she inhabits in an extensive manner, revealing her desire to escape this oppressed and isolated condition, through physical projection and emphatic visibility.

The scene depicts Marylee's rendezvous with an unsavoury employee of her father in the local bar. She is presented indirectly by the shot, which frames her in a mirror behind the counter as the owner informs Mitch of her scandalous behaviour over the phone.



She is tangibly cut off from the other members of her family, who are currently gathered together to welcome Kyle's new wife. Both the conversation taking place in the foreground (of which she is the subject) and her framed, reflected presence in the background emphasise the distance between her and the other characters. Her behaviour is relayed to Mitch over the phone, as her presence is relayed within the film image via the mirror. This double abstraction establishes a sense of her alienation, which is then reinforced by the cramped composition of the shot. The walls of the booth she occupies with her companion echo the boundaries of the mirror's frame, enclosing her further still.

However, her brightly coloured costume stands out against the otherwise all-pervading drabness of her environment. Her ensemble attracts attention and is suggestive of a desire to be noticed. Whilst the colourfulness of her appearance renders her conspicuous within the frame, her distinctive visibility also serves to single her out, underscoring her solitary condition. The inappropriateness of her modish and eye-grabbing outfit within the context of her shabby local bar also reflects her state of separation, as she never seems wholly to belong to any shared or communal environment.¹ Her appearance in the scene reinforces the sense of her isolation, as its aberrant vividness creates a marked disparity between the palette of her figure in the frame and that of her companion and the space in general. This aesthetic and stylistic differentiation singles her out repeatedly over the course of the film.

Her anomalousness is also expressed through her physicality in the sequence, as the intensity of her gestures and movements contrasts with her escort's more casual and offhand manner. Following the opening shot, she is shown seated at a table, opposite her companion. The angle of the shot and its proximity to her draw attention to the potency of her facial expression as she stares across the table.

¹ Inversely, the private spaces of her bedroom and the river are so imbued with her presence, they are rarely seen to admit anyone else. In the one instance that Marylee does manage to persuade Mitch to accompany her on a picnic to the riverside, the encounter is both short-lived and disappointing; his looming presence in a grey suit is entirely at odds with the scene of ludic nostalgia she attempts to stage.



As he sleazily congratulates himself on having told an off-colour joke, her facial expression seems self-absorbed and preoccupied. However, confined within the walls of the booth, her body is restless and writhing. She undulates provocatively, pouting and rolling her neck. Wide-eyed and lips parted, she gazes up at him whilst stroking the back of her neck. Regardless of her apparent lack of interest in her companion (conveyed by her disengaged expression and dismissal of his joke: “I’ve heard better”), her body continues to present itself in terms of a fervid display of sexual desire and desirability. Consequently, her ostensible seductiveness fails to appear quite authentic, and is better understood as a mode of maximising visibility than a means of encouraging interaction.

Her highly wrought appearance adds to this sense of the artificial or simulated nature of her desires and sexuality. Her bright pink make-up and dress are practically luminous against the dingy background of the booth. Combined with her tanned skin and dyed hair, she appears to have a distinctly inorganic quality, as though every aspect of her exterior were meticulously controlled or designed. Her gloves emphasise this still further, hinting at a retreat from tactility or sensuous confrontation. Although Marylee’s seductive behaviour and appearance allude to her desire for recognition and contact, her exaggerated and disinterested manner also expresses her state of alienation. She appears too preoccupied by the process of presenting herself to the world around her to achieve meaningful engagement within it. Her obvious and constant efforts to stage and extend her body communicate her estrangement from herself as well as bringing about her estrangement within her environments.

5.2 Spatial Provocation

Marylee also utilises her extensive physicality as a means of confrontational provocation, territorially asserting her presence to the world around her. She frequently stages herself within her surroundings, using space and objects in a theatrical and

forceful manner. This tendency to draw on her physical and spatial situation as a platform for aggravation and self-assertion is demonstrated by her first scene with Lucy Hadley.

The sequence begins with a shot showing the new Mrs Hadley reentering her bedroom from the shower. Following her movements, the camera discovers Marylee perching on her dressing table with a drink in hand. The delayed disclosure of her presence in the room emphasises its intrusive nature, as she impetuously imposes herself on Lucy's space, openly displaying her lack of respect for her privacy. Her position on the dressing table also reflects her assertion of a prior or superior claim on the space.

Her physical attitude towards Lucy also expresses her desire to dominate and control the interaction. Standing up, she walks slowly over to Lucy, introducing herself and welcoming her to Hadley. Claspings her hands around the drink, her enclosed posture contradicts the apparent hospitality of her speech. As Lucy thanks her for her greeting, Marylee cuts her off mid sentence, curtly dismissing her pleasantries ("I'm allergic to politeness"). Briskly waving her hand at Lucy in a gesture of dismissal, she turns her back on her and the camera follows her to a seat, in which she slumps indecorously with her foot on a cushion. Draping herself casually over the chair, she projects a disregard for her sister-in-law's good opinion through her lax and careless physicality.



Marylee subsequently strives to provoke Lucy by unfavourably comparing Kyle to Mitch. As she recounts the story of Kyle's brawl with one of her would-be seducers ("You should have seen him; on the wrong end of every punch!"), her amused, teasing tone of voice matches the provocative insouciance of her posture.

As the exchange of snide remarks continues, Lucy is shown sitting at her dressing table brushing her hair, whilst Marylee's reclining body is seen in the mirror's reflection.



This composition serves to heighten the sense of their disunity through their occupation of two separate spatial planes, as well as placing them in a semi-confrontational arrangement with one another by showing them face-to-face. This organisation of the frame highlights the performative nature of their interaction, as Marylee speaks with the deliberate intention of provoking Lucy while she feigns disinterest. Marylee's behaviour is given as a mode of provocatively presenting herself to Lucy, as she is once again physically abstracted from the frame via the use of a mirror.

Later in the scene, as their conversation draws to an acrimonious close, Marylee once again draws on the objects around her in order to stage disdain and contempt. Having stood up to take her leave, Marylee sarcastically offers her condolences to her sister-in-law on the event of her marriage. After Lucy retorts with a surprising degree of verve ("Excuse me if I seem to be brushing you out of my hair"), Marylee haughtily raises her head, before turning on the spot and striding towards the door. As she walks, she aggressively throws the remainder of her drink into the pot of one of the plants, again expressing scorn through her callous treatment of Lucy's objects and her imposing occupation of her environment. Pausing as she reaches the exit, an expression of satisfaction appears on her face as she turns confidently to deliver the final word. Quipping, "Darling, I'll send you some of my towels; I believe you're still wet behind the ears", she then waves a net curtain behind her as a final flourish. She brazenly imposes herself onto all aspects of her physical environment, engaging in a provocative relation with the world around her.

5.3 Temporal Estrangement

Throughout the film, Marylee relates viscerally to the worlds conjured up by her thoughts, memories and reflections; her gaze often appears to be almost hypnotically transfixed, either by another person, object or an unidentified point in space. She inhabits and projects herself into her fantasy spaces with as much expressive potency as she does the physical world.

The relationship between her condition of emotional alienation and her volatile, extensive physicality is evident in a scene that takes place at 'the river', where she rem-

iniscs about the days spent there during her childhood with Mitch and her brother. In this sequence, she appears to imaginatively and corporeally re-inhabit an episode from her youth, a time when she possessed Mitch's youthful affections. Rather than passively remembering this earlier stage in her life and engaging productively with the experience as memory, Marylee appears to physically occupy her recollections as though she were possessed by their power. Her physical characterisation in the scene can therefore be understood as another manifestation of her psychological and experiential alienation from the world around her, as she occupies her environment via the prism of her unrealisable and thwarted desires.

The riverside location is itself demonstrative of this condition of alienation and disconnection, as it is inextricably tied up with her presence. Whereas both Mitch and Kyle are seen to have travelled extensively beyond of the limits of the Hadley world, Marylee is shown to be emotionally confined there in terms of her wish to return to and recapture the world of her youth, evoked by the river. It is used as a symbol throughout the film for a fall from a state of innocence, as Mitch regretfully comments at one point, "How far we have come from the river". The look of the outdoor location also immediately stands out from the highly stylised interiors that form the backdrop for most of the film's other action. A bright autumnal palette of golds and greens combines with a more natural use of light to create a more organic-seeming setting. The richness of these colours and the abundance of verdant foliage do, however, create an impression of a romanticised pastoral space, which nevertheless distinguishes it from the more ornate, oppressive and inhospitable environments seen elsewhere. A sense of foreignness and isolation pervades the site, as a consequence of this aesthetic singularity within the visual realm of the film. As well as appearing stylistically discontinuous with the often garishly coloured and highly designed spaces of the Hadley home, it also seems alien to the desert-like vistas of the oilfields. The film's only other rural landscapes are shown to be lifeless and inorganic, punctuated by nodding derricks instead of trees. Marylee's intimate connection and familiarity with this environment is consequently coloured by its aesthetic and spatial displacement within the world of the film. The space that facilitates and instigates the most vivid expression of Marylee's psychological state is seen to be resolutely disconnected from the remainder of the film's physical and aesthetic universe. This singularity compounds Marylee's alienation from the social world around her.

The sense of isolation established by the distinct look of the location is compounded further by the manner in which the space is introduced. The scene begins

with a dissolve from Mitch's confession of his apparently unrequited love of Lucy Hadley to his father. As the film moves from one location to another, Mitch's final line ("It's completely one-sided") lingers, spilling over the fissure and into the shot of Marylee approaching the river. As well as drawing parallels between Mitch's love for the married Lucy and Marylee's infatuation with Mitch, the extension of his speech into the scene allows his presence to percolate into the space. The introduction of the soft strings of the musical score also invests the location with an emotionally fraught timbre. Consequently, before Marylee's recollections begin to manifest in a more tangible fashion, as her physicality and a voiceover project her vivid nostalgia directly onto her environment, the space already resonates with her unfulfilled desire for Mitch and her isolation from him.

Marylee's engagement with the environment is imbued with tactility from the first. She enters the frame barefoot, carrying her shoes in one hand and gently stroking the bark of a tree with the other, before crouching down by the riverside. This contrasts with an earlier tendency to withhold herself from making sensuous physical contact with the world around her, either by occupying her hands with an object (the glass in the Lucy's bedroom) or through her costume (the gloves in the bar). Here, she is immediately shown to be more receptive to the material world, rather than attempting to forcibly impose herself onto it. Once again, the only depiction of her entering into a tender and non-assertive relation with her physical environment occurs in a space that is strongly imbued with a sense of her insurmountable isolation.

This opening shot portrays her entry into the space from behind, thereby withholding her face from view. Languorously touching the tree several times over the course of her path around it, she pauses to look out across the scene. Restricting access to her facial response emphasises her physical interaction with the world around her, highlighting the significance of tactility in her experience of the environment. In addition, the composition suggests for the first time a lack of self-consciousness, as her absorption in the setting momentarily allows her ceaseless project of self-presentation to pause.



However, immediately following this, the use of voiceover reveals her vivid recollection of a childhood memory. A series of protruding gestures responds directly to the words on the soundtrack as though the actions they refer to were taking place around her. As she remembers the two boys skimming stones on the river, her facial expression engages directly with the scenario. First frowning with annoyance as Kyle is heard taunting Mitch before he casts his stone, she then cranes her neck and stares out expectantly over the surface of the water, looking jubilant as her childhood voice is heard proclaiming, “You made it Mitch!” Her expressions are overwrought with emotion as she gazes into the distance, transfixed by her experience of the past.

Subsequently, the young Mitch is heard commenting on mulberry juice that stained her lips, and her fingers reach instinctively and self-consciously for her mouth, which she caresses tentatively.



Here, her extensive physicality emerges through the craning and drawing in of her neck, her swelling chest and her pouted lips. Using all aspects of her body to extend herself outwards, she projects herself into the space her memories have conjured. As the reminiscence reaches its climax with his adolescent promises of marriage, she turns and sees their initials carved on a tree trunk. As the ageing, dead tree intrudes on her fantasy, the physical world becomes apparent to her once more, and the illusion can no longer be sustained. Leaning against the tree, she buries her face in her arms and sobs.

In this sequence, she appears to inhabit her physical surroundings through her intense and unmediated recollection of the past. This can once again be seen as an expression of her psychological dislocation within the fictional world of the film, as her frustrated desires intercede between her and her present situation. Her physicality is disengaged from her immediate context and responds to her fantasy of acknowledgment. Her extensive movements and the use of the voiceover (and children's voices) portray the past event as a tangible reality. Whilst she is recalling a memory, she experiences this past situation as though it were occurring around her in the present, through corporeal projection.

5.4 Restless Undulation

This somatic instability is expressed even in scenes which apparently depict Marylee at her most confident and self-possessed. James Harvey has suggested that a physical restlessness characterises Marylee's physicality generally: 'She never lets up: she looks sidling and sinuous even sitting still — "keeping her motor running" as one of her pick-ups instructs her to do' (Harvey 348). Her body is rarely static, as she undulates and writhes throughout her public misdemeanours and private reminiscences. Her state of agitation, emerging through her habitually extensive physicality, is symptomatic of a frustration with her indeterminate and isolated situation, as well reflecting a state of somatic volatility. Unable to settle or be at ease, she endeavours to display herself and enter into her unreceptive surroundings by engaging in a volatile and provocative relation with all elements of her surroundings. By stretching and elongating her body, she extends herself into her environment.

These gestural tendencies are particularly evident during her seduction of an attendant at a gas station. Throughout the sequence, she extends her neck and arms whilst sticking out her chest and pouting her lips. Continually stretching her neck and lifting her chin upwards, she extends her arms across the back seat. Gazing into the distance as though transfixed, she appears overwhelmed by or completely immersed in her body's sensuous, rhythmical motion. She draws out her body in two perpendicular directions, restlessly coiling and recoiling her neck and stroking the car seat with her hand. This propensity towards protrusion is echoed by the undulations of her hair and her bright red car.



Again, however, these constant, rhythmical readjustments and her state of almost hypnotised self-absorption are demonstrative of a physicality that is expressively unmoored. Her restless and extensive movements characterise her presence in terms of somatic instability.

5.5 Simulated Sensuality

Harvey has also connected the 'intense materiality' of both the Hadley children with the 'intensely present' objects in the film, such as this striking, red convertible

(Harvey 348). This is especially true of the numerous ornate items littering Marylee's bedroom, which compound many of the effects produced by her physicality. Her room, like the river, is intimately imbued with a sense of her presence in the film. In one sequence, Marylee is seen pulling on her stockings and readying herself to go out for the evening. The phone rings and Mitch announces himself on the receiver. His photograph looms in the foreground of the frame, and many of the other features of Marylee's bedroom are revealed. The image of Mitch, along with his tinny sounding, disembodied voice, serves as a reminder of his remoteness and inaccessibility for Marylee. The positioning of the picture, dominant and conspicuous at the same time as being peripheral and facing away from her, emphasises his unattainable status. Colour compounds this further, as the vibrant splashes of colour in her room contrast with the flat monochrome of his image. His absent presence in the sequence hangs next to her, catalysing her physical hyperbole as their confrontation on the phone intensifies her frustration.



Similar decorative and inanimate objects surround her. These objects, along with Mitch's black and white photograph all imply an inverted or simulated sensuality. The perfumes kept behind glass in the cabinet invoke the possibility of scent at the same time as abstracting their olfactory function through their visual display. The garish red flowers are clearly artificial; their lurid lifelessness is conspicuously inorganic. The cold moulded ceramic head behind her echoes this retreat from fleshly or carnal feeling. They are all lifeless and decorative things. They reflect Marylee's constantly unfolding project of self-presentation and simulated sensuality, as a response to the critical indifference of the world around her. Her frustrated presence is displaced and projected into her environment.

5.6 Destructive Isolation

The apotheosis of Marylee's alienated and projective physicality occurs in Jasper Hadley's death scene. The notorious sequence cataclysmically brings together and escalates numerous features of her presence in a frenzied expression of livid corporeality. The episode depicts the demise of Jasper Hadley, as he struggles up the

grand staircase in his opulent entrance hall, alongside Marylee, dancing rebelliously and frantically to thunderous jazz in her bedroom. The scene is of particular importance to Del Rio's understanding of Marylee's presence in the film. Drawing on Deleuze's theories of the molar plane (identified as narrative action) and the molecular plane (identified as 'affective-performative events'), she suggests that this sequence unfolds in terms of relations of 'speed' 'movement' and 'intensity', bringing together 'beyond subjectivity, the forces at work in two disparate corporeal configurations' (Del Rio 53-54). The unleashing of Marylee's repressed rebellious desires through the potency of Malone's physicality in this moment emerges as a wave of unruly destructive energy, which proves death-dealing for her father. The aggressive intensity of her performance accumulates such a high degree of affective force that it is said to move 'beyond individuation and cognition', as Marylee's body becomes abstracted into 'a red moving surface' (53-54). Del Rio also describes this affective outburst as a 'brief moment of impersonal vitality', and goes on to state that the film subsequently 'resumes its molar/moral mandates' (55). The implication that this moment of expressive hyperbole is anomalous and discontinuous with the Marylee's presence elsewhere (which belongs more obviously to the 'molar' dimension of narrative and character) is contradicted by the continuity of the film's depiction of her in this scene. While it may be singular in its climactic intensity, the sequence draws on devices which have already been firmly associated with Marylee's character.

The scene moves progressively towards a rhythmical crescendo in which Marylee's ecstatic dance and her father's death are made to collide with one another through the scene's formal arrangement, creating an impression of an elusive causality. However, to read this moment exclusively in terms of its destructive affective dimension, and to conclude that it somehow enacts a liberation of Marylee's presence, disregards both the ways in which it corresponds to the film's more general portrayal of her and the cumulative narrative significance of the event. The episode's creation of a link between Marylee's volatile physicality and the simultaneous demise of her father compounds the impression of the destructiveness of her alienated desire by causally tying her intense bodily projections to the depiction of a physical death at the level of the film's construction. Rather than creating a positive affirmation of the anomalousness of her presence (as suggested by Del Rio), the scene instead alludes to the violent futility of its expressions by juxtaposing Jasper's weakening frailty with her cumulative bodily extremity. The

film frames her wildly extensive gestures within a context that conveys another character's permanent alienation and exclusion from the film's narrative.

The intensity of this sequence is underscored by its narrative position, which follows directly on from a scene that stresses Marylee's rebellious self-estrangement and isolation from the other characters. The construction of the episode enforces the emotional and physical divides between her and her family through its depictions of spatial relationships. Having been discovered in the company of the gas station attendant at a motel, she is ignominiously returned home by the police, after her father and Mitch have been informed. The first part of the scene reveals Marylee's remoteness to her family, stressing her alienation from those around her. Her display of cold immunity is situated within a composition that highlights the distant and uncomprehending scrutiny she is subject to from without, as her presence is relayed through the critical gazes of both her father and of Mitch.

She comports herself in this section of the sequence with a tangible restraint and self-possession, displaying the composed equanimity of one who knows that they are being reproachfully observed. Once she has exited the police car pulled up outside the Hadley residence, a point of view shot shows Jasper watching through the window as she climbs out of the back seat. Visibly unperturbed, she casually adjusts her earrings and runs her fingers through her hair before allowing her shawl to slink around the small of her back.



She prepares herself to make an entrance, as though leaving a taxi to go into a restaurant or a bar. She betrays no outward signs of emotion or indignation at the manner of her treatment, as she brushes her hands through her hair and strides towards the house. Rather than responding to the situation and acknowledging the disapproval of others, she shuts herself off completely from their presence as a means of regaining control.

Upon entering the house, she is shown in terms of the gulf that separates her from Mitch, who opens the door to the office as she steps into the hall. He is seen, along with the policeman, watching her in the mirror's reflection as she passes by. Her physicality is here determined by her consciousness of being viewed and

judged by those around her. As a policeman follows in her wake with the gas station attendant behind him, she continues to saunter casually across the hall as though the unfolding drama had nothing to do with her.



The mirror recalls the use of the window frame through which her father viewed her in the previous shot. Both devices allude to the critical scrutiny of her behaviour, as the framing casts her as the object of first her father's, and then Mitch's, disapproving and distant gaze. Her careful and controlled demeanour reflects her self-awareness. They also emphasise her removal and isolation from the two men. Her presence to her father is mediated through the window, whereas the latter composition depicts Mitch as occupying a different spatial frame to Marylee within the image. Furthermore, this framing stresses the other characters' lack of insight or access to Marylee. Both of the shots foreground her presence to the two men in terms of distance and abstraction.

Her immunity continues as she begins a placid and posed ascent up the staircase, casually dragging her fur shawl behind her as a sign of her unconcern. Shown in a wide shot, her composure has a highly studied air. That she is shown from behind throughout the sequence, also stresses her immunity to outside scrutiny. Her head remains static as she looks straight ahead while stepping carefully but quickly up the stairs. The quietude of the moment affords her physicality all the more eloquence, as it resonates through the cavernous silent space of the entrance hall. Her quiet performance of indifference, though lacking in the physical extremity of the following moments, is also an effective and defiant provocation. Her isolated figure within the vast empty space of the room echoes her estranged condition as she makes her way up the stairs.

As she approaches the landing, she is shown from the front, outside of the context of her visibility to the others. As her progress brings her closer to the camera, her expression undergoes a transformation. Her look of blithe indifference changes to reveal a satisfied and wryly-amused expression in close-up by the time she reaches her bedroom door. She is conscious of the consequences of her behaviour, and derives no small amount of pleasure from them. Content with her performance, she

looks back towards the direction of the others below with narrowed eyes and a half-smile. Her expression is suggestive of the thrill she feels in witnessing the fallout of her scandal, as well as alluding to an appetite for further aggravation. The moment stresses the extent to which her behaviour around others is contrived and controlled in order to elicit particular responses.



The scene returns to Marylee once the details of her assignation have been revealed to Mitch and her father in the study, as the reality of her bad reputation in the town is made clear. Once the gas station attendant has been dismissed, having first been rescued from Jasper's homicidal ire by Mitch, Marylee watches from her window as he is driven away. She then begins to stage herself within the space of her bedroom, as though setting the scene for a performance.

Undoing her dress, she turns and strides purposefully across the room, lighting a cigarette from the fireplace and picking up her photograph of Mitch in the process. She looks eagerly at the picture, mouth open and eyes wide—an expression of childish excitement and distraction. Turning on her record player, she pauses to anticipate and appreciate the music, before glancing at the picture once more. She then begins to dance with a determined grin.



Marylee theatricalises her presence through the use of the objects in her room. She gathers props, a cigarette and Mitch's photograph, and puts on very loud and jazzy music (her own theme song, as she has been shown dancing to this music once before). She then moves behind the perfume cabinet to change her clothes, putting on a sheer bright red negligée. The eye-catching colour and billowing fabric of the garment maximise her visibility. Furthermore, just before changing her outfit, she carefully positions Mitch's photograph within her eye line, suggesting that her

actions are performed self-consciously, with a fantasy spectator in mind. Within the ornate and lifeless space of her room, she contrives an environment in order to facilitate a display of her presence. Her use of the music is also territorial, as it lays claim not only to her immediate surroundings, but also to the rest of the house, provocatively extending the boundaries of her space. Whereas on the stairs, she moved with implacable calm, here she escalates to a more active and aggressive expression of resistance. Dancing alone in her room, Marylee is setting out a public act of defiance, rather than indulging in a moment of private escapism. She occupies her surroundings acquisitively, as a means of intensifying and reinforcing her act of self-presentation.

The nature of her movements also reflect her endeavour to project herself outward in a display of aggressive potency. Rhythmically locking her hips from side to side in the manner of a metronome, she swirls around dizzily. Her arms bent, her elbows extend outward as she moves them back and forth feverishly to the beat. Her tensed body darts confidently around her room, as she energetically occupies the space. The reactive and sensitive nature of her physicality is made viscerally apparent through her responsive and agile dancing. Her smiling, engaged facial expression and bobbing head movements reflect her state of being caught up in the rising rhythms of the song. She fully inhabits both the physical space of the room and the undulations of the music with her body, as she stretches and extends herself. Her dance seems to be a gleeful assertion of physical enjoyment, just as her music acquisitively colonises the house by spilling out from her room while she possessively cleaves to the picture of Mitch. Her movements, however, are jutting and sharp, rather than sensual or fluid. Her physicality appears forceful and aggressive, suggesting that this dance is more a question of self-assertion than self-expression.

The scene also recalls an earlier moment in the film in which she is shown dancing to the same piece of music in a similar, albeit less intense, fashion. The connection between these two moments is emphasised by Mitch's presence in both scenes. As a live partner, he was hardly more animate or engaged than the framed photograph, as he danced stiffly and awkwardly whilst Marylee swirled and gyrated around him. Eventually giving up and leaving him for a more energetic partner, she glances occasionally back to him, ensuring his continued attention, keen to show off and enjoy her physical agility as much as possible.



In her room, she also leaves Mitch behind as she carefully positions the picture above her perfume cabinet, so as to once again allow him to witness her performance without hindering it. In each instance, Mitch is physically unavailable to Marylee.



Even in the flesh, they appear to belong to two drastically different expressive registers, an idea which echoed in the later moment through the abstraction implied by the photograph. Marylee responds to Mitch's remoteness in both scenes with an outburst of physical extensiveness, pushing herself toward extremity and visibility. The violence of these performances in both instances, however, requires that she abandon Mitch as her assertive physicality precludes the possibility of having a partner. Marylee's displays of sexual energy and ecstasy can only be achieved in isolation, as acts of potent auto-eroticism.

The rhythmical use of montage in the latter part of the sequence brings Jasper's physical frailty and weakness into a direct association with Marylee's potency. Cutting to the study downstairs where the police have just left, Marylee's presence asserts itself through her loud music. Jasper's expression is pained as he hears the boisterous jazz emanate from upstairs. The effort he exerts is palpable as he stiffly walks toward the door, visibly oppressed by the tyrannical rebelliousness of Marylee. In contrast, Marylee reappears from behind the curtain at the back of her dressing room in the sheer red billowing negligee, dancing even more furiously than before, with her arms bent, her elbows protruding sharply from her sides. Intercutting back and forth between the two, the film shows Jasper's wearisome climb as Marylee's dance picks up speed and becomes increasingly wild and unruly. The pace of the intercutting echoes the increasingly rapid tempo of the music. Jasper struggles to cling to balustrade in close-up as Marylee is shown frantically gyrating in a medium shot. Only the lower

portion of her body is visible, as her movements are too explosive and propulsive to be contained as she flings her legs from side to side, shrouded by the diaphanous surface of her nightgown.



Her body is consumed by its own expressive forcefulness, as Jasper's trembling hand cleaves to the rail for support. The camera swings around to keep up with her, seemingly enthralled by her movements. Her physicality violently asserts itself as she travels around the room, fully occupying the space as her image occupies the frame. The juxtaposition of the physical efforts of the two characters seems to flaunt her mobility in the face of the growing failure of her father's. As Jasper's strength begins to fail, he loses his straining grip and spins violently down the stairs. Cutting back as the music begins to climax, Marylee's dance also reaches its frenzied peak. At the bottom of the stairs, the other occupants of the Hadley home rush to the aid of her father, as her dance remains immune and continues to build. She finally collapses into her easy chair, kicking her legs and waving her arms out in front of her, smiling gleefully. Cutting finally back to entrance hall, Mitch turns over Jasper's body and the stricken Lucy is shown in close-up hiding her face in her hands.

By creating a structural causality between her dance and her father's death, the film establishes the sense of gleefully destructive futility that motivates Marylee's self-projections. Her extensive and forceful physicality is not a positively expressive affirmation of her presence. Rather, the scene's arrangement conceptually and literally ties it to a depiction of the collapse of a body's capacity to express altogether. While also alluding to the role played by Jasper's feelings of disappointment around his children's wildness in bringing about his death, the structure of the sequence also elaborates on the alienated and alienating condition of Marylee's presence. The intensity of her movements visually estranges her from the other characters, while the framing's exclusion of her torso and face dramatises this failure of incorporation. Marylee's wild eruptions of movement and colour protest the oppressive inertia of the world around her, which is epitomised by her frail father (along with the demure lifelessness of Lucy and the bleak wastelands of the oil fields). However, at the same time they prohibit and exclude her incorporation within that world, leaving her in

a fundamentally alienated state. This is underscored by the film's final frame, which portrays her in a plain grey suit, sitting behind her father's desk and beneath his portrait while handling a model of an oil derrick. This uneasy, loaded image and the absence of any clear resolution for her character highlight the irresolvable difficulty of her position within her environment.

Throughout the film, Marylee projects herself into the world through provocation, maximising her physical, visible presence as a protest against her exclusion. However, the intensity with which she enacts these projections reinforces her estrangement and isolation. Her intense visibility serves to affirm her marginalised state. The film repeatedly highlights her suspended state, and her attempts to overcome this through self-projection.

6 Evasion: *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss* and *Lola*

Few directors are as noted for the choreographic potency of their films as Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Examples such as *Love is Colder than Death* (1969), or *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), all foreground a quality of bodily intensity in their expressions of presence. The careful orchestration of gestures and movements, combined with a stylistic emphasis on the fleshliness of performers' bodies, is characteristic of the director's film style. However, his films' invocations of physical presence vary greatly in their particularities and draw on corporeal expressivity in different ways. This chapter explores the depictions of lead female characters in three of Fassbinder's films, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), *Veronika Voss* (1981), and *Lola* (1981), and reveals how their distinct stylistic approaches come to achieve similarly meaningful ends.

Predominantly, the critical attention Fassbinder has received has had a strongly historical or biographical perspective, as opposed to a more aesthetic one (Katz; Braad Thomsen; Elsaesser, "Mourning Work"). The director's dramatic personal life, the role of his films in the evolution of the New German Cinema and their relationship to German history have all been explored extensively. While tacitly acknowledging the significance of these factors, this chapter puts these questions to one side in order to attempt a more overtly stylistic treatment of the films, with a particular focus on their approach to the depiction of female presence.

Thomas Elsaesser has recognised Fassbinder's 'body of work' as a simultaneous 'work on the body' (Elsaesser, "Mourning Work" 255). In these films, the body is the medium through which characters' psychological traumas are manifested, negotiated and, often, repressed. The female protagonists of the films discussed in this chapter are all portrayed with very clearly defined but different styles of physical presence. Each of these is distinguished by the characters' inability to reside naturally or productively within their physical and social environments. This condition of alienation is shown to be brought on by experiences of trauma and distress, which are too intense to be confronted directly. Consequently, the films' depictions of their leads draw on expressive strategies to achieve an effect of emotional or psychological

evasion. In so doing, they reflect Elsaesser's understanding of trauma as 'something not assimilated, something not integrated in the psychic economy of a subject' (196). Elsaesser addresses this idea of 'trauma's non-representability' by proposing the possibility of a 'different kind of hermeneutics', one which is sensible to these traces of absence, understood as a kind of 'negative performative' (196).

The expression of failed or averted forms of experience characterises the films' creations of presence. Maria Braun's assertive and repetitive movements, and the film's depiction of her constant, linear momentum, communicate her state of denial regarding the failure of her marriage. Her constant mobility forestalls the necessity of confronting the breakdown of her relationship. The character of Veronika Voss has completely withdrawn from the world around her—a retreat that is echoed by her physical frailty and the film's fading of her presence into the black and white palette of the *mise-en-scène*. Finally, Lola's presence is expressively saturated through her expulsive movements and the colourful, visual excess of the film's composition around her. All three depictions of presence manifest forms of expressive evasiveness, displacing emotional suffering by means of momentum, 'retreat or display'.

6.1 *Maria Braun*: Compulsive Momentum

In Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Hannah Schygulla's presence is distinguished by restless forward momentum. Driven by the elusive and unrealisable promise of a marital life with her absent soldier husband, Hermann Braun (Klaus Löwitsch), her character is shown to assert her presence to the world through persistent movement, repressing the suspended uncertainty of her position. The film's opening scene neatly introduces this strategy. After the brief wedding ceremony is brought to an abrupt halt by an air raid, Maria is shown to crawl on her hands and knees amongst the rubble and dirt, dressed in her bridal clothes searching for her marriage certificate amongst the flurry of other papers scattered in the street by an explosion. Maria's struggle to retain physical proof of the marital tie in these opening moments reflects her refusal to accept the suspension (and eventual failure) of her conjugal relationship. The film expresses this denial through its depiction of her in terms of compulsive motion.

Maria's presence echoes Walter Benjamin's observation of Baudelaire, that 'petrified unrest is the formula for the image of a life which knows no development' (Benjamin, "Allegory and Commodity" 40). Following her husband's disappearance, only days after their wedding, she is shown wandering aimlessly amongst crowds and

rubble, searching for news of him. Her back is to the camera and passers-by obscure her body. The film expresses her response to her husband's absence through her impeded and cumbersome movements through the crowd. The card she wears across her back, bearing his name and photograph, serves as literal physicalisation of the emotional burden of his loss. Struggling to make her way through the crowded train platform, her presence is depicted in terms of her frustrated and impeded motion.



Denied the closure that confirmation of Hermann's death would have provided, the signs of his absence become sublimated and repressed as the film progresses. Anton Kaes has stated that in times of trauma, 'practical survival and accommodation take precedence' (Kaes 83), over reflection and confrontation with past events. Maria's character takes this process to a dysfunctional and compulsive extreme, repressing the state of indeterminacy brought about by the absence of her husband and displacing it into actions and movement. Her relentless momentum becomes indicative of her inability to engage productively in the activities of mourning and memory, and her constant physical movement reflects her psychologically suspended state. This emotional stasis is also evident in her unchanging outer appearance, informed by the film's use of temporal ellipsis. Despite the extensive time period covered by the film's narrative, she shows no signs of ageing. Additionally, even when she becomes pregnant and loses the child in birth, the film does not depict the event and body never bears any trace of the experience. Her presence is shown to be immune to change, as her character avoids any potentially disruptive emotional confrontation with the world around her.

An exemplary scene occurs when Maria's brother-in-law, Willi (Gottfried John), returns from the Russian front of World War Two. He brings with him rumours of Hermann Braun's death. The scene sets up a careful dynamic between characters, juxtaposing aspects of paralysis with movement in order to emphasise the compulsive momentum which distinguishes Maria's character. This tension is established through the contrasting presentation of the character of Betti (Elizabeth Trissenaar), Maria's sister, and the wife of Willi. Unlike Maria, she responds to the disappointment of her reunion with her disinterested husband by turning inwards. She is

predominantly static, and her few sporadic movements express futility and dejection rather than compulsive and evasive determination. Later in the film, it is suggested that she suffers from habitual overeating and has put on weight, creating a contrast with Maria's state of unchanging physical immunity. Carefully creating a sombrely reflective and static environment, the scene's introduction of Maria then instigates a series of physical and gestural evasions.

The tragedy depicted in the scene is twofold, involving both the failure of the reunion between Willi and Betti, and the revelation of Hermann's apparent death. The former is expressed powerfully through the inert arrangements and gestures of the characters, establishing an exchange of failed movement and interactions. This is subsequently used to emphasise the contrasting motility of Maria. Her entrance disturbs the dejected stasis. Her response to Willi's news is developed through a transition from a brief physical paralysis to an eruption of outward movement, a process which is emblematic of Maria's presence in the film as a whole.

The scene begins with a static, stylised tableau-like composition depicting the emotional divisions and tensions between the characters in the frame. An immobile image of a dysfunctional family reunion, the stillness emphasises the breakdown of interaction between the characters.



Seated in profile in the centre of the shot, Maria's mother (Gisela Uhlen), weeping with high-pitched and hollow sobs, is framed on either side by Willi and Betti. Willi is positioned towards the camera in the foreground on the left of the frame. Obscured but for a section of his torso, he wrings his hands, highlighting the presence of his wedding ring and his unease at his reunion with his wife. Also obscured by shadow, in the far right background of the image, is Betti. She stands facing the wall, disconsolately hanging her head with her hands clasped together behind her back. She appears cut off from the other two characters, self-enclosed and at a remove. They all face in opposing directions, unable to look at each other or communicate. This sense of disconnection is underlined further by the lighting, which flattens the image by creating distinct planes, separating the foreground from the centre and the background. The hanging lamp illuminates the mother from above

while Willi's hands are vividly lit from the front with Betti remaining obscure in the corner. This segmentation of the communal space of the kitchen divides the characters from one another. Their hands—the organ of touch—are all clasped together, forming closed and insular circuits. This overt patterning seems imposed and artificial, adding to the atmosphere of stifled, awkward emotion. They are locked tightly into this static, symmetrical choreography, which denies them the ability to confront one another or interact.

Although Willi's absence has now been resolved for Betti, his return has not provided any sense of familial reintegration. This is articulated by the mother, who cries, "What are you crying for you silly cow? You still have your man. He's standing there in front of you". However, he is not in front of her but facing away in the opposite direction. Whereas the instability of Maria's more suspenseful position (waiting for confirmation of her husband's death) creates a space for uncertainty in which it is possible for her to avoid the likely truth, Willi's anti-climactic return and the failure of their relationship has the effect of inhibiting Betti's movement. She becomes physically paralysed as the collapse of her marriage becomes undeniably apparent.



As the scene progresses, Betti's presence is depicted in terms of a discomfited physicality and a stifled position within the image. She tentatively begins to cross the room towards Willi, her slow pace and dejected posture lacking conviction or direction. Upon reaching him, she thrusts her body awkwardly against his in a frantic and fumbling caress that makes their irresolvable alienation from one another cringingly apparent. Betti tries to kiss an immobile and expressionless Willi, while his face remains an unresponsive and uncontactable surface. The camera pulls back, retreating from the uncomfortable failure of this embrace into a crack in the plaster of the wall. The unsymmetrical black frame highlights the botched attempt at contact and alienates Betti from her environment further still. As Willi pulls himself away, Betti is left alone within the frame created by the cracked plaster.

Following this exchange, Willi begins to describe the vague reports of Hermann's death: "No one came out they say". His speech coincides with the return of Maria,

whose cheery voice, declaring “It’s me!” almost collides with his dismal announcement. The delay of Maria’s entrance heightens the intensity of the moment. Her disembodied voice rings out at the thought of an exciting surprise she bears (“Imagine what I have! No, you won’t believe it!”), while Willi’s news still reverberates around the kitchen.

Her entrance marks a significant change in the manner of the other character’s movements, as the static compositions are shattered by the introduction of her compulsive momentum and energetic movements around the kitchen. Upon her arrival, eruptions of motion begin to take hold of the other characters and they begin to bounce back and forth between one another in a series of effusive embraces. The characters enact a passionate overflowing of forces (instigated by the arrival of Maria) which are passed on and exchanged from person to person, accompanied by piercing and guttural cries from the women. The intensity of Maria’s physical response to Willi’s regained presence defers and sublimates her recognition of Hermann’s continued and conspicuous absence. The displacement of her emotions into an outburst of movement appears to infect the other characters, as they all look to postpone or deny the inevitable. The emotions stirred up by Willi’s return and the pressing yet unacknowledged loss of Hermann cannot be left to hang suspended in stillness, but are transposed into the manic performance of these desperate clinches.



Like Betti’s attempted embrace of Willi, these emotional confrontations appear inadequate in their transient intensity. The hysterical overflowing of emotion manifests futility and desperation more than catharsis as the characters bounce awkwardly between one another. The as yet unspoken news of Hermann’s death reverberates in the empty space between the characters as Willi looks towards Maria. When this brief surge of energy begins to wane, Maria pre-emptively begins to isolate herself from the others, walking over to the sink in the corner. Once again the depiction of space becomes divisive and the choreography of movement more rigid. With Maria moving across the kitchen, the other characters cluster together statically in the foreground, underscoring the differences in their responses to this traumatic news.



Following Willi's blunt announcement, a state of physical paralysis seems to momentarily take hold of Maria. Her diminishing sobs come to an abrupt halt and the film cuts to her, panning down her body to show the tap dripping water onto her wrist and hand. The image is held for a few seconds, drawing out the sense of shock that has taken hold of her. Her peculiar decision to wash her hands at this moment signals her tendency to displace emotional distress into seemingly practical forms of action. The enigmatic image of running water pouring onto her arm is repeated at the end of the film, upon Hermann's final return. It evokes the numbing of sensation, as though she were trying to dull the feeling in her wrist and right hand, with her wedding ring clearly visible on her finger. In this brief caesura, all progression and movement break down, her stillness accentuated by the flowing of the water over her frozen hand.



Once again, the scene enacts a shift from suspenseful stasis to compulsive fast momentum. Following this pause, Maria abruptly takes on a new purposeful and driven motion. Briefly turning towards the others and approaching them with slow, trance-like steps, she rapidly turns, ducking through a crack in the wall, to the stairs outside that take her away from the house. Her face implacable, she compulsively embarks on a trajectory that takes her up and away from the home with its connotations of loss and absence. She immediately flees from the locus of her distress. The immunity of her appearance and her impulsive forward momentum come to characterise her presence throughout the remainder of the film, while the dejected stasis of the other characters remains a revealing point of contrast. Her action breaks the reflective tension established by the stillness of the earlier composition of the scene, refusing and resisting the contemplativeness of stasis. Her body does not display any signs of distress or discomposure. Her face remains blank and her movements con-

trolled. Her response to the news is displaced entirely into her compulsive forward trajectory.



The camera follows Betti to the open window looking out onto the porch, where Maria, having exited the house, is seen quickly climbing the stairs up to the street. The camera remains inside, highlighting Maria's path away from the kitchen to underscore her avoidance of that space and its connotations. This is emphasised further by the static presence of Betti in the foreground, who remains confined within the house. Her state of mournful resignation contrasts with Maria's determined disavowal.

The other characters are left behind following a disjunctive cut that takes Maria straight from the house to the bar where she is employed as a dance companion. Her trance-like forward motion continues across the cut, as she appears possessed by the compulsion to move. She is now shown walking towards the camera, as Bill (George Eagles), the American soldier she has been entertaining regularly at the bar (who was referred to earlier in the film as 'Braun'), sits in the foreground. The arrangement creates the impression that she is impelled by his presence, as she compulsively substitutes Hermann for him, deferring the acceptance of her husband's absence. She passes through the crowds of dancers in a direct and unencumbered fashion, her face blank and expressionless. She approaches Bill and asks in heavily-accented English, "Will you dance with me, Mr Bill?" Her arms hang by her side and she has a neutral face and posture; her body is limp yet composed as she waits to recommence her motion.



Bill stands and embraces her in a stilted and awkwardly prolonged fashion. His arms encircle her very slowly, as though to draw out the moment for as long as possible. Locked in this clinch, the couple begin to repetitively dance on the spot in

a gentle rocking motion. Her desire to postpone emotional turmoil through movement and action is extended into her employment as a dance companion, which allows her to maintain a directionless, constant momentum.

This scene highlights the significance of motility in the film's depiction of Maria's presence. Her face and physicality are themselves very muted in their expressive function, but by showing her continual impulse towards momentum (and contrasting her movements with complementary depictions of stasis), the film imparts a powerful sense of her displaced or sublimated emotion. The film develops her presence in terms of a quality of evasive mobility, characterised by a compulsive avoidance of direct expression.

6.2 *Veronika Voss*: Brittle Retreat

The depiction of Veronika Voss (Rosel Zech), a fictional ageing icon of the fascist era German cinema, takes the expressive dimension of her presence almost to the point of total collapse. Her physicality varies between frail self-composure and moments of complete breakdown, while her pale appearance recedes from view within the emphatic whiteness of the film's chiaroscuro colour palette. As her body withdraws from vitality, becoming rigid, paralysed and unable to support its own weight, the film withdraws the image of her presence from visibility. On the edge of madness, Voss is tormented by a sense of loss that she cannot articulate and anguished by the lack of recognition she receives from those around her. This failure of acknowledgement is echoed through the film's portrayal of her almost translucent presence within its black and white environments. She is barely able to physically sustain herself, while the film only just sustains the discernibility of her figure, reflecting her state of psychological disintegration.

Voss's form is blurred into the blank spaces of the film's often monochromatic settings, desaturating her and denying her a solid presence. Unlike Maria Braun, Voss's physicality does not displace emotional distress into a compensatory activity but surrenders completely to its weight. The film depicts the overt failure of the body as a centre for any form of productive action or positive self-assertion. Where Maria Braun is characterised by purposeful self-driving momentum, Voss is often completely unable to sustain herself independently of external supports. Twice in the film, her body gives way and collapses onto the floor. This is particularly evident in the scenes that take place within the clinic of the sinister Dr Katz. Katz keeps Voss contained within the clinic, perpetuating her morphine addiction in order to

financially exploit her. In one instance, Voss is shown crawling across the floor on her hands and knees; she is almost imperceptible dressed in a white robe within the white corridor.



The shot, like many others in the film, is characterised by a sharp distinction between dense, opaque shades of black and white. Voss's physical incapacity cripples her body as an expressive entity, a failure which is extended into the image's execution of her translucent presence. By dissolving it from view, the expressive power of her presence is diminished.

Voss's face also contributes to the elusiveness of her onscreen persona. Zech's somewhat gaunt features are exaggerated through the whiteness of her make up and her thinly penciled eyebrows. The translucence of her skin and the sharpness of her features create a brittle appearance. Her face does not appear solid or fleshy, but seems to be almost transparent, a vague outline or trace of features against the monochromatic background. It is often frontally lit to diminish rather than highlight its presence within the whiteness of the *mise-en-scène*. Frames of glass between Voss and the camera are also often used to place her at an even further remove. Particularly against the white walls and furnishings of Dr Katz's rooms, there is little sense of contrast between the tones of her face and those of the walls that surround her.



Yann Lardeau has suggested that this is not a black and white film, but a black or white film, in which white drives out the black (Lardeau 268-269). He claims that the absence of shadow leaves Voss's presence exposed to the point of total obliteration: 'Without shadows a person cannot live, without them a person has no soul because they have no secrets'. The whiteness of Katz's clinic is evocative of more than 'the clinical abstractions and the presence of death emanating from hospitals and medical institutions' (269). It also reflects the film's theme of seeking the blankness of forgetting through self-annihilation, blotting out of all traces of an unwanted past, including those inescapably bound up with the presence of the body itself. This is particularly resonant given Voss's previous career as a movie star within Hitler's Germany. Her face and its recognisable status are an indelible reminder of her complicity in her country's recent history. Her destructive movement towards self-effacement may be seen as an attempt to evade this association, as her identifiable visibility is the marker of her guilt. However, this tendency is complicated by Voss's contradictory distress at her waning fame and the loss of her once glamorous lifestyle. The film's portrayal of her presence captures the tension around her simultaneous desires to both regain her visibility, while also seeking to erase her history by receding into disappearance.

This dynamic is made especially apparent in a scene which takes place within her now unoccupied home. She invites Robert Krohn (Hilmar Thate), a journalist she has recently met who appears to be infatuated with her, to visit the residence and the two eventually have sex, following her performance of an awkward yet poignant seduction. During this seduction, she attempts to present herself as the confident and alluring movie star she once was. Despite momentarily entertaining the success of her efforts, the film ultimately undercuts them through its own staging of her presence. Elsaesser has observed that the moving effects of Fassbinder's cinema depend on the marked distance between the subjective *mise-en-scènes* created by characters' inhabitations of space, which convey their narcissistic illusions and larger-than-life aspirations, and the more objective *mise-en-scène* of the camera, which is inversely intent on demonstrating the futility of the character's desires (Elsaesser, "A Cinema of Vicious Circles" 29). In this scene, Voss attempts to stage her own presence, striving to recapture her former glory through her manipulation of music, costume, lighting and her own stilted performance of a film noir seductress. However, the film continually highlights the frailty and failure of her attempts, until her brittle and contrived illusion collapses.

The scene's use of contrast and lighting contribute towards the breakdown of Voss's attempted self-presentation. Having entered the house, Voss sits down at the piano and begins to play while Krohn lights the candelabra resting on top of the instrument. Despite the more prominent use of shadow within the composition, the brightly lit and opaque white dust-sheets covering the furniture serve as a visual reminder of the uniform whiteness of Katz's clinic. It has been made clear earlier in the film that candlelight is Voss's preferred lighting condition, because of its soft quality. However, the candles effect no such becoming transformation in her appearance, because the film's lighting of her face remains bright and harsh, flattening her features and stripping them of contour and definition. Despite her efforts to flatteringly stage herself for Krohn, the scene's composition undermines her endeavours through its over-exposing lighting. Just as her attempted femme-fatale-like seduction emerges as a stilted and clichéd performance, so is her appearance divested of the depth and mystery that might have been provided by the candlelight. The film alludes to the potential of the nuanced and enigmatic richness of the *mise-en-scène* of black and white noir cinema, while evacuating it of its detail and gradations.



The awkward artificiality of the scenario is exacerbated further by the presence of Krohn. His surly and earthy masculinity, along with the practicality of his movement (first searching noisily for a fuse box, then lighting candles and later turning on the radio) undercut the atmosphere of seductive romance Voss attempts to cultivate. The inappropriateness of their potential romantic encounter is highlighted by the differences in their physicality and appearance. Krohn, who is dressed in black, has removed neither his hat nor scarf, emphasising the awkward burliness of his physique next to the brittle frailty of Voss's body. Furthermore, while Voss's face is completely exposed and white within the frame, Krohn's dark apparel and position behind the piano establish him as a more remote figure within the frame. Voss performs her signature tune for Krohn, 'Memories are Made of This', an ironic reference to her attempt to literally re-create a past version of herself. The literalness of the song makes the transparency of her efforts to artificially stage her star persona all the more apparent.

Elements of costume and decor also contribute to the effect of Voss's stilted and brittle presence. She rises suddenly, abruptly concluding her performance at the piano. Laughing anxiously, she picks up a candelabrum and runs out of shot to the left, as Krohn, apparently immune to her exertions, mirrors her action by taking another candelabrum off to the right. Her movements are stuttering and rushed; she seems to be overflowing with a barely contained feverish excitement and on the verge of falling into hysteria. The camera then moves slowly to reveal Voss changing her clothes in a dressing room from a vantage point within the central room. The cluttered space between Voss and the camera is filled with seemingly randomly strewn decorative objects. Their lifeless obscurity compounds the sense of inertia and emptiness within the house. The contrast between her state of near frenzied hypertension and the shrouded, static possessions, remnants of her former life, highlights the irrecoverable distance between Voss's previous glamorous existence and her current situation, making the inadequacy of her attempts to revivify that lost past all the more apparent.



When Voss does reappear, she is sheathed in a floor length, translucent peignoir. The sheer fabric of the garment and the shape of her white hair blur the backlit outline of her form, giving her a dramatic, spectral appearance.



The lighting and costume produce an inversion of the over-exposed flatness that has mostly characterised her presence up until this point. Stepping from the bright dressing room into darkness of the reception room, her body is made to appear more physically substantial through the density of her silhouette. The absence of frontal lighting and the diffusing, flattering effect of her peignoir create a setting in which the recreation of her film star persona may be momentarily entertained. Reassured

by the obscuring effects of her peignoir and the surrounding darkness, Voss seems to be able to control and repress the volatility of her body. While the film's use of bright light has been associated with the effacement of presence and the crippling of Voss's physicality, here the gradated use of shadow creates an impression of depth. As she moves towards the camera, her face becomes apparent within the dim candlelight, producing a flattering effect. This uncharacteristic use of restrained lighting gives her face definition and softness denied by the imposing brightness used elsewhere in the film. The light distinguishes Voss from the background, rather than blurring her into it. For a brief moment, her assertion of her lost persona appears successful.



At the same time, however, the obvious difference in the film's depiction of her figure highlights the singularity of the moment, poignantly marking it out as an unsustainable fantasy. The flickering candlelight and diaphanous gauze of her gown also allude to the vulnerability of her illusion.

The potential for a more positive affirmation of presence is immediate undermined by the film's jarring cut into a flashback. As Krohn reaches to turn on the radio to create more of an ambience, the scene cuts to show Voss's former husband performing the same task. However, inversely, the husband has switched the radio station to a news programme detailing events of the war, prompting Voss to complain that she would rather have music. She insists he reduce the lighting, to create a more intimate space, 'just for us'.



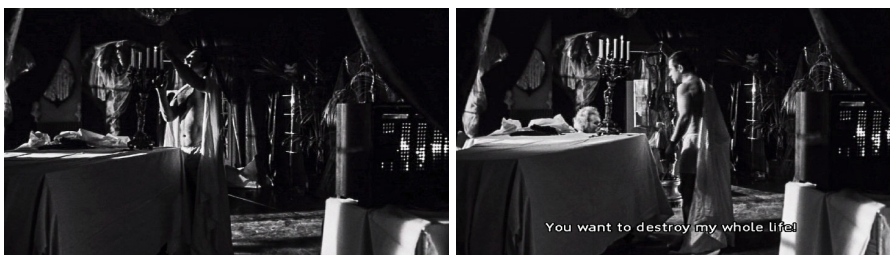
Seated in a rigid and upright position in the centre of the shot, Voss's requests to create a more romantic ambience are met with frustration by her husband. Grudgingly obeying at first, he then becomes agitated by her artificial and performative behaviour, complaining, 'Always the same nonsense! Why can't we just be what we

are?’ The flashback highlights Voss’s past attempts to negotiate her own presence to world and the connection between this behavioural tendency and her attempted avoidance of the realities of the war. However, in the wake of Germany’s defeat and the indelible association of her image with the Nazi regime, this evasion of complicity cannot be so readily achieved. The loaded connotations imposed on her image from without negate her ability to manipulate her appearance to the world, prompting her reluctant retreat from visibility.

The film then cuts back to show the aftermath of Voss’s sexual encounter with Krohn. The alluring obscurity of her presence in the previous moment has been replaced by imposing whiteness. The wrinkled sheet conceals her body, her limbs pulled in on herself, in defensive position of retreat from the world around her, and from any contact with Krohn. His broad and swarthy presence once again contrasts with the pale frailty of Voss. The two are perpendicular to one another in the frame, signalling an atmosphere of discord. Krohn reaches out to touch her and she responds with disgust and horror to his encroachment into her space.



Voss’s physical and emotional fragility further reasserts itself as the scene continues. As Krohn gets up from the bed, a vase falls from its stand and crashes loudly onto the floor. The noise shatters Voss’s already straining composure. As the object breaks, she lets out a piercing and violent scream, emerging from the bedroom gasping for air and doubled over, clinging to the doorframe for support. She is only partially visible, almost entirely obscured by Krohn’s presence in the foreground of the shot as he lights candles.



She remains blocked from view even as she begins to thunder awkwardly towards him. Once she reaches Krohn, the moment of confrontation is deflated as she col-

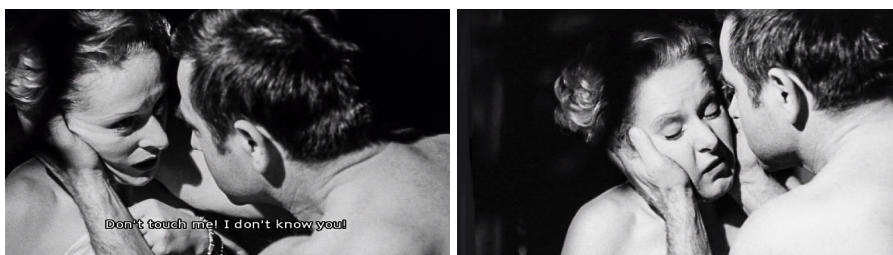
lapses onto the floor, striking the piano keys as she stumbles with a resounding discordant crash. She slips behind the piano, disappearing from view once again, as her physical disintegration is mirrored by the film's withholding of her presence.



As her crumpled body behind the piano is revealed, she appears to be completely drained of expressive or emotional vitality. Her face does not appear pained or distressed, but seems to be empty and sapped of life or energy. The failure of Voss's performance of composure is accompanied by the return of stark whiteness to the frame, as her pale body, weakened by her state of morphine withdrawal, is contorted and twisted amongst the crinkled sheets.



Krohn then forcibly lifts her from the floor, his hands seeming to exert a strong force over her lifelessly malleable face. Attempting to raise her up, he exclaims, 'You are Veronika!' The close-up of the pair recalls shots of embracing couples, with the camera behind his shoulder to show her face. However, like Betti's embrace of Willi in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, it highlights the failure of any meaningful exchange between the characters. Veronika's face is distorted as it wriggles awkwardly between his hands, unable to rouse itself. Her body appears in a state of total collapse, compounded by the film's bright lighting of her form, which is shrouded by the sheets.



The portrayal of Voss in this scene stages her character's attempt to control her appearance and assert an image of her past self in order to achieve a positive affir-

mation of her presence. At the same time, however, the film reveals the futility of these efforts, undermining them by revealing their frailty and then obliterating them altogether through the exposing effects of the *mise-en-scène*. The expressive remoteness of Voss's figure is not achieved through the obscurity of darkness, which would introduce connotations of concealed depths or meanings. Rather, it is developed through an excess of brightness, effacing her presence and stripping it of dimensionality, while Zech's performance enacts a crumbling of the body's capacity for expression. The illusion of Voss's past persona cannot be sustained within the context of the film's present because of its inextinguishable taint of complicity. Consequently, her character physically and psychologically withdraws from her existence and the film whites out her presence from visibility.

6.3 *Lola*: Destructive Display

The depiction of Lola (Barbara Sukowa) differs significantly to that of both Voss and Maria Braun. Rather than developing through a repression or failure of expression, she is characterised by an excess. Lola is consumed by the performance of the various personas she inhabits over the course of the narrative, occupying each with a potent physicality while the film's stylised environments add to the intense effects of her presence. Working as a nightclub singer in a small West German town, Lola is the mistress of Schuckert (Mario Adorf), a corrupt local builder. Upon the arrival of Herr von Bohm (Armin Mueller-Stahl), a morally upright building inspector, Lola is encouraged by her lover to seduce the newcomer in order to bring him into line. She successfully captures von Bohm's attentions by assuming the guise of a sweetly docile and neglected single mother. However, von Bohm eventually discovers the truth of her identity when he witnesses her act at the nightclub, triggering an eruptive performance by Lola which violently shatters his perception of her character.

Her wild, uncontrollable actions serve as a catalyst for the film's narrative disjunction, as her hyperbolic corporeality resists any straightforward expression of character or interiority. Her bodily performance is highly energetic, particularly during the uncontrolled dance that forms a climactic moment in the film's narrative progression. The chaotic cacophony of her bodily actions and the complete transformation in her demeanour signal a rejection of straightforward characterisation for her presence. However, this affective disruption does not instigate a positive repudiation of representational conventions in favour of a productive and ideologically cleansed instability, as is often argued for films characterised by a performative intensity. Rather,

through the film's emphasis on the inorganic appearance of her body and its heightened, deforming allusions to the norms of 1950s Hollywood cinema, it erodes her presence of its capacity to convey anything beyond an unpredictable surface volatility, evading any meaningful form of expression.

As a physical presence, Lola's body differs significantly to the frailty of Voss's physique and the upright composure of Maria. She is an imposing figure due to her tall stature and strikingly sensual features, making her a much more carnal and fleshy screen presence. However, her bodiliness is made to seem unnaturally exaggerated by the film's use of frequent close-ups, which highlight the artificiality of her often unflatteringly thick make-up. Beneath the brightness of the film's lights her face often appears sweaty and red. In spite of her intense corporeality, the film's staging of her appearance strips her presence of the impression of vitality through its obvious contrivance.



Lola's movements are distinguished by a restlessness and frantic energy. Her gestures are often conspicuously and forcefully performed. The tone of her physical characterisation differs greatly to that of Voss and Maria Braun, in its invocations of anarchic humour and absurdity. Her hyperbolic performance has an almost slapstick sensibility. However, any comedic effects are forestalled by the lifeless emptiness of her character. For example, in one of the film's first nightclub scenes, Lola is seen to be very drunk. She stumbles clumsily around her dressing room in a familiar enactment of performed inebriation. She talks into a phone with no one at the other end of the receiver, sits on and slaps one of her dolls, before immediately apologising to the inanimate object for having lost her temper. The obviously feigned manner of her display of drunkenness is underscored by the scene's stylised and brightly coloured lighting. The red environment creates a look of seediness in its lurid, almost neon, shade. The film stages familiar comic scenarios through Lola's presence, only to evacuate them of their usual effects by revealing their obvious artifice, eliminating their depth by emphasising their simulated surface.



The use of colour throughout the film is highly stylised. The drab tones of Maria Braun and the duality of the black and white in Veronika Voss are exchanged for bright washes of red, pink and blue, saturating the spaces of Lola and the performers contained within them. This extreme use of colour as a means of intensifying and heightening dramatic content references the Technicolor or Eastmancolor films of 1950s Hollywood directors such as Douglas Sirk, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and Nicholas Ray. However, as with the film's slapstick moments, rather than heightening the drama or creating an impression of character interiority, this non-naturalistic use of colour serves to highlight the artificial and lifeless tenor of the action.

Within the already stylised and aesthetically discontinuous spaces of the film, Lola's presence is developed through performative disjunction and expressive extremity. Altering between stilted fumbling drunkenness, childish impetuosity, an exaggeratedly coy femininity and wild candour, Sukowa's performance violently resists psychological coherence or organisation. Her character's behaviour is stripped of cause and effect logic or progression, continually deflecting attention away from narrative considerations towards overtly performative moments. Elsaesser noted a tendency in Fassbinder's work to move 'towards undoing, the shattering aspect, the anarchic impulse to tear the self down' (Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* 225). The film's depiction of Lola's presence enacts this destructive compulsion. The film stages Lola through familiar generic types and stylistic conventions only to undermine their usual significance by pushing their expressive characteristics to garish extremes.

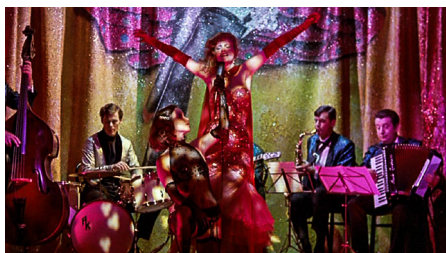
The film follows the gradual destruction of the regimented and disciplined character of von Bohm, who is overwhelmed by the disorderly intensity of Lola. For example, von Bohm's violin playing is initially shown to be a well-practiced and precise ritual performed with care. However, following his discovery of Lola's true identity as a stage performer, it descends into a weak and scratchy rendition of the song he saw her sing at the nightclub. The cool blue which saturated the space of his home early in the film is exchanged for the headiness of the reddish pink within which Lola's figure is often portrayed. Whereas the low angle of the camera in the

first scene emphasised his assertiveness and composure, the more confused sense of space created through the use of the mirror manifests a withdrawn and self-doubting body. The camera now looks past him to show the reflection of his image, as his physical presence is no longer clearly assured. The chaotic expressive disruptiveness of Lola operates as a contagion within the film's fictional world.



Elsaesser has stated that Fassbinder viewed 'the 1950s as the locus of traumas requiring a more psychoanalytic time' (Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* 110). He employed 'fractured chronologies or non-synchronicity or uneven time' to express the disassembling effects of the experience of trauma through narration (III). The discrete spaces constructed by the film's stylised use of lighting and the absence of any transitional movements between them also undermine continuity of action or character interiority. The film likewise establishes Lola's presence as a vehicle for this disjunction and fragmentation, as its intensely exaggerated depiction of her sabotages the orderliness of the narrative.

The scene depicting von Bohm's discovery of Lola's true identity best exemplifies the 'shattering aspect' of Lola's presence. However, it is prefaced by an earlier sequence in which Lola is shown performing 'Capri-Fischer' for the first time in the film. She stands on a stage in the centre of a darkly lit nightclub. The design of the space emphasises her elevated stature on the stage, with the heads of the seated audience barely reaching her ankles. Bathed in a pink light, she appears a somewhat spectral and unnatural figure. Her movements are characteristic of the nightclub performances often seen in 1950s Hollywood films, as she stretches out and circles them around her body, extending herself into her environment. Her powerful and resonant voice also fills the space.



The film cuts into a close-up of her face and she is illuminated by bright pink light before it gives way to a lurid yellow, once again giving her an inorganic appearance while still belonging to the paradigms of stage performance. By depicting a more conventional and contained version of Lola's nightclub act, the film highlights its subsequent diversion from this composure. This earlier scene introduces the elements which will be used to transform her rendition of 'Capri-Fischer' into a destructive exhibition of hyperbolic physicality and bodily artifice. The stylised lighting, her extending show-girl gestures and her elevated position within the frame, which are all familiar elements of nightclub performance, are amplified to the point of expressive abstraction.

The alteration in her second recital is triggered by her discovery of von Bohm's presence within the nightclub. The disintegration of von Bohm's perception of Lola and the town is introduced through the jarring transformation in lighting, as the film cuts from the cool blue space of his house to the dark and seedy red of the club. He walks through the brightly coloured environments of the club with trepidation, before sitting at a table with Schuckert. He half removes his coat, creating a disordered and confused appearance, as his companion gloats over his presence in his sordid club, joking, "There's a little sinner in all of us". He surveys his surroundings and the film cuts to a wide pan revealing the debauched scenario. Schuckert reveals that the club is also a brothel, prompting von Bohm to break down in hysterics, half laughter and half sobs, overwhelmed by his situation. Lola's performance is then announced and the film moves in towards his face as he recognises a seemingly respectable member of the community playing in the club band, shocked by the extent of the town's moral corruption. Before Lola appears, Schuckert tells von Bohm that she is both "the best broad this city has to offer" and that she belongs to him.

The film then cuts to show Lola being carried out onto the stage by two waiters, her arms raised above her head. Switching back to reveal von Bohm's reaction, he is seen to be in a state of shock. The music commences while Schuckert describes her as his "private whore", von Bohm stands up and walks towards the camera and the stage, entering into an area of the blue light with which his character has become associated. Lola then begins her performance in the same composed manner as her earlier rendition, extending her arms around her in circular motions. Her expressions and gestures clearly emote the lyrics of the song, gesturing to the netting of her dress while she sings about fishermen's nets. She is also illuminated by the contrast pink light that distinguishes her hyperbolic presence throughout the film.

However, as her head turns to face forwards, she freezes and the train of her dress drops from her fingers. Her hesitation is only momentary, and she continues to sing. The colour of the light illuminating her face changes from her pink to von Bohm's blue, as his presence and discovery of her true identity dawns on her. She almost immediately turns around to face away from him, before looking back over her shoulder. A shot-reverse-shot reveals the blank expression on von Bohm's face as he turns and walks out of the night club.



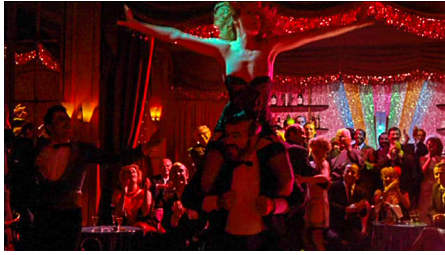
The slam of the door coincides with the beat of the music and the commencement of the song's chorus, triggering a transformation in Lola's physicality. She rips off her spotted cape and strips off her gloves with her teeth, the activity disrupting her vocal performance. She then moves from behind the microphone to the front of the stage, and begins to dance with bawdy and provocative moves.



Her actions take on a crude and frenzied intensity as she begins to violently and clumsily rip off her dress. While her dance retains the extensive gestures of her earlier act, they are now uncoordinated and chaotic; she waves her arms around her with an ungraceful abandon. She takes down her hair and flips it around, distorting her appearance through its blurring and wild movement. The camera adopts a different position to the frontal one used in the first rendition of 'Capri-Fischer', cutting out the presence of the audience in order to emphasise her loss of control over her performance. It also continually moves to reframe Lola's presence, underscoring the disorderliness of her motions.



Her physical forcefulness causes her to slip over and she climbs awkwardly off the stage. Her singing descends into a guttural shout while she flails across the nightclub, wiping off her lipstick to create an even more dishevelled appearance. She removes her skirt and climbs onto Schuckert's table, rubbing the garment between the thighs in a display of flagrant bawdiness. Her elevated position in the frame exceeds the expected confines of the stage, as she uses various objects as platforms for her explosive self-exhibition. This continues as she is taken up on the shoulders of Schuckert, who carries her around the room above his head as her arms thrash wildly above her head. She attempts to make herself as conspicuous a presence as possible in her violent and expansive gestures. Her arms reach outwards, away from the centre of her body with frenzied aggression as she gives herself over entirely to the performance of song. Her face suggests a state of rapture, as she appears to shed all self-consciousness. She is carried away by the relentless trajectory of her movement and the song's rising rhythms which she responds to with intense bodiliness. The transformation in her execution of the song from the first rendition to one presented by this scene, instigated by her shock at the exposure of her true identity to the adoring von Bohm, signals a rejection of the coherence of both of her personas. The blatant sexuality of her movements refuses the coyness of the persona she assumed for von Bohm, while the chaotic awkwardness of her physicality and her dishevelled appearance overturn the rules of the seductively composed showgirl performance. The film's emphasis on her artificiality compounds the impression of her lack of discernible interiority. Her character's response to the revelation of her fraudulent identity is displaced into a furious excess of self-expression, as her presence cannot be contained by any conventional notion of psychological characterisation.



With the expansive urgency of her movements, Lola's physical presence stretches itself into a position of maximum exposure. Rather than turning herself inwards and directing herself away from the shock of her discovery by von Bohm, she projects herself outwards, using display as a means of deflection.

For Heidi Gilpin (Gilpin 106-128), performance operates to counter positions of existential insecurity, affirming the stability and consistency of the body by denying the ephemerality of its movement. In each of the scenes discussed above, experiences of distress or shock are evaded through particular modes of bodily performance which are reflected and underscored by the films' depictions of their characters' presence. Through momentum, retreat and display, the films' female protagonists displace experiences of shock or trauma into different forms of compulsive physicality, resisting any emotional or psychological confrontation with circumstances. For Maria Braun, this involves displacing her distress at the absence of her husband and the failure of her marriage into a relentless forward momentum. Veronika Voss eschews her traumatic personal history and complicity with the film industry of Nazi Germany by attempting to either control or efface her own presence. Lola avoids the impression of interiority altogether through the expressive extremity of her artificial appearance and intense corporeality.

7 Obscurity: *Madame De...*

The presentation of the eponymous character in Max Ophüls' 1953 film *Madame De...* is somewhat paradoxical. Louise de..., portrayed by Danielle Darrieux, is central to the film's narrative and its main compositional focus. She appears in almost every scene. Yet despite this, she remains mercurial and remote in her appearance and behaviour. Access to the specificities of both her looks and her interior life is impeded by her graceful yet restless deportment, resisting stasis, whilst her wry countenance places her emotions at a droll remove. The opulence of her surroundings frequently seems to subsume the appearance of her physical body. However, her character remains vivid and complex, as the film's various strategies for withholding her presence become the means through which it is most clearly expressed.

Initially, the impression of Louise's indistinct airiness perfectly reflects the care-free realm of light aristocratic urbanity she inhabits. Her flighty behaviour, restless physicality and always-appropriate appearance seem entirely suited to a world of uniform luxury and carefree living. She occupies a prominent and popular position within her circle of acquaintances, possessing great skill at manoeuvring herself adroitly within this context. However, this social virtuosity, whilst fortifying her compelling and influential status within the fictional environment, simultaneously contributes to the indistinctness of her figure before the camera. Her individuality is shrouded by the very appositeness of her presence and behaviour within her societal context as she blends into her physical surroundings.

Darrieux's physicality also contributes to the sense of indistinctness around both Louise's appearance and emotional life. Her graceful composure and confident bearing indicate that she is not a young woman, but her flawless skin and physical energy simultaneously give an impression of youthfulness, making her age somewhat difficult to estimate. Her symmetrical, fair features and grace give her a beauty that is evident without being obviously striking. The use of costume, accessories and décor in framing her body compounds this impression of an attractiveness that is well-adapted to its surroundings without standing out from them in a conspicuous fashion.



Her wry expressiveness carries with it an urbane, haughty sophistication that renders her an opaque figure. She seems to consciously place her inner life at a remove from her surface appearance; her ability to behave in a perfectly adroit manner whatever the circumstance makes for an elusive interiority. The film's narrative also embodies the device of visually displacing Louise's figure for an emphasis on objects and environments. The story, ostensibly recounting Louise's romantic travails, is structured around the circulation of a pair of diamond pendant earrings between the various characters. With each exchange, the diamonds become more and more imbued with aspects of her emotional life that are withheld by bodily presence. Consequently, the details of their movements are of some importance to the film's development of her character. The jewels were originally presented to Louise by her husband, General de..., on the occasion of their marriage. However, she decides to sell the earrings in order to pay off debts she has accrued in secret due to her extravagant spending. She successfully persuades the original seller to buy back the heart-shaped pendants, concealing her actions from her husband by feigning their accidental loss during an evening at the theatre. The anxious jeweller then sells them back to her husband upon hearing the rumour of their theft and tells him all. The General then presents the jewels to his mistress as a farewell gift as he sends her away to Constantinople to prevent scandal. The mistress then loses them in a game of roulette.

An Italian diplomat named Donati (Vittorio de Sica), purchases the earrings before falling in love with Louise and giving them to her as a love token. Returning his feeling with full force, Louise neglects to tell her lover of the earrings' provenance. Once her perceived betrayals of both Donati and her husband are exposed, Donati leaves her. The General forces her to give the earrings to impoverished relations who promptly sell them back to jeweller for cash. Louise then sells all of her possessions to reclaim them, clinging to them as a symbol of her lost love. Unable to conceal her now unrequited feelings, she inadvertently brings about a duel between the two men in which Donati is killed. Louise, whose health has deteriorated since her lover's rejection of her, hears the shot whilst running in a futile attempt to prevent

the conflict. She dies, presumably of grief. The earrings are then seen a final time, having been posthumously presented as a gift to the Church in her name.

The story of the film differs from that of the novella by Louise de Vilmorin, on which it was based, in a number of ways. The most illuminating instance of these divergences occurs around the film's ending and the fate of the earrings. Published in 1951, in the original story Louise's eventual death offers a form of catharsis for the two men in her life, who do not fight a duel over her as they do in Ophüls' adaptation. Instead, they reconcile with one another over her body after she has died of heartbreak following Donati's rejection of her. Her husband offers Donati one of the earrings as a token of the love he shared with Louise. He has it placed on a chain around his neck that he can never remove. The other earring is buried alongside Louise's body, symbolically uniting the couple despite her death. The film, however, offers no such resolution. Having been rejected by Donati, Louise increasingly detaches herself from the world around her. She is unable to return to her life as it was before following her discovery of fulfilment and passionate love with Donati. However, she is also denied the satisfaction of having her feelings returned or her relationship consummated after his repudiation of her. Consequently, her obscure presence comes to stand for her outcast and irreconcilable position in relation to her life and social world. The film structurally depicts this alienation and failure of redemption by electing not to depict Louise or Donati's deaths on screen, negating them without emphasis or resolution. Here, as it does throughout, the film reveals more in the manner of its withholding of Louise's presence than it does through its direct portrayal of it.

7.1 Objects and Obscurity

One of the most prominent features in the film's presentation of Louise is its use of objects to both conceal and stand in for her body or character. Elements of the film's ornate décor or of Darrieux's elegant costumes often intercede between her body and its presence to the camera. Even when objects are not placed immediately in front of her—to either partially or completely obscure her from view—the quantity of ornamental details that frequently surround her detract from the clarity of her figure, deflecting the expressive centrality of her face and body within the frame.



This approach emphasises her relations to her environment and the symbolic dimension of objects as indirect sources of meaning for her character, imparting insights that her composed and obscured exteriority frustrates. The most prominent instance of this device is found in the film's use and presentation of the earrings. Their status as an expressive vehicle for Louise's character and a surrogate for her remote presence is introduced in the film's opening scene. This sequence offers the viewer an intimate exploration of Louise's extensive wardrobe whilst she assesses the monetary worth and personal value of her many possessions, trying to find something that she is willing to sell in order to pay her debts.

The scene commences as a gloved feminine hand reaches into the frame to open a drawer in a tightly packed jewellery box, revealing a pair of heart-shaped diamond pendant earrings.



Whilst the box is crowded with various gleaming pieces, the earrings, placed just below the centre of the frame, immediately stand out due to their singular luminosity. They appear to be lit from within, radiating light rather than reflecting it. In contrast to this glistening visibility, Louise's body is withheld and suppressed. The tight close-up shot excludes most of her figure from the frame, save her hand, which is shrouded by her dark gloves. The covering of her hand places her at a further remove from the viewer by concealing her skin and forestalling the potential for tactile intimacy that her bare-skin handling of objects might have introduced. The exclusion and shrouding of her body further underscores the uniquely sparkling status of the earrings.

The visual prominence of the gems compounds the looming sense of their fateful narrative significance that has already been impressed upon the viewer by the two

introductory cue cards placed at the end of the film's title sequence. These cards state: "Madame de... was a very elegant, distinguished and celebrated woman, seemingly destined to a delightful, uncomplicated existence. Probably nothing would have happened had it not been for those jewels...". The second sentence of this foreword downplays Louise's role in the story of her own life — placing the jewels in a more active position than her—in much the same way that the composition of the opening shot deflects the viewer's attention away from her body and onto the diamonds. The film therefore introduces Louise's presence and character by refracting them through the portending significance of her earrings.

The complexity of Louise's gestural response to the gems also underscores their role as vehicles for the indirect transmission of her expressively muted body. Having opened the drawer containing the earrings, Louise's gloved fingers reach instinctively to grasp the jewels within. However, just as quickly, she hesitates and withdraws her hand with a gesture of despondent frustration and an irritated sigh. Confirming her inclination to choose the diamonds by pointing to them, she regretfully reflects to herself, "If only they weren't the ones he gave me for our wedding", allowing her fingers to drum lightly on the edge of the drawer as she contemplates her other options.

Louise's reaction reveals her ambivalent feelings towards the earrings. The immediacy of her initial response betrays her lack of attachment to the piece whilst her subsequent begrudging hesitation reflects an acknowledgment of her duty to respect her marriage. Her wistful words and resentful huff imply that she feels that her wifely obligations are stifling; her ready willingness to part with her wedding gift in the first place suggests that she is not sentimentally attached to her husband. By conferring these insights upon the viewer through the medium of her earrings and her response to them before her face or body have been presented, the film establishes the jewels as a totemic device for Louise's character and alludes to the symbolic complexity that objects can accrue.

The association of Louise with the earrings also extends into the film's fictional world, as other characters perceive her through the prism of their understanding of the diamond earrings' symbolic significance. Donati's rejection of her is provoked by his discovery of her concealment of the true provenance of the jewels, which become a sign of her deceitfulness as well as her relationship with her husband. The General also invests them with a connection to her emotional life, evidenced when he forces her to give the earrings as a gift to a poor relative in an attempt to compel her to

simultaneously surrender her love for Donati. Both men come to imbue the earrings with a sense of their failure to fully comprehend or possess Louise, who repeatedly insists on defining the significance of the diamonds for herself. Consequently, in addition to being used as a vehicle for obscuring or substituting Louise's presence to the viewer, the jewels also represent her elusiveness to other characters.

The expressive and physical substitution of the earrings for Louise's presence culminates in the film's final scene, following her implied off-screen death. The scene takes place in a church that Louise has been shown to visit twice before in the film. Both times she offers prayers that are directly related to the earrings. In the first instance, she prays for the success of her attempt to sell the jewels. In the second, having heard of the impending duel between Donati and her husband, she prays for the life of her lover and offers the earrings as a self-sacrifice, laying them down reverently on the altar. The camera's movement in the first part of both of these scenes is almost identical. Stationed in the front of the church, it tracks and turns to show Louise's approach until she pauses in the centre foreground to greet the altar. It then resumes its motion as she stands and walks to her right, towards a shrine to the Virgin Mary. As she enters this fenced off space, the camera adjusts its position to frame her within the enclosed area.



The darker lighting and costume in the later of the two scenes reflects the alteration in the film's (and Louise's) mood, from lightly comic to solemnly tragic. In the first instance, her grey dress appears indistinct amongst the ornate details of her surroundings, alluding to the appropriateness and comfortable familiarity with which she inhabits her environment. In the second, however, her obscurity is a product of the shadowy darkness, allowing her to recede from visibility as a sign of her retreat from (rather than belongingness to) the wider world. The use of identical camera movement rhymes these two scenes, underscoring this shift in tone and the alteration in the mode and meaning of her obscure presence. The recession of Louise's figure within the frame in the paralleled shots is contrasted with the increasing visual prominence of the earrings. Whilst she only mentions them verbally in the earlier

scene, in the second, she produces them from her bag and places them on the altar whilst offering her self-sacrificing prayer.

The film's final scene concludes this process of retreat and substitution. Whilst the camera's movement deviates from the earlier examples in its much slower, more sombre pace, pausing first to linger on a crucifix and later on a medium shot of the statue of the Virgin Mary in the shrine, the trajectory it takes is clearly reminiscent of the earlier episodes. However, in this instance, Louise is absent from the frame as it tracks along the path she had previously taken through the church. The creation of this parallel with the prior scenes, in which the camera's movement was animated by Louise's motion, alludes to the fact of her death by inscribing her absence in a space that has been intimately connected to her (and the earrings') story.

The scene concludes by placing the earrings into the vacuum left by her lost presence. As the camera draws in closer to the Virgin's statue, it tilts downwards to reveal the diamonds resting in a black display case beside a card informing the viewer that they were presented as a gift from "Madame de..."



In addition to recalling the earlier church scenes, the composition of this final shot also evokes the film's opening image of the earrings. Once again, the diamonds are displayed in close-up near centre of the frame. Just as Louise's body was mostly excluded from the first shot of the film, the final scene's presentation of her name on the card is partial and withheld. The exclusion of any details from the image, save for the card, a candle and the diamonds themselves, concentrates the gleaming presence of the gems, giving them a transcendent quality. The compositional association with the first sequence is also suggested by the use of the same music, with the new addition of an occasional ominous minor drone, again highlighting the tonal shift from lightness to tragedy.

This circular repetition intimates that the frustrations imparted by the depiction of the diamonds in the opening sequence remain unresolved at the point of the film's conclusion. The failure of her desire for, and pursuit of, fulfilment beyond the restrictions of her marriage is suggested by the film's withholding of her name,

as the included words, “Madame de” refer simply to her status as a wife. Beside the card’s partial and impersonal words, the earrings take on a transcendent and iconic status. Following her withdrawal from the world and retreat into obscurity, the earrings become all the more vivid in their role as a surrogate for her unfulfilled presence and desires. Consecrated against the blackness of the background, permanently removed from the circulations that repeatedly redefined their value and significance and placed within Louise’s favoured shrine, their shining, reflective appearance stands out as an open-ended invocation of her mercurial character and figure.

7.2 Elusive Mobility

Louise’s intangibility is also developed through Darrieux’s light and errant physicality. Compounded by the film’s use of long takes, wide shots and moving camera, this draws out the persistent restiveness with which she occupies her environments. Rarely static, her figure is frequently presented in the midst of its nimble progress across space. The depiction of her constant movement creates meaning without her appearance becoming readily discernible within the frame. The film frequently presents her from a distance, observing her interactions with, and traversals across, environments whilst downplaying the expressive role of her bodily surface. She is compositionally central to the construction of the film’s shots and yet somewhat unavailable or undefined within them. This effect is produced by the camera’s depiction of her perpetual movements around environments that often serve to camouflage her appearance. It is also compounded by the portrayal of other characters’ efforts to keep pace with her restive momentum, as she frequently slips away from their (and the camera’s) view.

The sequences that immediately follow the opening scene establish this aspect of Louise’s elusive presence. After deciding to part with the earrings, she steps out from her bedroom and onto the mezzanine landing above the entrance hall of her grand town house. The camera shows her progress from a position on the ground floor with an upwards-tilted angle. She walks with a suppressed hurriedness, balancing a desire to move quickly with a need to remain quiet and unobtrusive, whilst her hands flutter around her head to fix her hair and hat.



Her body is minimised within the frame, surrounded by the decorative features of the balcony and light fittings. Her fast, busy movements also distract from the details of her appearance.

The unbroken shot continues as the gliding camera turns and tilts downwards to depict her descent down the stairs. Making her way to the hall, she repeatedly disappears behind various features that pass across the middle ground between her body and the moving camera. Her nanny calls her name on the landing midway down the stairs and she changes direction to greet her. The camera reactively halts in its downward trajectory and moves to the right to accommodate her sudden diversion, following her as she passes behind a decorative ornament on the corner of the balustrade.



The long take combined with the wide angle of the shot preserves the fluency of her movement at the same time as allowing her to pass in and out of view, depicting both the graceful confidence of her inhabitation of space and the subsuming of her figure by her imposing environment. Whilst she is shown to be adept and confident at inhabiting in her surroundings, this composition also alludes to how her presence is determined and qualified by her external world.

Whilst Ophüls' much-discussed roving shots are one way in which the film achieves her vague presence, more static camera positions are also used to create this impression. Restricting the camera's movements to rotation about an axis underscores the freedom of Louise's mobility by withholding the film's capacity to pursue her. It also allows her to move back and forth before the lens, letting her slip in and out of view. The camera adopts this type of position as she reaches the bottom of the stairs. Ceasing in its more flexible roving action, it instead turns on the spot as

she passes before it to show her walking across the hall to a coat stand with her back to the lens.



As her nanny's voice calls from behind to remind her to take some breakfast, she halts and turns back towards the camera. She then glides past it once again, whilst it revolves to show her as she moves towards and then away from the lens. She steps into the breakfast room with her back still to the camera and disappears from the frame. Remaining in the same position, the camera then pans back on its axis along the corridor she has just traversed, retracing its previous movement whilst also drawing in closer to the wall. It then arrives at a window through which Louise is seen approaching a breakfast tray. Framed by the panes of glass, her figure is again obscured by the decorative details that intercede between her body and the camera in the foreground.



Limiting the camera's movements to axial rotation underscores the comparative flexibility of Louise's mobility whilst also placing her in a position of qualified accessibility as she moves towards and away from the lens.

The restless quality of her physicality is also a product of the film's repeated depiction of her arriving at and departing from various locations. This unsettles her presence by creating the impression that she is perpetually in transit, moving from one environment to another. It also invokes a sense of the existence of her presence beyond the confines of the frame by showing her to both enter and leave it. This device is employed in all three of the first scenes of the film, as she moves from her home to the Church, and then on to the jewellers. Following the breakfast scene, she is shown hastily striding out of her house with her back to the lens, closing the door behind her. The camera then lingers momentarily on this shot of the closed

door, punctuating her departure from the space, before fading to frontally show her striding at a similarly quick pace along an aisle in a church. The subsequent scene in the jewellers is also bracketed by the depiction of her pulling up and then away from the boutique in her carriage.

Andrew Britton has also referred to the rhyming of these three scenes. He argues that that they are 'bound together by...the act of exchange, the conspicuous presence of white candles, and the scrutinizing male gaze' (Britton 333). Focusing on the latter motif, he contends that one of the effects of this paralleling is that Louise 'appears, both to herself and to us, in an absolutely objectified form' (333). He cites the different types of scrutiny her appearance is subjected to in each of the sequences, first from herself (as she regards her reflection in her dresser's mirror with a view to charming the jeweller), then from an admiring soldier in the church, and finally by the jeweller and his young assistant. However, Britton's suggestion does not take account of the ways in which the gazes of her male admirers are challenged and circumvented by her restless and itinerant physicality, in much the same way as the film forestalls the viewer's easy apprehension of her appearance. Whilst their looks may have an acquisitive intention behind them, the elusiveness of her presence to the camera impedes the 'absolute' objectification of her figure. Furthermore, the scenes' depiction of the men's straining and flustered responses to her reinforces the impression of her inaccessibility.

Each of the men's looks is characterised by their endeavour to watch her as she quickly enters and departs from the spaces, seemingly immune to their scrutiny. Having faded to the church scene, she is shown walking towards the camera, which turns to follow her trajectory along the aisle. As she reaches the foreground, a supplicating soldier raises his head from his prayers to watch her as she briefly kneels before the altar. The soldier turns his head to gaze at her and watches as she rises and moves past him towards a shrine of the Virgin Mary.



The camera, maintaining the same position, turns to show her as she climbs the steps to the shrine, leaving the soldier's gaze behind. The camera's attuned respon-

siveness and the use of a prolonged take emphasise the continuity of her movements, towards and then away from the soldier. Rather than focusing on or reproducing the acquisitive nature of his gaze, the moment seems rather to stress her immunity to and evasion of it. After saying a prayer and lighting a candle for her attempt to sell the jewels, she returns to the altar. The camera retraces its movements to follow her as she once again sweeps towards the soldier who, distracted from his own prayers, looks up at her face. Kneeling before the altar once again, she rises without acknowledging him and quickly sweeps past him, striding down the aisle as he cranes his neck to watch her.



The same sense of fleeting inaccessibility characterises the film's depiction of her in the jeweller's shop. Her carriage is shown arriving outside through the window of the boutique. She runs down the stairs and enters hurriedly, the doorbell ringing ethereally like wind chimes to mark her entrance. She immediately asks the assistant for the proprietor, Monsieur Remy, before pacing back and forth on the shop floor. As she waits for him to emerge, she swings her umbrella and bag distractedly. The camera adjusts its position back and forth to mirror her fidgety actions, unsettling her presence within the frame and deflecting focus from her appearance. As Remy emerges and invites her upstairs to his office, she takes the train of her dress in her hands and strides with confidence and poise ahead of him, moving towards and then up a spiral staircase. Still holding the same shot, the camera moves vertically upwards along the stairs. Monsieur Remy trails behind her, looking up at her eagerly as she ascends out of view.



Reaching the top of the stairs, Remy begins to speak breathlessly, betraying the exertion of trying to keep up with her. As they discuss her debts and the purchase

of the earrings, Louise begins to affect a fainting fit to induce the reluctant jeweller into acquiescing to her request. Remy calls for his young assistant Jerome to aid him. Cutting to a high angle shot to show Louise lying limply in her chair with Remy leaning over her with concern, Jerome's startled head emerges from the hole of spiral staircase in the background.



The film then cuts to a wider shot, moving away from Louise to show Remy as he crosses the room to retrieve a glass of water for his ailing customer. Louise begins to stir as he returns to offer her the refreshment. The following shot depicts the underside of the spiral stairs where the riveted Jerome stands watching the dramatic scene unfold. At first only his legs are visible, but after Louise starts to take her leave, the camera follows him as he runs down the stairs to open the front door for her whilst looking excitedly over his shoulder. Cutting back to the same shot of the staircase, the film shows Louise steadily descending with the jeweller in tow, a highly satisfied expression on her face. The camera repeats its movement across the shop floor as she approaches and passes through the open door. As she passes through the doorway, Remy detains her to ask how she will explain the absence of the earrings to her husband. She answers vaguely that she “will think of something” whilst swaying restively. She then picks up her skirts, and climbs the steps to her carriage. The camera maintains its position in the shop, showing her progress from within and the men gather to watch her through the window in the foreground.



Throughout this sequence Louise exerts seemingly effortless influence over Monsieur Remy, as both he and his assistants begin to trail back and forth around the shop on her behalf. Her restless agitation induces restiveness in others, as she briskly swirls through the environment with the shop workers trailing behind and around

her whilst she remains one step out of reach. The camera's movements, following Remy and Jerome across the shop floor and up and down the stairs, emphasise her power over them while withholding her physical presence. The recurrent shot of people ascending and descending the swirling spiral stairs compounds the impression of dizzying fluster that she introduces into the space. By having the camera follow Remy's and Jerome's responses to her fainting fit, she remains central to the compositional impetus of the shots by provoking the movements of others towards and away from her. Furthermore, in her changeable, shifting and elusive physicality, she resists and rebuffs the riveted gazes of the curious shopkeepers.

The scene depicting Louise's first encounter with Donati is also characterised by its presentation of her compelling yet elusive mobility. Taking place in Basel train station, it begins with a close-up of a suitcase as the name of the station is called out over the huffing of steam trains. The suitcase is opened to reveal a jewellery box containing the earrings. A man is heard requesting a luggage search as the camera pulls back to reveal the interior of the station. A protesting customs official refuses the gentleman's unusual demand, explaining that it is not necessary given his possession of a diplomatic passport. Commanding the perplexed customs official to "just pretend", the diplomat looks anxiously to his left, peering across the station for a sight of something or someone whilst pleading over his shoulder, "I need an excuse to stay here". The camera begins to move discreetly to the left, following the diplomat's eager stare, pausing as Louise is discovered in the distance, standing in line at the ticket office.



Whilst the diplomat encourages his accomplice to continue with their charade in the foreground, Louise makes her way quickly across the station floor towards the checkpoint and the camera.

She is distractedly putting her ticket into her purse whilst complaining aloud to her maid about having to pay customs tax on "luxury items". The shot now draws in closer to her and turns to trace her trajectory. Moving past the camera and the customs desk, she glances up from her purse to the diplomat very briefly. Donati

stands transfixed by the sight of her, turning on the spot in unison with the camera's motion.



No sooner has she looked at him than she whisks indifferently past, briefly disappearing from the frame. Donati turns with the camera to follow her with his gaze as, like a magnet, she draws the attention of both whilst she walks away. As she arrives at the ticket desk, the film cuts in to a medium shot of her looking up from her ticket and back across the station at Donati. A reverse shot over her shoulder then shows Donati gazing back at her with gentle ardour. Breaking with the fluidity of the camera's movement across the station, this exchange of static medium shots momentarily dislodges the pair from their environment as they become aware solely of one another. Cutting back to a shot from the camera's original position, Donati moves quickly to pursue her as she disappears through the station door and onto the platform. However, before he can reach her, a man demanding his passport calls him back. Louise, just visible through the hazy platform window, turns back to look at Donati as he argues with the determined official.



The camera then turns back across the station, following Donati as he hurriedly looks about for his documentation before finding it in his pocket. He then rushes once again to the exit, stepping out into the empty space behind the window on the platform that was occupied by Louise just seconds before. He looks along the tracks after the train that has just pulled away.



The movement of the camera in this short scene indirectly places Louise at its expressive centre without showing her. The camera reflects Donati's responsive awareness of her itinerant presence, as she draws their attention to her whilst moving across and out of the station. Once again, her trajectory across the space is presented in terms of her arrival, progression and departure; all shown almost in one continuous long take. Her rapid and driving movement leaves Donati rushing frantically in an attempt to keep up with her; the camera's accompanying back and forth motion across the breadth of the station underscores his agitated motion. Repeatedly turning away from or losing sight of Louise's retreating figure, it echoes and amplifies Donati's frustrated pursuit of her as she glides out of reach.

The film's elusive positioning of her in relation to both Donati and the camera is carried over into the following scene, in which two characters run into one another in their carriages on the streets of Paris. Once again, the camera turns on an axis to depict Louise's carriage's swift passage around a corner where its wheels collide with those of another vehicle. Cutting in closer to the accident, the two drivers squabble with one another as Louise's quizzical face peers out, framed by the carriage window. The camera almost immediately moves away to the right to reveal Donati stepping down from the vehicle. He walks over to greet Louise at the window, taking off his hat as he approaches. She is shown in profile, framed by the window, her face slightly blurred behind the veil of her hat. The angle of the shot is such that she is never directly facing the camera.

As Donati recounts the story of their previous encounter, the film performs a number of rapid shot-reverse shots, never allowing the viewer to dwell for too long on the side of her face, which is de-emphasised by its off-centre position in the frame, before cutting inside the carriage to show the back of her head.



As she charmingly recounts Donati's appearance and attire at the station in Basel with pinpoint accuracy, she speaks very rapidly, reeling off an itemised account of his clothing and accessories from that day. Her speech reflects her physicality in its rapid sprightliness, as the listener must concentrate to catch her words before they disappear. The coachman then informs them that the damages have been repaired and Louise's carriage begins to pull away. Baron Donati asks if they "will meet again" and begins to run alongside her now moving coach as it starts to speed ahead and move into the distance, leaving him behind.



He calls out his name to her, as the film cuts to a medium shot of him taking off his hat to her once again rapidly retreating presence. She is heard off screen returning his introduction. However, she only gets as far as "And I'm Madame de..." before the film cuts back to show her carriage disappearing into the park with Donati standing alone in foreground. Again, she is characterised as much by the absence of precise definition as she is by her more tangible features. The film presents her as an elusive figure, both within the frame and in her positioning as a presence that indirectly compels the pursuing movements of others around her through her obscurity.

However, once her relationship with Donati has ended due to the exposure of her deception, her restiveness ceases to stand for her captivating unattainability and instead comes to reflect her purgatorial isolation from the social world. Rather than revealing the ways in which withholding her presence captivates or attracts, the camera's depiction of her now stresses the uneasiness of her inhabitation of space, bereft of the sense of belongingness that characterised her figure earlier in the film. Having elected to leave Paris in an attempt to overcome her all-consuming feelings for Donati, she sets out on a five-week voyage through Italy. In one of the film's most

atypical shots, she is seen walking across a beach wearing an uncharacteristically drab black cloak.



The image is noticeable for both its strong use of contrast and outdoor location, which stand out amongst the film's otherwise mostly decorative interior environments. The shot's anomalism reflects the estrangement and uncertainty of her position. She seemingly emerges from nowhere, compounding this sense, as she walks into the frame from behind a fishing net. The sparse and blank beach provides an anonymous backdrop for her displaced, wandering figure. Her cloak obscures her body save for her forlorn face and uncharacteristically unkempt hair. The camera begins to follow movements across the beach, showing her in profile whilst she strides with directionless determination along the shoreline. Her face, though visible before the lens, has a remote expression of contained melancholy; her gaze remains transfixed on the unseen horizon. As her maid's calling voice becomes audible, she pauses and looks up. The film then cuts to show the maid running along the beach, stopping to inform her mistress that their luggage is ready for their departure. She then enquires after the reason for their sudden departure, gently complaining that this is the seventh town they have stopped at in five weeks. Louise, maintaining her fixated gaze into the middle distance, avoids all eye contact. She replies bitterly, "You couldn't understand" before turning away.



She then retraces her steps back along the shoreline in the other direction as the camera once again tracks alongside her, as she demands to be left alone.

In this scene, Louise's ambulatory restlessness reflects her displaced position. Unable to reside in the environments that had previously contained her now unsatisfying life and in the spaces that remind her of Donati, she leaves Paris to find that she

cannot bear to remain anywhere. The anomalous characteristics of the shot allude to this purgatorial and outcast state. Despite the relative visibility of her brightly lit yet expressively remote face, the repetitiveness of her movements erodes the immediacy of her presence by inflecting them with a sense of the past, as she traces and retraces the same ground, unable to move forward.

7.3 Expressive Withdrawal

The film's presentation of Louise shifts following her discovery of devoted and all-consuming love in her relationship with Donati. Where elusiveness previously stood for her compelling unavailability and belonging to her environment, it later comes instead to reflect her emotional abstraction and alienation from the world. This transformation is introduced over the course of one of the film's most celebrated sequences, depicting the courting of Louise by Donati over the course of a series of society balls. The construction of the scene places one ball after another, extending couple's waltz seamlessly across various occasions. This device allows for the transformation in Louise's demeanour and feelings to become palpable to the viewer, as the development of her affection for Donati and the shift in her attitude towards the wider world is expressively compressed into a single scene. As the sequence develops, there is a tangible alteration in both Louise's physicality and in the film's presentation of her body in relation to her environment. Darrieux's comportment changes from one of aloof haughtiness to intensive inwardness as her focus shifts from a consciousness of the public realm to a desire for private retreat. The film mirrors this alteration in its use of compositions that increasingly withdraw and abstract Louise's (and Donati's) presence from their social surroundings.

During the first ball, Louise appears teasing unattainable. Playfully flirting with Donati, she provocatively alludes to her reputation as an incorrigible flirt, counselling him "not to hope". She delivers her taunts with quick fire jadedness. The speed of her speech and flatness of her tone are suggestive of her familiarity with this style of conversation, placing her at an emotional remove. Simultaneously, the film visually mutes aspects of her presence by contrasting her impassivity with Donati's vivacity and allowing her image to recede into the similarly coloured background.



As the couple turn with the dance, their faces appear and then disappear from view. Louise's expression remains remote and aloof, whilst Donati gazes at her with a broad and admiring smile. His figure almost overwhelms hers, as his black coat with gold trim stands out sharply against the more subdued colour of Louise's ornate lace gown. His animated face draws attention from her more deadpan countenance. The medium shot allows the many nearby couples to pass across the frame, their complimentary motion stressing the ritualistic nature of Louise and Donati's flirtation. Daniel Morgan has stated that this 'dance embodies the socially prescribed form of circulation, the shifting patterns of social life' (Morgan). This is emphasised still further by the many mirrors that hang from the walls, stressing the social and public nature of the setting.



Presenting their interaction in context of the synchronistic movements of the crowd around them, the composition suggests that their relation resides, at this stage, within the boundaries of social convention as they flow harmoniously with the rhythm of the assembled dancers. In response to Louise's wish that he will not become "caught in her game", an image that echoes the sense of enclosure created by their dance and the camera's subtly encircling motion, Donati playfully assures her that he will "refrain from hoping". The verbally nimble back and forth between them becomes a part of the rhythmical action of their dancing, as their playful exchange is conducted with as much fluidity and easiness as their physical movements.

However, as the scene fades to another ball, a change in Louise's appearance and demeanour becomes apparent. The camera is now closer to the revolving pair, revealing her broad smile as she looks up to the face of Donati. Her dress is a dark shade of luminous silk, standing out more prominently against her partner's coat.

Additionally, there are no longer any other couples in view, as only an orchestra appears in the background of the shot creating the impression that they are playing music for Louise and Donati alone.



They begin to move to the right of the frame and the camera follows the pair as other couples pass in a blur. Rather than emphasising their synchronisation with the crowd, the lateral movement of shot detaches them from the other couples. Moving behind a row of columns within the middle of the frame whilst the other dancers glide quickly past them in the foreground, they appear to occupy their own private spatial plane. Gradually, the camera draws into a close-up, emphasising the proximity of their faces and excluding other details of their surroundings from the frame.



The conversation that passes between them is also more animated, as the haughty cynicism of Louise's tone in the previous ball has been exchanged for one of playful interest. They discuss politics whilst knowingly smiling, the inhibiting public surroundings preventing the discussion of more personal subjects. After a period of loaded silence, during which they exchange potent glances at one other, Donati asks after her husband, his voice encumbered with emotion. Louise responds with a clipped, "Excellent, thank you" whilst averting her eyes with a downcast expression as Donati draws her in closer, covering her body in the frame with his own.

The following ball makes their increasing desire to retreat from the social world apparent by fading in to show a mounted painting depicting a group of musicians over the fading image of the revolving couple. The previous ball initially showed the pair dancing in isolation with the live orchestra; they now appear to be completely cut off from their wider public environment. They enter into the shot from the

immediate foreground, their faces momentarily filling the frame. Louise is shown serenely smiling at her dance partner, who is regarding her with an intense expression. Filling the background of the shot, the pictorial image reflects their illusion of escape from their social and temporal context into a romanticised realm. As Donati laments two days spent without seeing her, they revolve on the spot in front of the painting, no longer traversing the ballroom.



The camera draws away into a medium shot, revealing their masquerade costumes and adding to the sense of fantasy that pervades the scene. This atmosphere is further compounded by the other strangely garbed partygoers and cherubic statues that surround them as they begin to spin across the floor as the music swells. The couple arrive before another painting that once again obscures their public environment and Donati asks if Louise has any news from her husband. Louise responds, “From who?” momentarily forgetting the existence of her husband and her position.



As Donati reminds her, she replies with a cursory, “He’s very well, thank you”. They then sweep quickly across the room and behind another painting, retreating from the view of both the camera and the crowd.

After another ball, in which Donati confesses that he is beginning to “hope”, the film fades to the final episode of the sequence. Once again, an orchestra is the first thing to come into view. The musicians are beginning to pack up their instruments. Louise and Donati, the only couple dancing in the ballroom, are just visible in the hazy reflection of the mirror behind the musicians, who are loudly complaining about time and the couple’s refusal to leave (echoing the very similar scenario between Stefan and Lisa, the protagonists in Ophüls’ earlier 1948 film, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*).



Here, the film presents the pair abstracted from the physical and social world entirely. Whereas the mirrors in the first ball affirmed the omnipresence of the social world, here they facilitate Louise and Donati's separation from it. Louise is isolated with her partner in the reflection on the mirrored walls, recalling the use of paintings as backdrops in the earlier ball. Their insulation from their broader environment is underscored further by the discordantly quotidian and comedic tone of the musicians' vocal frustrations, as the couple's enraptured state leaves them oblivious to their surroundings. As one violinist gets up to leave, the camera follows his progress across the room. Producing a cigar, he approaches a servant occupied with snuffing out the candles for a light. The couple are then once again visible in the reflection of another mirror on the wall. Their figures appear almost spectral, framed by the glass in the dim light of the ballroom.



As the musician takes his leaves, the camera continues to follow him across the ballroom to the exit, at which point it breaks from his trajectory to reveal Louise, wearing her fur stole, and Donati, wearing his greatcoat, dressed to leave but still dancing with one another. As the camera move in closer to the couple, they are shown regarding one another gravely without speaking, until Louise asks, for the final time, "Aren't you going to ask about my husband?" After Donati declines, she replies, "You're wise not to. He's returning tomorrow". As they embrace one another more tightly whilst closing their eyes, the camera moves off to the right, returning to the progress of the servant working his way around the room extinguishing candles. Arriving back at the orchestra's stage, the couple are seen a final time still dancing in the mirror's reflection as the camera closes in on the harpist as he covers his instrument with a shroud, creating a black out. Despite showing them in their coats,

clearly ready to depart, the scene closes by obscuring their already abstracted image in the reflection. They do not exit the space or stop dancing. Rather, the film places more and more impediments between the couple and the camera, placing them at an increasing physical and visual remove.

The devices of temporal compression and rhythmical continuity seamlessly unite what are, within the fictional world, disparate days and spaces spread over the course of several weeks, rendering this transformation in Louise's demeanour and presence all the more palpable to the viewer. Initially emphasising her expressive restraint and assimilation with her surroundings, the latter part of the episode comes instead to depict Louise (and her partner) in terms of spatial retreat and abstraction from her environments. However, whilst this withdrawal is ultimately revealed to be temporary and provisional for Donati, who is firmly ensconced within codes that govern appropriate behaviour, the shift in the presentation of Louise signals a more permanent alternation of her feelings and attitudes.

7.4 Relational Obscurity

In addition to reflecting her ability to fit in to her surroundings and, later, her desire to retreat from them, Louise's obscure presence is also demonstrative of the emotional distance that characterises her pleasant yet unfulfilled relationship with her husband. Ophüls sets out this dynamic in a scene that sees them both preparing for bed. The General, having just sent away his mistress with the earrings, is heard whistling off screen.



The shot presents two jugs resting beside water basins on parallel dressing tables; one presumably used by Louise and the other by her husband. The jugs are facing in opposite directions with the gulf between them filled by one of the house's numerous decorative murals, depicting a romantic classical scene of two women bathing in the sea. The composition evokes a sense of symmetry tempered by separation, of a prosperous yet lifeless harmony.

As the camera swoops to the left, the General is seen emerging from his chamber, cigarette in hand. He approaches the washbasin and scrutinises his reflection

intently in the mirror. He calls out to ask if Louise is sleeping, and her voice is heard off screen to say, “No, I’m on edge”. During this exchange, the General combs his hair and moustache before plucking stray hairs from his eyebrows, absorbed by his reflection in the mirror even as he inquires after the source of his wife’s unease. His concerned tone of voice is at odds with his engrossed facial expression as he inspects his appearance. Louise replies that she is worried about the missing earrings, her voice sounding strained and distressed. The General is at this point well aware of the location of the earrings and of Louise’s deception and elects to indulge her with paternalistic tolerance. They are both manufacturing artificial concern for the other’s benefit. The performative aspect of this exchange is underscored by the use of the mirror, which emphasises the disconnection between the General’s voice and expression.

The sense of separation brought about by this depiction of distancing duplicity is magnified by the absence of Louise from the frame. Rather than cutting to show Louise in her bed, the camera follows the General’s movements across the chamber that connects their separate rooms, pausing just behind him as he stops at the threshold. Louise is visible in the background of the shot, framed behind the panes of glass that divide the space. The General’s shadowy figure in the foreground contrasts with the illuminated brightness of Louise’s bed, accentuating the distance between them.



They are both visually remote in relation to the camera, Louise at a considerable distance from the lens and her husband shown from behind in silhouette. The crowded composition of the shot reinforces their alienation from one another in this exchange, with its multiple planes and borders reflecting the numerous evasive deflections that are passing between them. The imposing formality of the bedroom’s decorations and the General’s hesitation in the doorway divest the chamber of a sense of intimacy. The camera then follows the General as he strides back to the washstand, travelling once again across the interim space between their rooms. Out of the sight of his wife, the General’s pleasure in knowingly watching his wife’s performance becomes apparent in his gently smirking expression. Ophüls’ characteristic use of a mobile

tracking shot here serves to highlight separation and distance rather than fluidity and connectedness as it repeatedly and emphatically traverses the space between their rooms alongside the General's movements.

The alienating and performed dimension of their exchange is further impressed upon the viewer by the composition of the following shot, as Louise's attempts to dismiss her husband's teasing accusations of various members of their household staff. The image carefully frames her bed so the curtains in the foreground are transformed into a proscenium arch.



Again, the imposingly ornate furnishings subsume Louise's figure and the magazine she is reading obscures her face. The artificial and stylised quality of the image erodes the vividness of her bodily presence still further. The film then cuts back to the General, still in the adjoining washroom. The mobile camera's angle and proximity to his body bear no relation to its static, frontal and distant position in its depiction of Louise. This spatially discontinuous shot-reverse shot estranges the couple and their respective environments.

The film's portrayal of their detachment from one another and of Louise's remoteness continues as the General enters his bedchamber. Initially, the camera remains in the interim space, showing him through a partly opened door as she disrobes and climbs into bed. The presence of the dividing partition in the foreground underscores the separation of space. Cutting back, the camera has moved in closer to Louise, although the shadowy presence of a net curtain intercedes between her and the lens in the foreground of the shot, flattening her appearance. This mediation of her body doubles the sense of distance created by her consciously performed behaviour.



As she insists he stop accusing their servants, the camera spins very rapidly back to reveal her husband's chamber, stressing the great distance between them across the hall. The General's voice is also suddenly faint, as it echoes across the cavernous divide between them.



Cutting back to close-up of the General, the film then performs a series of shot-reverse shots as they continue to discuss the fate of the earrings. The presence of objects in the foreground of the shots of each adds to this impression of containment and separation by creating a defined spatial zone for them to inhabit within the frame. Louise is presented in each episode behind a curtain of her bed. An upright empty dinner suit and dress sword in the foreground of the image of the General enhances the comedic tenor of their increasingly mischievous exchange, whilst also alluding to the air of theatricality that characterises the scene.



The film revisits the harmonious yet detached symmetry depicted in this sequence in a later scene that also takes place in their separate adjoining bedrooms. However, rather than presenting Louise's obscurity as a reflection of the amicable distance and knowing manipulations that occur between them, it comes instead to stand for the failure of reciprocity and understanding. The scene is preceded by a sequence in which Louise publicly faints on seeing Donati thrown from his horse during a hunt. Having watched the incident through binoculars, Louise collapses from her mount in shock, unable to conceal the intensity of her feelings.

Once again, the scene begins by showing the General regarding his reflection in the mirror. This time, however, he is dressed in white tie, preparing to depart to a ball. This association highlights the absence of change in his behaviour and routine. Also as before, the camera lingers on him as he addresses the unseen Louise, regretting

her refusal to accompany him. Turning off the gaslights as he readies himself to leave, Louise calls his name from off screen and informs him of her wish to go away from Paris. As she speaks, he looks in the direction of her voice and closes the door sharply before crossing the space slowly towards her voice and bedchamber. Rather than showing him as the earlier scene did (from behind in the foreground of the shot, framed by the doorway with Louise in the background), the film cuts to show him standing on a threshold from inside the room. It is not clear where Louise is situated in relation to him.



Distant from one another within the frame, the two are now divided by the camera's position, which omits Louise from the shot altogether. He passes through the door as the camera continues to track his movements, Louise present only as an off screen voice. The placement of the camera and the direction of his gaze give the impression that he is drawing closer to her. However, as he walks, he changes direction and it becomes apparent that he is standing in the centre of the parlour that divides their rooms. In the earlier scene, the oppositional symmetry of the space between them was made quite clear by both commencing the sequence in centre with the image of the parallel wash basins and use of shot-reverse shots. Here, the depiction of the environment through the camera's and the General's movements is far more uncertain. Withholding Louise's presence and keeping the mobile camera close to the General denies the viewer a clear understanding of the physical configuration of the space, showing the failure of their previous state of mutual independence and revealing the untraversable emotional gulf that now exists between them.

This is also reflected in the tonal disjunction of their respective moods and style of communication. The General, having momentarily betrayed a degree of concern, resumes his customary tone of teasing affability, complimenting her on her offer to leave and suggesting that it is a sign of her good breeding. Whilst he delivers his good-humoured speech, the camera continues to track his movements, turning away from Louise's doorway and gliding back across the parlour. Her withheld presence presses on the shot, reflecting the General's avoidance and denial of the truth of her feelings as he forestalls any serious confrontation between them. Excluding her from

the frame reflects the failure of understanding between the couple and the General's refusal to confront this fact.

Louise's presence is diffused and diminished by the film in various ways. Obscuring her physical appearance in relation to her surroundings, it reveals her aptness to and then her retreat from her social environment. Similarly, her itinerant and restless physicality shifts from reflecting her compellingly unattainability to demonstrating her unmoored displacement from her life and identity. Other characters' experiences of this enthralling unavailability are presented to the viewer through compositions that follow their spiralling movements towards and away from her person. Later in the film, however, this same ploy underscores her abstraction from their understandings of her character, and performs their denials of this fact. By mirroring and coupling scenes, such as those in set in the church or in the couple's adjoining bedrooms, and repeating the trajectories of the camera back and forth over the same ground, the transformations in the significance of these devices become all the more apparent. Furthermore, the very act of this repetition may be said to gradually erode the vividness of Louise's presence in the film as a whole by constantly referring her actions and person back to a point in the past, divesting her figure of its expressive immediacy. This conveys the impossibility of progress for her character beyond her frustrated but all-consuming love for Donati. The film realises both the condition and fate of Louise's character through its obscuring of her body and presence.

8 Depersonalisation: *Meshes of the Afternoon, At Land* and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*

Few filmmakers have focused as explicitly on the representation of the body in motion as Maya Deren. Despite the divergent subject matter of her works, ranging from distended depictions of everyday gestural routines, to representations of traditional martial arts and abstract dance, they all share a common preoccupation with the rendering of corporeality through film. Striving to eschew conventional approaches to the portrayal of movement and performance, she sets out to exploit the distinctive structural characteristics of the medium to create novel modes of representing and generating meaning through the mobile human body. Bill Nichols, in his introduction to *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Nichols), relates Deren's interest in experimenting with forms of bodily movement in film to the idea of depersonalisation through ritual performance, which she describes in her essay 'An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film'.

The ritualistic form...creates fear, for example, by creating an imaginative, often mythological experience which, by containing its own logic within itself, has no reference to any specific time or place, and is forever valid for all of time and place...Above all, the ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalised element within a dramatic whole' (Deren quoted in Nichols 10).

Consequently, Deren's particular style of expressing corporeality on film looks to abstract the body's movements from the specificity of the individual's enactment of them. The filmmaker strives to release actions from their confinement to certain individuals and particular moments in time and space in order to create meaning on the level of the film's compositional and rhythmical organisations. Her films do not portray their performers as characters with palpable interiorities, or as discrete agents acting within a distinct or causal external world. Rather, they are presented as privileged incarnations of a particular approach to the realisation of movement, which characterises the film's form more generally.

Deren's own extensive film writings provide a valuable insight into this aspect of her film aesthetics. Her privileging of bodily movement as a vehicle for both subject matter and form is based on a belief that this approach most appropriately reflects and exploits the defining characteristics of the medium. Deren's views on this matter echo the logic of her modernist forbearers, such as Jean Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, who all similarly asserted that film form proper must arise through those features and assets which distinguish it from all other forms of representation. Renata Jackson has described this two-pronged principle of medium-specificity as asserting 'that art forms are differentiated from one another by virtue of their distinctive formal characteristics or structural capabilities, and that there is a direct connection between these structural characteristics and each art form's 'proper' expressive realm' (Jackson 47). Given that the mediums of dance and theatre already employed the movement of bodies through continuous space, Deren championed the distinctive capabilities of cinema to create new types of motion dependent on body/camera interaction and the use of montage—devices which belong exclusively to the realm of filmic representation. Consequently, Deren's explorations of film movement have their basis in exploiting the interface between the performer and the camera, by allowing the body to move beyond the confines set by the spatial/temporal laws that regulate its potential actions in reality.

It is for this reason that Deren's approach to the portrayal of the body on film resists the more literary models of characterisation, typified by popular Hollywood films of her time. She believed firmly in the unsuitability of these conventional modes performance for the film medium, arguing that the successful expression of interior human states belonged most properly to the novel form, due to its capacity to evoke ideas or concepts through their direct representation in language. She infers that any attempt to achieve equivalent expressions in film (through referential gestural performance, for instance) results in the creation of 'symptom-actions' or 'visual shorthand clichés', '[deriving] impact...not from what we see, but from the verbal complex which the image represents...this transcription deceives us, and we imagine we enjoy a truly visual experience' (Deren 91). Whether this is true or not, her films attempt to reject conventional forms of action based on causality and discrete individuated agents, fostering this depersonalised mode of corporeal expression.

Consequently, abstract forms of physical expression, such as dance and ritual, figure strongly in Deren's films. A dancer herself, she was affiliated to the company of Katherine Dunham, from whom she recruited most of her film performers, includ-

ing Rita Christiani and Frank Westerbrook for *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), as well as Talley Beatty for *Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945). Deren's interest in dance and performance came in part from her preoccupation with the practice of Haitian voodoo. She was particularly interested in the practice of possession, which involves the invocation of multiple 'loas' or spirits through dance or the performance of particular characteristics belonging to the spirit in question. It was in part from this that she contrived the idea of 'ritualistic form', which Bill Nichols suggests 'stemmed from her belief in the vital necessity to decentre our notions of self, ego and personality' (Nichols 10). These ideas are all brought to bear in Deren's approach to the depiction of movement on film. Three of her early works in particular seem to develop this concern for depersonalisation or the evacuation of the self. *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), *At Land* (1944) and *Ritual Transfigured in Time* all draw on different aspects of the film medium or film performance in order to achieve a depersonalised mode of film presence, characterised in terms of material abstraction, corporeal continuity and gestural dispersal respectively.

8.1 Material Abstraction: *Meshes of the Afternoon*

Meshes of the Afternoon, a collaboration with her then husband, filmmaker Alexander Hammid, is less overtly orientated around the filmic examination of bodily movement than her later films. It is nevertheless concerned with the destabilisation of coherent identities through the invocation of a particular mode of screen physicality. Rather than achieving this end through the creation of multiplicities via montage (*At Land*) or depersonalising screen entities through a ritualistic or mythical mode of expression (*Ritual in Transfigured Time*), the film draws on the ephemeral insubstantiality of screened images in order to disrupt the constitution of a coherent, discrete presence. Concerned with the capacity of the self to split, *Meshes of the Afternoon* sets out to subvert the presence of a rational, autonomous, consistent subject.

In its disjunctive approach to the constitution of its protagonist, the film speaks to a prominent debate regarding the interaction between the mediums of dance and cinema, which in turn reflects an issue at the heart of Deren's own film practice. The translation of live performance onto film has been a source of considerable anxiety for many dance critics. The suggestion has been that desirable qualities such as spontaneity, immediacy, and kinetic force are apt to be lost in process of transcription. For instance, Daniel Nagrin has suggested, 'both in film and video...the rigid, rectangular window too often robs the dance of dynamic nuance, spatial rele-

vance, and the sweating, exultant immanence of the living dancer' (Nagrin 3). Erin Brannigan has also noted that that dance film 'has often been seen as locking down and undermining the singular, affective experience of any given dance performance' (Brannigan 9). Moreover, she has stated: 'Writing about and recording dance are complex activities in an economy where elusiveness has defined all aspects of the form' (9).

This concern regarding the forfeiture of particular features, seen to be experientially specific to 'live' mediums, echoes Walter Benjamin's reflections in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. He observes, 'the camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole...It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera' (Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 222). This is perhaps the source of these critics' unease surrounding the fate of the corporeal evanescence of dance on film. Imposing the limitations of the frame's borders and structuring movement after the fact through montage undermines the conditions of spontaneity and indeterminacy that characterise a live body's movements through space.

However, it is this aspect of the medium, this gulf of abstraction between events as they take place 'in the flesh' and their ultimate conversion into film, that Deren and Hammid exploit effectively in *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Rather than attempting to restore or rehabilitate a sense of the live body's corporeal imminence, the film draws on qualities inherent to cinema's conveyance of presence—ephemerality and insubstantiality—in its creation of a divided, fragmented heroine. It establishes a sense of elusiveness, not through the impression of impermanence given by the unfolding, ceaseless motion of a body in space (as in live dance), but through the revelation of the ephemeral in its invocation of disenfranchised materiality. Abstracting movement from agency and appearance from physical actuality, the film undertakes a dissolution and fragmentation of Deren's presence at the centre of the film. Rather than reconstructing an illusion of fullness or bodily integrity as the basis for a discrete, autonomous self, *Meshes of the Afternoon* creates the impression of a self which cannot be and has never been fully constituted. Split between overlapping layers of memory fused with perception, the film expresses a psyche's chaotic attempts to organise itself.

Accordingly, the film crafts a mode of physical address based on fragmentation, abstraction and dispersal. The film achieves this effect through a vacillation between

the sensuous depiction of the body, in its repeated focus on Deren's striking face and dancerly movements, and its emphasis on the ephemerality of this film presence. Employing the frame as a tool for exclusion and montage as an elliptical device, Deren is presented as an entity denied physical agency or the ability to act effectively on the world around her. She is portrayed alternately as a massless, illusory surface or as a broken up, fetishised accumulation of separate parts.

The broader organisation of the film reflects this fragmentary approach to the portrayal of Deren's lead. It is structured around cyclical repetitions of a single sequence of seemingly banal events. A woman (Maya Deren), seen walking along a road, catches a momentary glimpse of a figure turning the corner. She then opens a front door and, after a cursory inspection of the empty house and the objects it contains, proceeds to rest in an armchair situated by a front-view window before closing her eyes and falling sleep. This introductory premise is then repeated several times, seemingly as a dream, whilst the film gradually modulates its depiction of these events. Taking on increasingly sinister or malevolent connotations with each cycle, the episodic structure creates a cumulative impression of a psyche drifting further and further away from an objective reality, as the film's introductory images are reanimated by the woman's dreaming unconscious.

8.1.1 *Expressing Ephemerality*

One of the chief vehicles in the film's creation of this illusory mode of expression stems from its careful representation of physical matter and its relation to movement. Rather than attempting to create a sense of the fullness of materiality, its weight and dimensions, objects and individuals are seemingly evacuated of these qualities. Disassociating image from substance, and movement from agency, the film conjures a capricious environment in which no presence is assured.

The opening frames, in spite of the absence of any human figure, establish this sense of the elusiveness of materiality. The film begins by focusing on the sway of treetops lining either side of a road. Panning down, the shot shows the play of the trees' shadows on the asphalt surface. Rather than revealing a distinct visual setting through a conventional establishing shot, the camera's downwards motion refocuses attention onto the variable undulations of shadows, sidestepping the question of topographical specificity. These prefatory images can accordingly be viewed as a rejection of conventional approaches to spatial dynamics. In place of geographical clarity, there is an intensive absorption in the qualitative aspects of movement.

Anna Powell has suggested that this concentration on slight, uncoordinated motion evokes a ‘mysterious and diffuse world of non-human energy’ (Powell 28). Focusing on shadows whilst excluding the objects that cast them (a recurrent device in the film, compounded by a similar use of reflections) emphasises the abstraction of movement from materiality. This focus on visual manifestations of the physical world points to and doubles the photographic operations of the camera in its disenfranchisement of the materiality as an origin or source of motion. Instead of presenting a world in which solid entities are the sources of action, the film’s opening shot establishes an environment in which movement is given as an expression of invisible, animating forces. The dissolution of discrete physical beings introduces a broader conception of movement, enacted and enabled by the film itself.

The depiction of motion as an animating, yet unaccountable force is expanded upon by the ensuing moments. The boundary of the frame is suddenly punctured by the appearance of a descending plastic mannequin arm, a paper flower loosely balanced in its moulded fingers. The drawn out notes of a flute echo the steady motion of the arm, elongating and emphasising its motion.



The flower slips to the ground and remains lifeless, as the arm vanishes in a jarring cut, with a drumbeat punctuating its sudden disappearance.

The choice of objects here also refers to corporeal abstraction. The hand holding the flower seems to initially call for a kinesthetic response, implying a dimension of scent or touch, but this is immediately undermined by the still, smooth falseness of the hand and the paper flower. The integrity or continuity of the world within the frame is also undermined through the striking nature of this vertical, downward interruption into the space. By revealing the permeability of the frame’s borders and repudiating continuity of movement with the jolting cut, the moment challenges the notion of agency within the film world by undermining its hermetic autonomy.

Theresa L. Gellar has similarly understood this episode as an instance of Deren drawing on film’s abstracting power, rejecting conventional modes of film expression based on causality built around active agents. She suggests that the scene is designed to draw the spectator’s attention to ‘the more frightening aspects of loss

and alienation that dominant cinema works manically to efface through the fullness of the screen-image' (Geller 143). Rather than presenting the body as a cohesive whole with the ability to act on and influence the world around it, Deren reveals the screened human form as a piecemeal, illusory abstraction.

This idea introduces a visual trope that characterises the film's subsequent depiction of Deren's presence. She is first revealed as a partial shadow, walking left to right, before approaching the flower in order to pick it up. There is then an unsettling delay between the commencement of the action, as the shadow arm moves, and the eventual arrival of her body.



Situated within a wider tapestry of other shadowy motions (shown in the film's first shot), she is presented as a silhouette, momentarily divorced from her corporeality by the border of the frame. The moment reflects once again the process of a dispossession enacted by film, in its extraction of the visual manifestation of an object from its actual existence in the physical world. The body is removed from materiality, from agency, preceded and pre-empted by its own elongated shadow, melting physical representation into illusion and abstraction. This articulation of Deren's ephemeral insubstantiality in the film is also achieved through the portrayal of her movement. Her nameless heroine is repeatedly unmoored from her contingent orientation in space and time, and denied status as an autonomous, mobile agent within the context of the film environment. Disembodied forces seem to determine and hinder her progress through this world, obliterating any sense of conventional modes of causality or intentionality.

The careful matching of Teiji Ito's ethereal score to events reinforces this effect.¹ In the first cycle of events, prior to the commencement of the overt dream sequence, Deren arrives at the front door of the house. Her hand knocks hard upon its surface and rattles upon the handle, her shadow now serving to emphasise the bounding flow of these actions.

¹ Deren elected to add the score years later in 1959. She became frustrated with critical insistence on psychoanalytic or autobiographical readings of the film and added the music in an attempt to 'depersonalise' the action and emphasise 'ritualistic' form (see Jackson 202)



The soundtrack of plucked strings, however, remains entirely indifferent to the vigorous movements of the woman. She then produces a key from her purse and proceeds to drop it on the floor, and the object bounces away from her down the stairs. Its progress is mimicked by a resounding and repeated thudding sound in the accompanying music, whilst the camera pursues its trajectory, leaving the woman behind. The camera's pursuit of the lost key, reinforced by the use of the soundtrack, challenges the centrality of the woman as the centre of the film's action. Whereas her actions went unheeded by the film's score, the bouncing of the key is stressed by the scene's emphatic percussive accompaniment. This creates the impression that the object possesses greater agency than its human counterpart. The use of slow motion in the depiction of the key's fall also informs us that this world is not subject to effects of gravity in any normative sense, as the key is seen to float gradually down the stairs. The scene thereby both denies the centrality of human presence as an originator of movement, and reinforces the sense of the volatile insubstantiality of the physical within this film world.

Slow motion is also used in relation to Deren's movements as a further means of dispossessing her actions of agency. For instance, in the second cycle of events (the first 'dream' cycle) she is shown ascending the staircase in the home once again. This time, however, her progress is presented in slow motion. Her feet glide sluggishly through the air, emphasising the rhythmical, repetitive symmetry of her movements over their practical function. Her body is divested of its status as a vehicle for the functional traversal of space, undermining the notion of her presence as an autonomous entity within the film environment.

8.1.2 *Bodily Fragmentation*

In addition to emphasising the intangibility of Deren's presence, the film also characterises her as a composite and dispersed entity, disavowing her as a distinct or unified physical whole. This process of fragmentation is initially characterised by a divisive use of framing, which repeatedly withholds her appearance as a complete body. Even in moments that reveal her corporeal presence she is rarely intact, broken

apart by the frame's borders. Fracturing her form in this manner results in the creation of a virtual mode of presence, as parts stand as substitutes for wholes. Never fully belonging to the homogeneity of the spatial environment within the frame, the actuality of her corporeal presence, even prior to the apparent dream sequence, emerges as a vulnerable and fabricated illusion.

The disconnected depiction of the woman initially becomes apparent as the film withholds the arrival of her body proper in the frame for the first four minutes, almost a third of the film's total running time. During this period, she is shown through a series of close-ups that highlight particular areas of her body and emphasise particular gestures or movements, independently of their broader context. Suppressing her body as a whole entity, her physical extremities seem to belong to the series of privileged inanimate objects (the key, the flower, and later a knife) that appear throughout the film. Rather than using close-ups of her face or singling out specific gestures in order to facilitate a sense of interiority or something beyond this surface apparition, Deren is given as a decentred accumulation of discrete fragments. Recalling surrealist distortions of the body, the use of high contrast isolates the whiteness of her hands and feet from the solid black of her clothed torso and legs, amplifying the effect.



The sequence's indirect portrayal of Deren's presence is also manifested through its recurrent use of shadow and silhouette. The partial images of her shadow bring into play a sense of space beyond the boundaries of the frame, undermining the autonomy of the images it contains. For Gilles Deleuze, shadow has an 'anticipatory function', where it acts independently of form, disorientating 'virtual conjunctions'. He argues that shadows 'express an alternative between the state of things itself and the possibility, the virtuality, which goes beyond it' (Deleuze 112). By introducing her image through this use of partial shadow, the film portrays Deren's body not as a discrete character or agent, but as a secondary, illusory surface without substance or permanence. The images that follow also withhold the depiction of her body as the instrument of movement, as her shadow continues to move across the screen in an anticipatory way.



This distortion is present also in the seemingly exaggerated silhouette thrown upon the wall, caused by her large halo of hair and the shape of her figure. Her body seems to unnaturally extend itself in all dimensions. Following her physical introduction, there appears to be little material difference between her actual form, shrouded in black cloth, and her shadow, combined with the innumerable other shadows cast in the frame. This association carries over the sense of physical abstraction established by the opening moments into the remainder of the film, in which Deren appears ‘in the flesh’.

This dispersal of Deren’s presence is complicated still further by the ambiguous use of subjective point of view shots once she has entered the house. The initial jump from the fragmentary disassociations of the prior sequence to a ostensibly first person viewpoint is unsettling, as the film is yet to constitute a tangible individual or subject to which this perspective can be attributed. The film cuts straight from an image of Deren’s feet to the point of view shot, without contextualising the shift in perspective through a close-up on her face. This swing from a decentred image of a fragmented, insubstantial corporeality to an apparently coherent, self-contained subjectivity alludes to the constructed nature of this perspective. Consequently, rather than seeming to inhabit a discrete subjectivity that exists autonomously within the film world, the moment creates the impression that the film is actively generating this illusion of consciousness.

The scene goes on to produce further uncertainty surrounding the use of perspective in the ensuing scene. As Deren’s figure explores the house, the suggestion of a first-person perspective is maintained through the use of a roving handheld camera. However, the apparent evocation of the woman’s subjectivity, generated by this exploratory style, is repeatedly undercut through the incongruous intrusion of Deren’s figure into the frame. She is repeatedly shown to be physically occupying positions which are incompatible with her ostensible location as the subject of the camera’s point of view. As such, her physical presence, which ought to be indirectly assured by the invocation of a first-person perspective, is prised apart from the scene’s portrayal of subjectivity, which is revealed in turn to be a depersonalised standpoint. By

evoking this impression of subjectivity and associating it loosely with Deren, only to then repeatedly challenge this association, the scene undermines any sense of an organised, integrated presence consisting of a discrete physicality and attendant internal consciousness.

Through this strange collision of abstract perspectives, the sequence invokes a picture of a split or non-constituted self that is then developed throughout the latter part of the film. Deren alludes to this when she writes of film time as an arrangement 'of fragments of a permanent incorruptible memory' (Nichols 13), or in terms of its ability to 'accelerate real, natural processes, until they become unreal or abstract' (13). This is manifested in the film through the cyclical doubling of Deren's figure. Multiple versions of her character encounter one another at various stages in the narrative. This layering and proliferation of her presence reveals the fungible border that separates memory from perception and creates a divided, disjunctive presence. The film's disabling or abstraction of Deren's body as an active agent in a determinate environment, earlier performed through the disaggregation of her form, is continued through this multiplication. As well as undermining conventional time/space dialectics, this process facilitates the creation of a fragmented subject. Maria Pramaggiore has argued that the film 'emphasizes the triangular relations of self, other and self image', depicting 'the inseparable and simultaneous nature of the search for an other *and* a self' (Pramaggiore, "Seeing Double" 245). Deren's dreaming unconscious manifests numerous overlapping but non-intersecting versions of her self, repeating the same events with an increasingly doom-laden degree of potency.

This process is staged with particular clarity in a moment depicting Deren's second incarnation observing the progress of the third through a window. As her double begins her journey, pursuing the mysterious figure on the road outside, the earlier Deren gazes blankly, whilst pressing her hand up lightly against the glass. Emphasising the invisible barrier lying between the two, the shot illustrates the simultaneous states of active doer and passive observer that inhibit the constitution of a unique and integrated self. This split is echoed further still through the image's allusion to the process of film viewing, placing the second Deren in the position of voyeur to the actions of the third. Elizabeth Bruss has described this process in the following manner: 'the perceiver can never hope to catch a glimpse of himself; the figure that he sees before him on the screen cannot be his own, for he is somewhere else watching it' (Bruss 308). Deren's film uses the medium's capacity to abstract the body from both its image and its physical integrity in order to express this division

between an unseen, inert spectator and a discrete, functional agent. By abstracting Deren's presence (and the material world in general) through devices of ephemerality, fragmentation and multiplicity, *Meshes of the Afternoon* troubles the constitution of a unified subject, revealing the illusory status of the representation of action and agency on film.

8.2 Corporeal Continuity: *At Land*

Unlike *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land*'s heroine remains alone and undivided until the final sequence. Throughout the film she traverses a disjunctive series of non-contingent environments, with the continuity of her bodily movements providing the only fixed point within an otherwise volatile and capricious world. Deren has pointed to this idea herself: 'through dislocations in space and time [*At Land*] creates a relativistic universe in which the individual alone is a continuous identity' (Deren 247). This unpredictable journey is fashioned through Deren's disjunctive use of montage. Whereas her previous film's generally continuous editing style allowed for the uncanny, seamless coincidence of multiple selves, here montage is used to jarringly detach the flow of movement from its anchoring in linear space.

The differences between the two films do not end there. Where *Meshes* presented a fragmented and ephemeral central figure with an ever-fracturing point of view, *At Land* constructs a protagonist whose bodily integrity and perceptual perspective form its only sources of structure and continuity. *At Land* posits a type of film space that only makes sense and coheres on the condition of Deren's corporeal inhabitation of it; it is by virtue of her continuous physical engagement with the film's disjunctive sequence of changeable environments that its narrative emerges. The construction of Deren's bodily movements through montage creates *At Land*'s form, establishing an embodied perspective for the film as its spaces are sutured together solely via her corporeal involvement with them. Her contact with the world around her is presented exclusively in terms of her bodily contingency on her external environment, thereby subverting any sense of agency or interiority.

In this respect, *At Land*'s production of Deren's presence echoes some of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on the relationship between the body and the external world. He proposes that we can only access or conceive of external space as embodied subjects: 'Our body is not like things; it inhabits or haunts space...' The body is for Merleau-Ponty the absolute precondition for our perception of and contact with space:

The ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in the object, the situation of the body in the face of its tasks...’ (Merleau Ponty 100-102).

At Land dramatises this idea of the body as the ‘first coordinates’ through which space is perceived and traversed by aligning itself structurally with Deren’s bodily experiences. Rather than using conventional editing techniques to construct an objective or extrinsic spatial environment into which she enters as a discrete, distinct variable, the film’s creation of space occurs simultaneously alongside its portrayal of Deren’s corporeal discoveries of it.

The first part of the film focuses solely on representing the woman’s bodily encounters with a volatile and discontinuous external world. As such, the film undermines our sense of woman’s agency, as she is presented purely in terms of her passive responses to her environment’s inscrutable fluctuations. Rather than assuming an active or participatory stance in relation to the world around her, she is shown traversing space insentiently, driven by an instinctive bodily forward momentum.

The film establishes a depersonalised engagement with the external world in its first part by transplanting Deren’s body from place to place as she passively reorients herself to each new environment. She does not assert her presence as an individual onto her surroundings (until the film’s inverting climax) as she participates in the world around her without actively adopting a stance towards it. The figure presented is not a being who makes decisions or who is possessed of any recognisable sense of agency based on conventional causal spatial relations. Instead, she moves through space as a passive entity without affirming her own presence within the world around her.

Deren’s bodily performance reflects these ideas of passivity and receptivity. Initially, her figure is shown to submit to all the vicissitudes that take place around her. Her actions are determined by the inscrutable fluctuations of the external world. As such, her corporeality depicts a constant physical struggle with her indifferent environment as she attempts to orientate herself. Another dimension of significance is added to this process, as the implacable and capricious world of the film is also characterised as being a distinctly social one, with a particular emphasis on male and female interactions. The film’s male figures are presented as indifferent, anonymous

and even sinister. She is shown crawling along a dinner table during an upper-class social gathering surrounded by rotund cigar-smoking men, or chatting to a male figure who changes form each time she looks up at him.

However, as the film progresses to its conclusion, she begins to assume a more active role in her engagement with the world. This rejection of her earlier state of passivity is represented through her recovery of the chess piece, which she liberates from the board and runs away with victoriously. This shift in the nature of her engagement with the world is once again constructed through montage. Her flight with the queen is punctuated by encounters with her past selves from earlier in the film, symbolising the dawning of a self-reflective, active consciousness. No longer limited to the realm of immediate sensation, her assumption of the chess-piece and the recurrence of her past experiences points to a newly formed self-awareness and drive towards self-determination.

The film traces the development of its heroine's consciousness from the depersonalised realm of sensory perception through to the dawning of self-reflexivity through the manner of its depiction of her bodily movement through space and physical engagement with the external world. This progression is characterised as a shift from passive sensory acceptance to active fully conscious resistance.

One of the devices the film employs to create an impression of Deren's initial passivity involves using various editing techniques in order to displace agency away from her and onto the external world. The first instance of this device occurs in the film's opening sequence. The episode also illustrates yet another difference between *At Land* and its predecessor in terms of the invocation of their shared motif of the ocean. *Meshes of the Afternoon* concludes with an image of Deren's lifeless, soaked body, splayed over the chair in which she slept, covered in shards of mirror and seaweed. The ultimate dissolution and fragmentation of the heroine's subjectivity is represented by the loss of her body to the sea. Turning this idea on its head with a punning title (she is lost *At Land* rather than at sea) begins with shots of the tumultuous churning waves of an ocean. These images convey a sense of the power and volatility of the supposedly inanimate external world.

Cutting to the beach, Deren's body is shown violently washing up onto the sand. Thrown from side to side, she appears almost lifeless as a rapid series of close-ups depict her being tossed helplessly onto the shore. Following this, the sea appears to deliberately retreat from the beached woman, as the movements of its waves are shown in reverse. The tide seems to turn back on itself, giving the waves the ap-

pearance of physically pulling away from Deren's body. Maria Pramaggiore has understood this moment as Deren inverting the relationship between 'the human as subject and the sea as passive object' (Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona" 30). Consequently, the film immediately calls into question the agency of the woman, as rather than acting on or in her environment, the environment acts upon her.



Pramaggiore's reading echoes Deren's own description of the moment, as she refers to the woman watching 'the sea desert her with inactive longing, accepting the sand which, as she dries off, slowly collects around her' (Clark et al. 174). The film stresses the woman's sensory yet passive experience of the world, showing her in close-up looking towards the sea, which is then shown to be recoiling in a reverse-shot.

Her lack of self-determination in the face of the unpredictable manoeuvrings of the outside world is developed in a similar manner a little later in the film. The female protagonist, crawling up onto driftwood on the beach, suddenly finds herself beneath a dinner table in a luxuriant dining room. A point of view shot pans down from pointing upwards the ceiling, revealing chandeliers hanging above a crowd of well-dressed men smoking cigarettes and talking avidly to one another. Deren peeks meekly out at this novel environment from her position crouched beneath the table.



The cavernous and busy environment appears oppressive and cramped as she squats submissively. Her expression is blank and unreadable as she looks from side to side, taking in her new surroundings passively. Looking dead on towards the end of the table, she begins to slide smoothly along the tablecloth without raising her hand or chin. She appears to be feeling her way with her body, following the direction of her gaze. The proximity of the camera to her face and hand underscores the tactility of this movement, emphasising her sensory experience of her environment

whilst her blank facial expression gives no clues as to any interior processes. This attentiveness to her bodily engagement with her surroundings continues, as she is shown climbing up onto the table. Another close-up reveals her knees sliding slowly along the surface of the tablecloth. This once again underscores the tactility of her engagement with her external environment.



Her trajectory here follows her initial progress straight up along the driftwood on the beach. Rather than altering her course or behaviour in response to this new environment, she continues to follow the path of least resistance, crawling straight down the tabletop, seemingly heedless of her new occupied surroundings.

The scene underscores her passive and indiscriminating experience of her physical environment still further. Awkwardly pushing herself along the surface, she is suddenly seen to be crawling through dense vegetation outside. Groping through the leafy undergrowth, her gaze remains fixed straight ahead of her before another cut locates her back on top of the table. Deren's facial expression and physical attitude betray no alteration as she is displaced from one locale to the next. Despite obvious differences between the two spaces, she experiences them as continuous due to the uninterrupted flow of her movement and unbroken sensory experience. By maintaining a similar camera angle across its numerous cuts from place to place, the episode creates an impression of a smooth current of bodily movement across spaces. The world around her fluctuates independently without her assuming any active or conscious responses to it.

The scene also emphasises Deren's passivity by withholding any acknowledgment of her presence by other characters within the film. As she continues to crawl along, the people around her remain indifferent to or unaware of her. She too fails to look up from her intent forward-looking gaze to pay any heed to her numerous companions. The shots that do depict the diners seated along the table as she slides past them are clearly disassociated from her forward looking perspective through the use of a different side on camera angle. As such, the scene emphasises both her own lack of awareness of her surroundings outside of her tactile experience of them, as

well as the external world's indifference to her. She behaves and is presented as a passive recipient of the world around her and not as an active participant.

Deren's disempowered position within the external world is developed further once she reaches the end of her journey across the tabletop. Coming to halt in front of a chessboard, she is shown watching a group of the diners say their goodbyes. Her face remains blank as she mutely watches their exchanges. Discovering a chessboard, she gazes at it intently as the pieces begin to move independently of any human hand. The coming together and going apart of the pieces reflect the movements of the people around her, as their delineated and regulated social interactions contrast with her own visceral and tactile encounters with the external world. Clearly intrigued by these structured movements, she is shown in close-up as her eyes track the movements of each of the pieces closely. Once again, the world around Deren seems to exert a power over her as she appears entranced by the game taking place before her as her gaze parallels the unfolding chess game. Sliding smoothly across the board, the pieces' movements, from black square to white square, recall Deren's own journey across the table that took her from dining hall to forest, from the natural world to the cultural as one cut leads to the next. Mirroring her own disempowerment within a world characterised by disjunction and volatility, the chessboard illustrates her own state of passivity and inaction in the world around her. Like the pieces on the board, her movements are determined by inscrutable external forces. By foregrounding Deren's figure's bodily experiences of a capricious and volatile world, the film undermines any sense of her agency or interiority as she is swept along continually from one space to the next.

8.3 Dispersing Action: *Ritual in Transfigured Time*

This chapter's discussion of Deren's approach to the body has so far focused on her films' use of technical devices to depersonalise movement and fragment physicality. Her 1945 film *Ritual in Transfigured Time* continues to draw upon some of these techniques, such as the use of slow motion and jump cuts between non-contiguous environments connected by the performer's motility. However, unlike its predecessors, its emphasis falls more explicitly on the use and style of choreography across multiple bodies. In addition to emphasising the ephemerality of the film image and drawing upon the fragmenting properties of montage as vehicles for disrupting the construction of coherent bodies and identities, *Ritual* employs the interaction

between figures in space (and across time) as a means of unnerving autonomy and subverting agency.

Deren's approach to screen choreography in this film differs greatly from the more abstract forms of movement explored in some of her later work. For instance, *Meditation on Violence* (1948) depicts martial artist Cho-Lin Chi performing various styles of Chinese boxing alone against a white wall. *The Very Eye of Night* (1959) presents a number of dancers, filmed in negative, as ghostly semi-transparent apparitions drifting across a black firmament. In *Ritual*, however, the types of actions and gestures portrayed by the performers belong to a more familiar, quotidian register. This is particularly true of the first part of the film, which takes domestic spaces as backdrops for the depiction of various rituals of social interaction. However, rather than looking to reveal interiority through these gestural expressions, the movements of the film's volatile protagonists are presented in terms of their qualitative and rhythmical dimensions; excessive expressivity and emphatic repetitions eschew any sense of functionality or intention. Gesture is given the liminal status of ritual, and so becomes another means of circumventing causality or individuation by dispersing action across multiple bodies.

In addition to drawing on devices of slow motion, repetition and freeze frames, *Ritual* also strives to dismantle functional or referential forms of movement by dispersing action across different bodies. However fragmented or disenfranchised Deren's persona in *Meshes of the Afternoon* or *At Land* becomes, there is still a unifying and distinct body image at the centre of the films from which their narrative cycles can spiral. *Ritual Transfigured in Time's* introductory sequence dislodges Deren's body from its role as the sole organising principles of the films' narrative structures, by creating a pattern of doubling in which separate bodies merge together at the same time as remaining distinct. In so doing, Deren's film presents movement as a force which intercedes object and subject relations, 'as an event which is not independent of bodies but is independent of any one body' (Pramaggiore, "Performance and Persona" 27).

Ritual in Transfigured Time attempts to unmoor its gestures from their referential or representative status and their basis as actions performed by individual agents. Taking familiar scenarios of the everyday as the basis for much of its choreography, the film transforms the performers' movements into abstract, ritualised forms of bodily expression. Dispersing actions across numerous physicalities, gestures are used as a vehicle to fracture and multiply identities. Deren has written that the film is 'held

together' by this 'consistent mode of movement common to a variety of individuals who are...used as interchangeable variables within a consistent pattern created by the film instrument' (Brannigan 114). As such, the structural and compositional organisation of *Ritual* serves to subsume the individual, distending their actions into a broader, more abstract conception of the movement of the film as a whole, flouting the confining stasis of individual identity.

8.3.1 *Dispersing Persona*

Numerous critics have highlighted the doubling of the female protagonists at the centre of the film as an example of Deren's preoccupation with an aesthetic of depersonalisation. Carrying over the figure of the double or doppelgänger from her earlier work, the film's splitting of its protagonist figure is complicated further through the division of the role across (at least) two separate performers. Rather than employing technical devices to fragment an identity across multiple copies of an identical body, the film disperses a single persona over two clearly distinct, separate performers. Whilst there is a passing resemblance between the individuals in question (Maya Deren and Rita Christiani) in terms of their hair and costume, the obvious differences between the pair nevertheless underscore the film's efforts to depersonalise its performers and strip them of autonomy or individuated agency. Furthermore, the blurring of identity across distinct bodies suggests a rejection of the ossification of the self, brought about by conventional subject/object relations.

Matches on action are explicitly used in the film's final moments, seamlessly linking the figure of Rita Christiani to Deren's presence and drawing a direct association between the pair. However, the film begins to allude to connection between the two women long before this explicit correlation occurs. Deren's use of collaborative, repetitive action complicates the film's presentation of the relation between the two women from the first. The first sequence in the film depicts a domestic scenario in which the two women work together to wind a ball of wool. As the scene progresses, this action creates an umbilical tie between the pair, as they are swept along by the rhythmical momentum of their task. The process of winding the thread seems to take possession of both of the women's physicalities, in addition to framing the introduction of the film's third female figure, played by Anais Nin. The women of the scene are sutured together through their physical and visual ties to the performance of this action.

As the film begins, Deren is shown sitting down alone behind a doorway on

the left of the frame. She takes up a length of wool, and stretching it between her palms, begins to rhythmically move her arms up and down in a rocking motion so as to keep the cord straight whilst another unseen individual presumably gathers it into a ball. Her smiling, absorbed expression seems to allude to the presence of this other figure, either absent or else obscured by the frame of the door. Her gesture, isolated within the darkness surrounding the doorway, is presented without any clear sense of context or purpose, thereby highlighting its rhythmical and qualitative dimensions.



Rita Christiani's figure then steps into the foreground of the frame. There is then an alternation between a medium shot of Deren, still rocking her arms up and down behind the open doorway, and a close-up of Christiani stretching her arm towards her co-protagonist. The pair wear virtually identical costumes.



Christiani's steady extension of her arm in Deren's direction alludes to a magnetic force of attraction between the two. Her hair and scarf are suddenly animated by a strong wind emanating from Deren's direction. A reverse shot returns to Deren; her rocking arm movement is now accompanied by the rolling of her head from side to side, allowing her hair to toss freely around her shoulders. The action is presented in slow motion, emphasising its bounding, repetitive qualities. Underscoring of the momentum of her physicality, this creates the impression that it is these movements that generate the wind that animates Christiani's figure. Despite the lack of tangible or physical association between them at this point, the same kinetic energy animates both of their bodies. Consequently, before the two women occupy the same spatial plane, they are already connected. The connection between the two women is also elaborated upon through the use of composition. As Christiani begins to move towards the door, she takes an unexpected path through the empty parallel entrance

way. Whilst this may seem to counter the idea of a force of attraction between the two women, the movement creates a strong sense of balance within the frame. Rather than approaching Deren straight on in a confrontational manner as one agent physically addressing another, the parallel positioning suggests a mirroring between the two women.



This echoing of one another's placement within the frame continues following a cut to reveal the environment behind the doorway for the first time. Christiani's outstretched hand is shown in extreme close-up in the foreground. The hand's diagonal placement within the frame visually echoes the positioning of Deren's own hands. The hand's mobile trajectory, followed slowly by the camera, builds anticipation as it gradually traverses the room. Its abstracted status within the frame furthers this suspenseful tone, as her fingers linger hesitantly in the foreground, waiting to make contact with its inevitable target. Deren too appears to be in stasis; silent and motionless she awaits the arrival of this hand to complete a broken circuit and allow her action to continue. The arrangement of the two women's hands, with their open palms facing one another, and the suspenseful tone of this shot foreshadow their shared gestural futures as they are each implicated in the other's posture.



Cutting to a reverse shot, Christiani is then shown framed within the loop of yarn wrapped around Deren's hands. Prior to physically joining in with this winding of the wool, Christiani is visually encapsulated by the postural performance of this action through her positioning within the frame. Her image is bordered in terms of the gestural orientation of her counterpart.



Prior to taking her place in the chair beside Deren to complete the action, a point of view shot from Christiani's perspective pans from Deren's expectant face to the end of the thread, placed carefully on a stool. However, the subsequent reverse shot undermines the assumption that that this viewpoint belongs to Christiani. Rather than looking in the direction of the empty seat, Christiani is shown gazing directly forwards, still walking steadily. Only then is she seen to look down at the thread. This use of a disembodied, anticipatory perspective entertains the possibility of character interiority, only to then refute it. Instead of asserting the existence of individual subjectivities within this environment, it inversely creates a sense of pre-determination and inevitability, abstractly linking the two women together.

As Christiani takes her seat opposite Deren, the two women are then rhythmically conjoined in the collaborative process of winding the yarn. As Deren, shown from behind in the foreground, rocks her arms from side to side, Christiani simultaneously winds her hands to gather the thread. Their actions compliment one another, as they become linked together in gestural symbiosis.

The qualitative elements of this moment are underlined by the use of slow motion, which draws out the rhythmical aspects of Deren's movement. This action is performed outside of conventional narrative space-time, occupying the liminal temporality of ritual.

Despite the continuity of motion between the women, the scene then goes on to separate them spatially through a series of shot and reverse shots. They are also lit very differently within their respective environments. Christiani, shown sitting side on to the camera, mutely and passively inhabits a grey shadowless space, whereas Deren, brightly lit from the front and blasted by a strong wind, chatters energetically away to herself within a windy darkness. Their physical composites also belong to contrasting expressive registers: one neutral and submissive, the other dynamic and expansive. Whilst the action of winding the wool maintains a physical, rhythmical relation, the scene also seems to take pains to orchestrate a sense of separation or difference between the pair. This serves to complicate the film's constructions of

identities still further, as it entertains the possibility of difference within its presentation of shared gestural characters.

This ambiguity is compounded following the introduction of a third figure within the room. Christiani, still winding the yarn, is shown in close-up turning her head over her shoulder to look back in the direction she came from. A cut then reveals Anais Nin standing in the doorway through which she entered. Nin then also turns her head, following Christiani's gaze out of the door and into the space beyond. Cutting back, Christiani is then shown turning her head back towards Deren. The smoothness of the head movements across the two women created by this cutting pattern once again implies a connection or identification between the women. As the wool spinning continues, the composition of the shot mirrors the earlier arrangement in which Christiani was framed by the loop between Deren's fingers. Only now it is Nin's face that is intermittently bordered by the circle of thread, before disappearing behind Deren's rotating arms. This visual repetition further connects the figures to one another.



All three women are sutured together by the repetitive, collaborative action of winding the wool. Unlike the identical doppelgängers of her previous two films, here there is no sense of a foundational, dreaming self from which copies can splinter. *Persona* is spread across three distinctive bodies through the portrayal of this communal gesture.

8.3.2 *Gestural Contagion*

One of the means through which Deren achieves this subversion of consistent or autonomous identities is through the transference of movement across multiple bodies. Rather than presenting gesture in terms of intention or causality, it emerges in the film as a vehicle for interrelation between figures, producing 'multiplied and fragmented film protagonists' (Pramaggiore, "[Performance and Persona](#)" 19). Following the wool-winding episode, Christiani's figure arrives into a party environment where pleasantries are frenziedly exchanged. In the ensuing scene, numerous individuals enact familiar gestures of greetings as they draw close to one another before part-

ing ways. However, these movements take on a quality of expressive autonomy in the scene, as their intense repetitiveness and brevity causes one instance to blend seamlessly into another. Through their undifferentiated fluidity the actions assume a circuit of significance that resides outside of any familiar systems that would explicate them.

The scene opens with a number of freeze-frames that momentarily bring the flurry of activity in the room to halt. The device serves to abstract their gestural performances still further, as their figures are distilled into a purely imagistic rendering of this greeting action. Arms outstretched into the centre of the frame, the figures appear as anonymous ciphers standing for the image of gesture, as distinct from its meaningful enactment.



The remainder of the scene is orchestrated around the coming together and pulling apart of individuals within the crowded room. Shot after shot depicts these figures smilingly approaching once another with their hands raised in a gesture of greeting before moving onto to their next partner. The flurry of movement and the large number of performers within the each shot create an impression of a depersonalised form of interaction. Differentiating characters and following the development of their exchanges becomes impossible, as the scene does not trace the progress of any of the figures from one shot to the next. Continuity is manifested through the transference of this gestural activity from one body to another, and not the preservation of a particular individual's physical trajectory.



The corporeal performances of the characters stress this depersonalisation still further. Their reaching hands and criss-crossing eye lines seem to be aimed at no one in particular, as they randomly bounce from one partner to another. Figures

are shown in close-up talking intently to unseen partners who are left unidentified beyond the borders of the frame.



The interchangeableness of the characters is stated overtly midway through the scene, as Christiani walks into the frame in order to greet a male figure. A disjunctive jump cut then reveals the same situation, taking place in the same spatial locale, only with a different man. Second later, the original man has returned as Christiani bids him farewell and leaves the frame. The effect of replacing her partner midway through their gestural transaction underlines the abstraction of movement from bodily specificity and agency still further.



Rather than seeking to discover any authentically communicative function within these gestures, the scene strives to evacuate them of social meanings by accentuating or dissecting their rhythmical and physical organisations. By depersonalising gesture in this manner, the film destabilises the notion of coherent bodily identities.

Deren's later films, such as *The Very Eye of Night* (1958), take this preoccupation with the depersonalisation of film presence to an even further extreme by superimposing the negative image of dancers onto abstract or virtual environments. Each of the films discussed in this chapter, however, draw on more conventional narrative environments in their portrayals of divided or unconstituted psyches. By abstracting the materiality of bodily presence, asserting the corporeal experience of space in order to subvert interiority and dispersing gesture across multiple figures, the works dissolve the actions and the agency of their performers into the broader choreography of the films' motion.

9 Conclusion

This thesis shows that female presence is an important dramatic and stylistic concern of films. Unlike many previous studies of the representation of women on film, it has demonstrated how the narrative and aesthetic exploration of female characters can create varied and complex meanings. Refuting the tendency to view female presence as a by-product of the general cultural or ontological conditions of film expression, it has shown how the films discussed in each chapter invoke and investigate the subject as a crucial element of their dramas. Furthermore, the thesis has not limited the types of significance that these films may achieve in accordance with their style, genre, or the circumstances of their production. Instead, it has demonstrated that exemplary and richly realised instances of this thematic preoccupation may be found in a stylistically and historically diverse array of films. By accounting for the *distinctive intricacies* of particular films' explorations of female presence, the thesis has shown the importance of this subject for film, and illuminated the variety of meaning that has been achieved through its numerous and disparate invocations.

The first chapter defined the thesis's understanding of female film presence by examining the different ways that it has been neglected or minimised within other theoretical approaches. It shows how commitments to rigidly defined understandings of film convention or of the film medium have limited or skewed critics' interpretations of characters and films. For example, psychoanalytic feminist critics belie the diversity and depth of meaning found in Hollywood portrayals of women by insisting on the reductive and hegemonic influence of patriarchal ideology. Later chapters, such as 'Artifice' and 'Projection', showed how particular films may actively probe and challenge the ideas which are central to these writers' limiting assumptions around the position of women in Hollywood film, such as 'spectacle' or 'excess'. For example, the second chapter argues that the spectacular artifice of three characters played by Marlene Dietrich is variously developed and affirmed as a defining feature of their uncompromising independence and self-determination. Additionally, in the fourth chapter the visual and physical 'excess' of Marylee Hadley is shown to be a stylistic manifestation of her character's isolated and alienated state *within* the film's fiction, rather than a symptom of the film's rhetorical failure to properly articulate female subjectivity.

Several recent feminist critics draw on the work of philosophers such as Luce Irigaray and Michelle LeDoeuff to account for more productive or fulfilled depictions of women on film. However, while these critics focus on the achievement of a specifically feminine form of subjectivity as a criterion for the assessment of film, this thesis claimed that success in depicting a female character should not be judged solely in terms of the prominence given to expressions of her interiority. As shown in several of the chapters, but most especially in ‘Assimilation’ and ‘Evasion’, a film may withhold the direct expression of a character’s internal states in its portrayal of her presence for a variety of stylistically and thematically pertinent reasons. *Midnight* does so in order to develop the comedy and the drama of its central character’s assimilative surface appearance. The three Fassbinder films discussed by the later chapter draw on different strategies to avoid the direct expression of interiority in order to reveal the destabilising effects of trauma.

The final part of the opening chapter explored the work of writers who have attempted to redress the perceived neglect of the roles of bodily affect and materiality in film. The chapter argued that these critics overstate the significance of these aspects by understanding them to be definitive for the medium and claiming that the physical dimension of an image’s content supersedes all other aspects of film expression. The thesis has further demonstrated the limitations of this understanding of the medium, showing that the depiction of physical intensity on film can have very particular meanings depending on the manner and context of its execution. This is apparent, for example, in the discussion of the dance sequences in *Written on the Wind* or *Lola*. The chapters ‘Obscurity’ and ‘Depersonalisation’ build on this to illustrate how films have *meaningfully* suppressed the bodily dimensions of film presence.

The second chapter examines three films starring Marlene Dietrich that have been repeatedly misread for this very reason. It showed how the films explore the role of ‘Artifice’ in their depictions of their respective female characters, and challenged previous readings that have tended to view Dietrich’s performances in terms of a rhetorical detachment from their fictional environments. For example, the dynamic achieved through the use of framing in the opening scene of *Morocco* contradicts readings of Amy Jolly as a two-dimensional fetish object, by showing how this status is imposed upon her by other characters *within* the film. Cutting her face out of the shot and framing La Bessière as he picks up her scattered belongings at her feet, Amy Jolly’s subtle bodily gestures of insulation and reluctance are emphasised while the intrusiveness of his figure is underscored. *Shanghai Express* uses a different sort

of framing to stage and refute the reductive judgements of its central female character, as the borders of a train window are drawn upon to visually stage and challenge the two-dimensional assessment of her character as the notorious escort 'Shanghai Lily'—the object of scurrilous gossip and moralistic contempt. While discussing her past and reputation with her ex-fiancée, Lily moves from pointedly staging her presence within the window in the manner of a static tableau to provocatively crossing its boundaries, obscuring and complicating her figure within the frame. *Blonde Venus* reveals the authenticity of its protagonist's glamorous showgirl persona by juxtaposing parallel scenes, in which she tells her son the same bedtime story. In the first scene, she is characterised by a flatness and frustration, but in the second (following her resumption of her career on the stage), she takes on a greater stylistic animation and intensity, as the adoption of her glamorous persona allows her to become a more expressively fulfilled presence. There is a shared thematic concern with revealing and refuting the suspicion with which glamorous or performing women are regarded. Where other characters, and numerous critics, simplistically associate stylised surface with a lack of sincerity or depth, this chapter strived to show how it is used to define the independence and individuality of Dietrich's heroines.

The third chapter examines Mitchell Leisen's *Midnight* and its consideration of female presence in terms of 'Assimilation'. Rather than exploring the troubled relationship between artifice and depth, the chapter shows that the film carefully divests Colbert's presence of cumulatively developed characterisation in order to focus exclusively on her constantly changing and reactive surface appearance. In its early scenes, the film exploits the visual absurdity of having its very striking star (wearing a gleaming silver dress) attempt to blend into a party unseen as a vehicle for comedic effect. The frequent use of medium shots and wide shots highlights her prominence within her environments (despite her attempts to remain discreet) and depicts her often awkward struggle to negotiate her position and control her appearance in relation to the surrounding characters. Given the complete absence of any backstory for her character, the film develops its drama and comedy exclusively through the depiction of her improvisational assimilations. Like the films discussed in 'Artifice', *Midnight* takes up the dynamic between the protagonist's negotiation of her presence and other characters' perceptions of her as its principal dramatic and stylistic concern. However, instead of using artifice as a vehicle for the expression of individuality and depth, it uses it to create a tightly woven comedy of changeable and fragile surface appearances.

Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* presents an inversion of the capacity for assimilative responsiveness. The forcefulness of Marylee Hadley's assertions of her presence alienates her within the world of the film, revealing her state of psychological estrangement. The film contrasts her extensive physicality with a frequent compositional emphasis on her isolation or confinement. It tightly frames her figure, and often shows her through doors or windows or reflected in mirrors, spatially detaching her presence from the areas occupied by other characters. Within these insulated arrangements, her reaching gestures and hyperbolic comportment appear all the more intense and seem to viscerally strive to provoke or elicit recognition. Cutting her off from her broader environment, this use of framing dramatises the alienating and destructive effects of her attempts to urgently impress her presence onto her surroundings and the film's other characters.

The next chapter proceeds to examine another approach to the portrayal of emotional displacement and frustrated presence in three films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss*, and *Lola* explore different means of evading the direct expression of emotional trauma through their stylistic depictions of their female characters. Maria represses both the disappearance of her husband and the subsequent failure of her marriage following his sudden return and discovery of her infidelity, transferring her emotional energy into constant bodily movement. Her initial discovery of his death instigates a compulsive perpetual momentum which characterises her presence throughout the remainder of the film. Veronika Voss is depicted in terms of a retreat from presence, as her brittle physicality cripples her body's expressive power, while the film simultaneously effaces her pale image within the starkness of its white environments. Lola inverts this withdrawal, expelling any trace of shock or emotional turmoil following the exposure of her false identity. Her presence is viscerally saturated with chaotic expression through Barbara Sukowa's exaggerated performance style, her wild movements, and the heightened portrayal of her figure through artificial costume and lighting. Each film explores the evasion of trauma through the stylistic realisation of its female lead's expressively thwarted presence.

The following chapter shows that this circumvention of presence can be taken even further. *Madame De...* creates meaning through the changing significance of its central character's obscurity. Initially, the film presents Louise in terms of her constant motion towards and away from the also frequently mobile camera, making her elusive within the frame. Furthermore, within the film's many wide-shots her

modishly dressed figure is often blurred into the densely packed décor of the mise-en-scène. This depiction of her elusiveness conveys her character's confident and successful integration within her surroundings, while also pointing to how her virtuosic conformity may efface the vividness and individuality of her presence. Later in the film, however, her obscurity is not produced through rapid fluency of movement or the absorption of her figure within her environment, but through a retreat from visibility that signals her alienation from her social world, reaching its culmination with her unseen and anticlimactic death. The film's conclusion meaningfully evokes her absent state, using repeated camera movement to retrace her now ghostly trajectories from earlier in the film and presenting her earrings as an open-ended emblem for her character and her fate. The drama of Louise's character, and concurrent drama of the film, is accomplished through the meaningful advancement of her obscurity.

In the final chapter, three short films by Maya Deren are shown to detach their depictions of presence from individual bodies or characters, in order to use them to express more abstract concepts and themes. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren disengages the surface appearance of her body from its corporeal basis. She achieves this, for example, through her use of slow motion, which divests gestures and movements of bodily agency. *At Land* uses montage to disempower its central figure, transplanting her from one environment to another with no sense of spatial continuity outside of her own physical trajectory. Finally, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* disperses gestures across different bodies to call the individuality of the performers into question. Each of these films abstracts the presence of their female performers from their associations with a particular body or character, eschewing notions of conventional identity in order to achieve a depersonalised form of film expression.

In its efforts to draw out the unfolding sophistications of specific films in detail, the thesis is not able to assert a single definition of the role or function of female presence in film. Instead, the discussion of each of these films has enabled it to reveal how female presence has been a crucial feature in the accomplishment of stylistically and thematically distinct examples of the medium. Rather than being the passive locus of abstract theoretical claims, the expressive portrayal of female characters has been shown to be a fruitful and variegated element of film expression. Accounting for the specific design of the different films, it has offered an appreciation of the diversity and complexity of meaning that films have achieved around this subject.

Filmography

- A Study in Choreography for Camera*. Director Maya Deren. Maya Deren, 1945.
- Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)*. Director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. With Brigitte Mira and El Hedi ben Salem. Filmverlag der Autoren : Tango Film, 1974.
- At Land*. Director Maya Deren. With John Cage and Maya Deren. Maya Deren, 1945.
- Blonde Venus*. Director Josef von Sternberg. With Marlene Dietrich and Cary Grant. Paramount Pictures, 1932.
- Duel in the Sun*. Director King Vidor. With Jennifer Jones, Joseph Cotten, and Gregory Peck. Selznick Studio, 1946.
- Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Director Howard Hawks. With Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1953.
- Goodfellas*. Director Martin Scorsese. With Robert De Niro, Ray Liotta, Joe Pesci, and Lorraine Bracco. Warner Bros., 1990.
- Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Director Max Ophüls. With Joan Fontaine and Louis Jourdan. Universal Pictures, 1948.
- Lola*. Director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. With Barbara Sukowa and Armin Mueller-Stahl. Rialto Film, Trio Film, and Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), 1981.
- Lost in Translation*. Director Sofia Coppola. With Scarlett Johansson and Bill Murray. Focus Features, 2003.
- Love is Colder than Death (Lieber ist kälter als der Tod)*. Director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. With Ulli Lommel and Hanna Schygulla. Eine X Film GmbH and Co Produktion des Antiteater München, 1969.
- Madame de...* Director Max Ophüls. With Charles Boyer, Danielle Darrieux, and Vittorio De Sica. Gaumont, 1953.
- Madame X*. Director David Lowell Rich. With Lana Turner, John Forsythe, and Ricardo Montalban. Universal Pictures, 1966.
- Meditation on Violence*. Director Maya Deren. With Chao Li Chi. American Federation of Arts, 1948.
- Meshes of the Afternoon*. Director Maya Deren and Alexander Hamid. With Maya Deren and Alexander Hamid. Maya Deren, 1943.

- Midnight*. Director Mitchell Leisen. With Claudette Colbert, Don Ameche, and John Barrymore. Paramount Pictures, 1939.
- Morocco*. Director Josef von Sternberg. With Marlene Dietrich, Gary Cooper, and Adolphe Menjou. Paramount Pictures, 1930.
- Pather Panchali*. Director Satyajit Ray. With Kanu Bannerjee, Karuna Bannerjee, and Chunibala Devi. Government of West Bengal, 1958.
- Ritual in Transfigured Time*. Director Maya Deren. With Rita Christiani, Maya Deren, Anaïs Nin, Frank Westbrook, and Gore Vidal. American Federation of Arts, 1946.
- Shanghai Express*. Director Josef von Sternberg. With Marlene Dietrich, Clive Brook, and Ann May Wong. Paramount Pictures, 1932.
- Stella Dallas*. Director King Vidor. With Barbara Stanwyck, John Boles, and Anne Shirley. United Artists, 1937.
- The Age of Innocence*. Director Martin Scorsese. With Daniel Day-Lewis and Michelle Pfeiffer. Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1993.
- The Devil Is a Woman*. Director Josef von Sternberg. With Marlene Dietrich, Lionel Atwill, and Edward Everett Horton. Paramount Pictures, 1935.
- The Furies*. Director Anthony Mann. With Barbara Stanwyck, Wendell Core, and Walter Huston. Paramount Pictures, 1950.
- The Lady Eve*. Director Preston Sturges. With Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda. Paramount Pictures, 1941.
- The Marriage of Maria Braun (Die Ehe der Maria Braun)*. Director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. With Hanna Schygulla and Klaus Löwitsch. United Artists, 1979.
- The Piano*. Director Jane Campion. With Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel, and Sam Neill. Miramax Films, 1993.
- The Scarlet Empress*. Director Josef von Sternberg. With Marlene Dietrich, John Lodge, and Sam Jaffe. Paramount Pictures, 1934.
- The Seven Year Itch*. Director Billy Wilder. With Marilyn Monroe and Tom Ewell. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1955.
- The Very Eye of Night*. Director Maya Deren. With Don Freisinger, Richard Sandifer, and Patricia Ferrier. American Federation of Arts, 1959.
- Veronika Voss (Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss)*. Director Rainer Werner Fassbinder. With Hilmar Thate, Rosel Zech, and Peter Marthesheimer. Filmverlag der Autoren, 1981.
- Vertigo*. Director Alfred Hitchcock. With James Stewart and Kim Novak. Paramount Pictures, 1958.

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