

Myopic Conflict: Documentary Ecologies of Violence

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explicate three films that trouble the well-examined distinction between fact and fiction in contemporary depictions of violence. *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008), *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), and *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007) complement each other, as all three films are examples of contemporary hybrids of documentary and fiction that agitate prevailing attitudes held toward non-fiction representations of violence. By adopting a critical methodology termed ‘media ecology,’ this project attempts to think about media environments that affect ‘patterns, dangers, and potentials’ while considering the agency exerted by contemporary images of warfare and the ethics of spectatorship.

Cette thèse considère trois films qui brouillant la distinction entre fiction et réalité dans les représentations contemporaines de la violence. *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008), *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), et *Redacted* (Brian de Palma, 2007) complètent les uns et les autres, comme trois exemples d'hybrides contemporains du documentaire et de la fiction qui remanient les perspectives habituels a propos des représentations des histoires vraies de la violence. En adoptant la méthodologie d'une ‘écologie médiatique,’ ce projet tente de penser des environnements médiatiques qui transforment ‘les modèles, les dangers et les potentiels,’ tout en tenant compte de l’efficacité des images contemporaines de la guerre et l’éthique des spectateurs.

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War, Peace

A pair of enemies brandishing sticks is fighting in the midst of a patch of quicksand. Attentive to the other's tactics, each answers blow for blow, counterattacking and dodging. Outside the painting's frame, we spectators observe the symmetry of their gestures over time: what a magnificent spectacle—and how banal!

The painter, Goya, has plunged the duelists knee-deep in the mud. With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their movements become and the faster they sink in. The belligerents don't notice the abyss they're rushing into; from outside, however, we see it clearly.

Who will die? we ask. Who will win? they are wondering—and that's the usual question. Let's make a wager. You put your stakes on the right; we've bet on the left. The fight's outcome is in doubt simply because there are two combatants, and once one of them wins there will be no more uncertainty. But we can identify a third position, outside their squabble: the marsh into which the struggle is sinking.

For here the bettors are in the same doubt as the duelists, and both bettors and duelists are at risk of collectively, since it is more than likely the earth will swallow up the fighters before they and the gamblers have had a chance to settle accounts.

On the one hand there's the pugnacious subject, every man for himself; on the other, the bond of combat, so heated that it inflames the audience, enthralled to the point of joining in with cries and coins.

But aren't we forgetting the world of things themselves, the sand, the water, the mud, the reeds of the marsh? In what quicksands are we, active adversaries and sick voyeurs, floundering side by side? And I who write this, in the solitary peace of dawn?

~Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*

Introduction

One of Francisco Goya's infamous 'Black Paintings,' this image titled 'Fight With Cudgels' is of central concern to this investigation because, as Michel Serres points out, documenting war is a much more expansive problem than simply questioning how we represent violence. Serres points to a series of concerns that the painting makes apparent; these observations betray surprising complexity within modes of representation and may escape the cursory glance. 'Fight With Cudgels' shows us a problem of 'technology' and 'media': from the 'documentation' of two warring figures captured in an oil canvas, Serres reads a great deal of movement within the frame as the two forms struggle against one another *and* the inertial forces of their surrounding diegetic environment—movement arises from an *interanimation* between form and content; body and matter. From this *interanimation* of motion, we also see the agency and insistent presence of an 'ecology' working through the action. Serres points to the presence of at least three actants in the scenario: the two men and, silently, the surrounding ecology that seems to drag, suffocate, and drug the battle into a slow grace. In what is surely a nod to Goya's painting this image directly on to the wall of his home, we see the diegetic environment become an extension of the domicile; a return of 'ecology' to its etymological roots of 'oikos,' or home. Bundled alongside Serres' suggestion that the painting achieves a passive yet animating diegetic environment, he also draws attention to problems of 'spectatorship': how we experience 'affects' working through the different bodies on canvas. In what we might call the 'event' of perceiving a work of art, we see an affective collaboration between canvas, viewer, I, you, we, bettors, writers—this two-way cooperation between human and non-human generates the meaning we find in the spectatorial contracts our perception writes with the material world. 'Affects,' here, are the embodied forces that form a multiplicity of interactions between the audience and those

bodies conjured to life or *interanimated* within the piece itself: Serres feels as though he is sinking alongside the two combatants, all the while ‘affectively’ animating several figures (the heat of the bet, cries, coins) in a reverse motion. Then, might Goya (and Serres) also seem to suggest that there may be a form of materialist ‘ethics’ located precisely at the moment when the interrelational forces flowing between form, content, and ecology suddenly shape how we perceive the painting *and* how the paint acts toward us. This strange and mutual exchange we find in the moments when the spectator becomes the painting and the image becomes our perception, is itself the productive liveness of the material world collaborating with the human in what we loosely call meaning. In ‘Fighting With Cudgels,’ we experience discernible yet imperceptible forces that *interanimate* the figures, the swamp, the home, the spectator—each bleeding into the sovereignty of the next. Then, what is the nature of this affective documentation of conflict and should we try to think about the ecology’s autonomous expression of non-human forces through the lens of an ‘ethics’? Is there space for us to philosophically evaluate how Goya’s canvas insists on making us feel the dense suffocation of the marshland?

This thesis poses three ecologically complex films as theoretical platforms so to help us think critically about how the contemporary documentation of warfare intersects with questions of affect, spectatorship, ethics, and ecology. *Redacted* (2007), *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), and *The Act of Killing* (2012) complement one another, as each film is (unto itself) a unique example of a hybrid blend of documentary and fiction. The films also share a common target in criticizing prevailing attitudes carried toward representations of violence. The purpose of this thesis is to interrogate these differing yet similar cinematic efforts that use moving images to agitate the social, political, and ethical categories of belonging that also work to build the shared precepts and we, as communities, draw from non-fictional content. Just as Serres’ poetic

consideration turns Goya's trace of a fierce battle into a claustrophobic and immersive conflict producing intense and affective bodies, I likewise hope to animate ethical questions while speaking to epistemic claims about how we perceive (and *sense*) warfare in contemporary politics: when seeing doesn't always mean knowing, we must acknowledge that knowledge can fine-tune the event of sight itself.

1) Media & Technology

All three of the films that structure this thesis heavily emphasize the technological relations found between narrative form and content. In *Redacted*, De Palma makes use of Internet videos, webcams, hand-held cameras, and others media forms to inordinately stylize the storytelling through variegation. Errol Morris employs radical new camera technology in *Standard Operating Procedure* and Joshua Oppenheimer's film is as much about narrating history as it is about watching the documentary subjects learn how to use film equipment.

'Media' and 'technology' are two terms that I deploy frequently throughout this work, as philosophical questions about technical objects seem to arise around each corner. To clarify, I use both terms interchangeably and in a very expanded sense. Rather than focusing on the hardline technical definitions that we might be used to, I am working within a theoretical framework of 'media archaeology' or a form of media exploration tied to: "emphasizing both the discursive and the material manifestations of culture" (Huhtamo and Parikka 3). This critical method rummages through media in all its forms so to discern the philosophical implications of specific technical objects and how these technologies are non-human actants that display patterns of capture, agency, and distribution in their own right. Technical objects play a very vital role in the politics of our daily lives, and immanent considerations of how technology and media impress upon our storytelling in surprising ways is warranted by our everyday forgetting that

perception is a multilateral and explosive agreement between autonomous forces of the world and what we term the ‘self’ or consciousness. It is helpful then to consider a given technological or media device not as an object or tool, but instead as a consistent collaboration of many immaterial drives and forces. If we look at a simple example of a ‘hard’ technology, like a camera, we can think about the specific machinations of the device: a system of mirrors, film, a flash etc. If we continued tracing the composition of ‘camera’ past the working parts and started speaking about the immaterial forces that also go into what we call a ‘camera,’ then ‘technology’ ceases to be about a specific organization of gears and circuits and starts to address a much broader and expanded world. The ‘camera’ is not simply metals and plastics, but also a sustained composition of immaterial forces: an operator, technical knowhow, the labor relations producing certain parts, accumulated smears of grease on the lens, laws and social contracts of appropriate use, etc. Technology and media, in my consideration, are much closer to a term like ‘assemblage,’ or as Matthew Fuller explains: “an apparatus is never necessarily taken as the composite or the sum of all the programs that compose it. Any one or any combination of these programs, themselves the results of others, can be pursued as a compositional imperative” (57). In this immanent and materialist approach to scholarship, the world itself is simply the perception of material flows. Even though we might term chunky matter like a camera as ‘material,’ and less stable compositions like radiation, light, or thought as ‘immaterial’; all of these forces form together in assemblages on an immanent plane that rejects the transcendental qualities some attribute the ‘immaterial’. The immanent relations I attempt to trace are never necessarily ‘material’ in the traditional sense of a hard object, but instead considered as integral and constitutive flows of the *process* that we flatly refer to as ‘objects’. Media systems and technical objects are under continual pressures and patterns of change; I feel we can do critical work that

takes into account immaterial specificities and tensions imparted upon the inert, otherwise, a politics of (im)material agencies.

With this framework of radical materiality sliding into place, we can start to see how minor or hidden historical projects might allow our analysis to surface in unexpected and exciting places. What's more, this methodology works very hard to allow for unanticipated, and I would say underacknowledged critical pathways leading to surprising politics. This project banks on thinking beyond the 'chunkiness' of material objects:

An assemblage, whether classified as technology, animal, or a human being, is a product of the connecting relations, and what can become technological is not decided *before* the relations are entered into. [An assemblage] consists of much more elementary things such as speeds and slowness, affects (potentials to connect) and qualities—a mode more akin or to becoming than expressing a solid being. (Parikka xxv-vi)

If we think back to 'Fight With Cudgels,' then an expanded consideration of technology as an 'assemblage' leads us to consider how traditional media definitions might stop at the oil canvas, but an expanded consideration takes account of how the painting originated as a mural in Goya's home alongside fourteen other similarly grotesque works of art. If we were to continue down this path, questions about Goya's sanity and archival curation (he never wanted these paintings to leave his home) would surely arise; but for the purpose of this introduction, let's leave this critical flight at how the painting today isn't simply composed of oils, *but also* the social, political, and non-human forces that 'make-up' Goya's work.

2) Spectatorship & Affect

When Serres asks: 'In what quicksands are we, active adversaries and sick voyeurs, floundering side by side?' his question casts away traditional understandings of spectatorship in favor of a more immersive and affective appreciation of what it means to engage art and how this fluid relationship spills over from the artistic object and into the world at large. Established

approaches to spectatorship debate questions of activity versus passivity, spectacle and alienation, and the sovereign politics present in media encounters. Following the stated purpose of this thesis, we might animate an illustration of why thinking about spectatorship in such strict terms might glance over some very relevant political complexities. For example, in the first chapter I consider the events of 2 March 2011 when German authorities arrested Arid Uka for his deadly firearm attack leaving two dead and three injured outside the Frankfurt airport. The targets of the attack were United States Air Force personnel en route to Afghanistan. Uka had no official history of violence or ties to terrorist organizations. During the subsequent interrogation, the accused assailant stated that a video clip he watched on YouTube of American soldiers apparently raping and murdering a Muslim family was the inspiration for his attack. The source of the clip is De Palma's film *Redacted*: a scathing and fictional interpretation of the 2006 Mahmudiyah killings, when five American soldiers raped a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl, murdered her family, and attempted to cover-up the crime. I point to this case as a theoretical platform to think differently about spectatorship, as there are no easy answers available in the limited sense of looking for direct causes and we know better than to say: 'he did it because he saw it'. The linear approach of a 'media-effects' based theory surely resolves in questions of 'does mass media amount to mind-control?' and other similarly frightening conclusions that fail to consider the vast multitude of immaterial relations that also played a hand in the event. A better question might be, as I address later, what kind of non-human forces or immaterial patterns of information and circulation of *Redacted* helped along such a radical misrecognition? For this reason, I think it's important to expand spectatorship both temporally and spatially while thinking about media encounters to fully account for the processual form of media events as timely assemblages.

For Jane Bennett, there is a materialist consideration of the spectator that occurs with or without the presence of a set aesthetic object, instead occurring actively in our day-to-day environments:

The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone [...] the mood or style of an open whole in which both the membership changes over time and the members themselves undergo internal alteration. [Assemblages] can operate at the very threshold of human perception or more violently. (24, 35)

Bennett helpfully reframes our spectator as a constituent element working as a part of much larger im/material machines. This doesn't mean the spectator is only ever a part of one assemblage, but always married to several. Bennett also notes that we are not relegating spectators to strict codes of passivity either; spectators don't ever fully merge into the material world (only perhaps in death and disintegration), but instead cooperate with it by exerting agency alongside similar actions advanced by humans, animals, and non-human networks. Instead of thinking about spectatorship as a one off-event, instead I imagine the spectator as a small cloud that gets caught-up in the larger workings of a hurricane. The cloud becomes a part of the hurricane passively, but together with a multitude of other natural forces, the matter begins to collaborate in order to form a higher order entity that only lasts as long as there is energy to remain assembled. In this manner, spectatorship is instead a *membership* in materialist machines where passive activity occurs through registers that are not necessarily conscious or perceptible, but instead 'affective' in nature.

Affect is a tricky and highly contested critical abstraction. I prefer the term in its simplest form, as Michael Hardt defines:

Affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions. Affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter the realm

of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers. (Clough and Halley ix)

Affect, then, becomes a way of constantly negotiating the spectator's membership with the active machinery of the world. The body's affective relationship determines: the intensity of relations in an environment, the amount of engagement as the self proliferates, and the opportunity to opt in and out of certain assemblages. In Serres' example above, we see him affectively interrelate with the dense movements of the combatants; as though the spectator's thoughts and feelings match the slowness affected by the swamp. This processual event forms a small and collaborative machine from all efforts and actants involved. Affect, then, is the consideration of forces composing the spectator as a process interacting with the world; allowing a careful critical attention to sensory perception through the limits, ruptures, and bodily powers to affect and be affected in a sensory environment.

3) Ecology & Ethics

Although these are probably the two most difficult terms running throughout my work, I feel that 'ecology' and 'ethics' are deeply interrelated and complementary in their modes of action, claims to knowledge and sense making of the world. Keeping in mind our expanded definition of technology, Matthew Fuller outlines a critical methodology for us to think ecologically about media in an immanent topology. Here, technical events and medial encounters fold into the spectator and surface in the active processes of perception:

Media provide access to another or to an outside by means of the specific perspectivalism or affordances that they embody. Just as capacities of thought, of being, are made in lived bodies, in complex and delicately conjoined tissues and processes, and just as powers are inherent in all matter, materialism also requires that the capacities of activity, thought, sensation, and affect possible to each composition whether organic or not are shaped by what it is, what it connects to, and the dimensions of relationality around it. (174)

Returning to Serres' comments above, I think that he outlines how such an ecology works by noting the agency exerted by an assemblage of human beings and non-human actants: the swamp is an adversary affecting the combatants, the mural, Goya's home, Serres himself etc. Serres' thoughtful reading gives this system a description of both immaterial (affective) and material relations; a prime example of expanded and ecological thought. The responsibilities we must take in recognizing that our world operates on an ecological and affective register also acknowledges that beyond our immediate sensory perception there is the body's ability to tune-in to the immaterial patterns of danger and potential at work throughout the politics found in assemblages.

Above all, I feel it is helpful to think of an ecological method as a technique, or approach to the world that carries with it a set of imperatives that we can eventually term ethical. By 'ecologically' examining various media in this thesis, I have tried to outline an impulse or autonomy to designing ecology that goes beyond systems of morality, judgment, and other forms of retroactively applied ethics in favor of a process-based model privileging creativity and difference. This model is primarily indebted to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who together champion techniques of "affect as immanent evaluation" (*Cinema 2* 141) where "nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mecosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think 'transversally' [...] Cosmic and human praxis has only ever been a question of machines, even, dare I say it, of war machines" (*Three Ecologies* 29, 43). The effort toward transversal thought is somewhat of a maxim for this project as well: to consider at once the interrelations and interactions of affective forces across different structures of knowledge, both human and non-human. In many ways, transversality is the hallmark of ethics in an ecology, as

the simultaneous reflection of how the social, technological, and natural worlds are never segmented but always in collaboration requires reminders, so to think across and through boundaries and *make different sense* of the world.

Ethics, then, is a drive toward difference that I see surfacing in all three of these films documenting warfare. Each text, in its own unique way, exposes the spectator to some kind of transversal work stressing how ecologies are always *making sense* of and in the world. The phrase ‘*making sense*’ is, of course, taken in the doubled sense as both a production of sensory frameworks *and* the logic of knowledge formation that flows through sensation. These films highlight the *making of sense* by pushing spectatorial perception through a series of experiments and collaborations that *alter sensation itself* for the purpose of future encounters. Perception is suddenly made different. Ethics constitutes a will to difference, in both creative and collaborative futures marked by both danger and potential. We make access points to difference by a kind of ecological design that, I feel, works through each of the films addressed in this work. De Palma, Morris, and Oppenheimer are artists who: “make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision that appears through the rent” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 203).

4) Three Ecologies; Three Refrains

While violence and war is common ground for each text, these documentaries also address a philosophical problematic I have termed *myopic conflict* or violence that is too close, fast, or minute to see. These documentaries display a shared will to interrogate questions of fact, fiction, truth, and falsity, as these moral categories structure the act of perception itself. In *Redacted*, I will attempt to show how De Palma employs technologies of melodrama in order to reorient perceptual territories within his film. The greatest complication facing *Redacted*—as a

fictionally realized and politically charged document of a very sensitive political event—is the technique of care taken in depicting a vicious rape/murder without falling into what Chris Dumas calls a strictly “negative politics” breeding vast “spectatorial unpleasure” (196-7). I argue that by deploying melodrama as a technological refrain, De Palma engages the spectator in a collaboration that builds a new sensory ecology by consistently maintaining a motor program of experimentation through the choreography of affect. In the ecology that develops between spectator and film, an affective intensity arises in the form of a refrain that leaves all sides (spectator, film, diegetic and non-diegetic environment) with the inability to fully enforce a hard distinction between the form and content of the narrative. This is different than a ‘negative politics’ or brutal masochism because *Redacted* seeks difference as an alternative health relying on an indeterminate future of potential. Difference arises here as a programmed experiment of sensation.

In the second chapter, I deal with philosophical questions about ethics and technology more explicitly and attempt to fully theorize ‘myopic conflict’ or the majoritarian assemblages that structure sensation in ways amenable to state control. I closely analyze Errol Morris’ use of new technology, machines, and animals in *Standard Operating Procedure*—a documentary deployment of radical new visual machines that work to explain how the infamous Abu Ghraib images are manufacture at the level of perception. I theorize how Morris’ use of cinematic technology might affect a *making sense* of the myopic by compelling perception toward radically different sensations of the world.

In my final chapter, I look at a film by Joshua Oppenheimer titled *The Act of Killing* while trying to collide differing media ecologies with a goal of difference emerging from the trans-continental flows of media circulation depicted in the film. By thinking through the powers

of collaboration, creativity and a collective mythmaking that Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson call ‘fabulation,’ I contend that Oppenheimer’s artistic cooperation with the surviving murderers of the Indonesian genocide creates a cinematic monument capturing cross-cultural precepts and affects. This creates media images that deflect and shatter ethno-centric moral judgments built on relative and mobilized notions of truth. This cinematic monument, which might work more like a crystal fracturing light through rotation, invokes a kind of affective labor that traditionally manufactures ‘the documentary production of truth’ for the purpose of amplification, intensification, and ultimately subversion.

Finally, and this is a critical strain that runs throughout the thesis, my project is essentially about contemporary experimental documentary and the ethical powers that technologies hold to generate difference in a world brimming with intolerable events (here, a rape and murder, torture, and genocide). Embedded within are transversal thoughts about animals, insects, machines, philosophy and music; I hope you forgive my experimentation and winded deviations as part and parcel of the territory, so to speak. This playfulness is an attempt to think ecologically in my own work and—hopefully—forges some new connections itself. By analyzing my own three media ecologies, I hope to demonstrate that *there are* collaborative and creative forces working in the world and by adopting an ethical impulse toward media environments, we might *make new sense of myopic conflict*.



Fig. 1. Rock Hudson, Jane Wyman, and the Mute Dewy Deer form an ‘Affective War Machine;’ *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)

Contrary to popular belief and historical record, Douglas Sirk didn’t make films. He made affective war machines. They are emotional siege engines that frankly don’t care if you think yourself more knowing, tougher, more able to pick out the barely veiled mechanisms aimed at your heart, guts, and tear ducts. They don’t care because it doesn’t matter if you know what’s coming. What you don’t know can’t hurt you, sure, but what you do know can still make you cry when the love between a slab of beefcake wrapped in flannel (Rock Hudson) and an middle-aged Kewpie doll (Jane Wyman) keeps getting interrupted by classist neighbors, petty children, social convention, forces of nature, and a deer that stalks the scenes of their coupling like a mute, dewy nightmare.

~Evan Calder Williams “World Melodrama”

***Redacted* (2007): A Programmatic Ethics of Care**

1) Choreography, Refrain & Melodramatic Technologies of Violence

The film referred to in the epigraph above is Douglas Sirk's 1955 Hollywood melodrama *All That Heaven Allows*. Williams' observations, while lightly sardonic, speak volumes about what makes melodrama unique: cinema that turns the exaggerated 'beefcake' performance of Rock Hudson into an emotional force that provokes a strong spectatorial response of sentiment, empathy, and affect. At least that's how I react to a Sirk film: I find myself counter intuitively moved by bad acting, exaggerated gesture, and overly embellished set and shot design. The generic, modal, and emotional powers of melodrama in fiction film have a long critical history, so it's all the more interesting techniques of melodrama work to trouble the line between documentary knowledge claims and fictional narrative storytelling. Brian De Palma's *Redacted* employs melodrama throughout his fictional documentation of the 2006 Mahmudiyah killings: the gang-rape and death of a young Iraqi girl and the murder of her family committed by United States Army personnel serving in Iraq. *Redacted* is a very explicit formal and intellectual criticism of Western military interest in Iraq; but the important questions we need to ask of a film like this do not revolve around whether or not the politics are there, this is obvious. Instead, our concerns should center on the techniques through which cinematic politics are enacted and what exactly a film does to the audience; in the case of *Redacted*, how is melodrama made to be, in Williams' words, an 'affective war machine'?

Williams notes how melodrama has a special relationship with cinematic opulence and the subtler affective powers that work underneath. Melodrama troubles the intersection of knowledge, form, and content because although the cinema is explicitly about character-driven narratives, because the work accomplished by the surrounding mise-en-scène, say in Fig. 1, is an

interanimating force found between on-screen bodies and forms that occupy a figural position—the scene is affectively charged due to the way the deer, Wyman, Hudson, and the dissonance between interior and exterior work together as a machine to generate meaning as interrelated with the spectator. The scene doesn't *feel heart wrenching* because of a grand psychoanalytic or social narrative that might suggest the divisions found between the lovers are a product of some binary operation: man vs. nature, domestic life vs. the social, significations of the phallus etc. Instead, the scene affects melancholy because we participate in the processing of a multitude of forces both integral to the film, and more locally. This process-based generation of affect is what causes spectatorship and cinema to collaborate and together interanimate and make affective Rock Hudson, who is largely just a 'beefcake.' Rock Hudson's emotions have no interior narrative, but instead are produced, shared and distributed across the film's material aesthetics. Melodrama then, presents us with ontological questions about cinema and the way we read stories generally: we can't analyze a character's motivations, actions, or politics in terms of psychological motivations or unconscious drives as this practice simply forces one social narrative upon another. Instead, melodrama helps us understand that whatever 'character' we might label Rock Hudson is simply a convenient and consistent call-name for what is actually a materially affective force distributed throughout a film's aesthetics. Rock Hudson the 'beef-cake' is not a recognizable character on his own but instead activated through the film's environment: an inter-animation composed through the choreography of spectator, Hudson, Wyman, neighbors, children, convention, nature, animal, and the technical apparatus itself—we need a way to talk about how this process works in films other than the work of Sirk and his descendants.

In recognizing how melodrama troubles the clear lines of an 'on-screen subject' in favor of a forceful consistency (perhaps 'negentropic' bodies composed of affective forces), then we

can see how questions of knowledge and materiality are central to this discussion. In melodrama, instead of receiving a collection of narrative bodies, we have forces and affects choreographed into the visual environment—we interpret *everything* as character. This extends well beyond the human bodies onscreen, but character only arises from a choreography that includes decisively non-human elements like light, color, sound, and animals. Characters are carefully choreographed in excess of bodies; instead, as forceful consistencies of affects mutually drawn from the diegesis and spectatorial environments. If we are considering film from a spectatorial position that privileges affect and interrelation, the leap between melodrama and documentary is not tenuous at all, as both forms—despite our cultural willingness to keep them categorically discrete—as a tether lies in how both modes employ a choreography of affective forces that are figural and in excess of representation. In Sirk’s films, we have the organized ‘cooperation’ between ostensibly discrete factors (Hudson, Wyman, neighbors, excessive lighting and emotive sound etc.) into a collaborative production of spectatorial affect. Documentary employs the same method in choreographing forces to an end; the major difference lies in the documentary claim to non-fictional knowledge and the form’s pursuit of origin—a gap that we can bridge with affective considerations of cinema. It’s easy to say that we can distinguish between fictional melodrama and documentary by claiming a quantitative difference in this will to knowledge; but in an affective consideration this hardline distinction begins to bleed as both ‘types’ of aesthetic assemblage (documentary and fiction) carry the same powers to affect. When interrogating documentary then, perhaps targeting veracity, transparency, or informational responsibility is not as productive as asking what interior choreographies shape documentary’s ‘emotional siege engines,’ because ‘what you don’t know can’t hurt you, sure, but what you do know can still

make you cry.’ After all, a documentary can move me to tears just as easily as a ‘beefcake’ and fictional melodrama and documentary both share the benefit of choreographing hindsight.

Our push to rethink melodramatic aesthetics as an affective deployment in documentary is authorized by the recent critical motion to divorce melodrama as a mode (Zarzosa 1-7) from the grand narratives of psychoanalysis; instead reading together these particular film forms, content, and body politics through a lens of immediacy, immersion and affect. Linda Williams reframes much of this debate by reading melodrama as a modality capturing bodily excess through technology:

Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness. Aurally, excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama. Looking at, and listening to, these bodily ecstasies, we can notice something else that these genres seem to share: [...] the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain. (1991: 4)

From Williams’ observation we take the idea that women—as their gendered interrelating bodies work with the spectator through a melodramatic mode—are much closer to the designed contraction of affects supposed by an expanded understanding of ‘technology’ or ‘media.’

Williams points to the way that women’s bodies are carefully choreographed with audiovisual cinematic registers to capture and provoke a specific subset of emotive response within the audience. Bodies in melodrama exist as figural forces that work beyond narrative markers and names, instead becoming vibratory conductors affectively choreographed to create certain patterns of thinking and feeling. I believe that we can expand these thoughts beyond this very effective consideration of women as figuring emotional excesses on screen, and carry similar considerations about the forceful consistency of bodies beyond gender and into more difficult terrain like animals and stylized form. In a nod to this expanded approach, we seek to determine

choreographed affective registers as forms of technology or media in their own right, as Augustín Zarzosa puts it: “in the particular case of melodrama, *media* are means through which the visibility of suffering is distributed” (3). Our ecology of melodrama is starting to come into clear view: as an aggregation of diegetic technologies as an embodiment or contraction of affective force. Each technology or media works through an interanimation to collaboratively channel forces through and alongside the spectator as a choreography of light, sound, color, perception and bodies.

To return to our small conundrum: if, as Williams points out, the bodies of women are cinematically designed to provoke certain affective responses in those watching melodramas, how do we open up this analysis to the other affective bodies that populate the *mise-en-scène*—both human and non-human? For example, can we take the animal presence in *Redacted* as a demonstration of how a materially expanded interpretation of cinema helps us address the agency of non-human actants and the affective powers they release in the artistic event found between spectator and film? As Matthew Fuller argues, it is precisely through these expanded points of analysis and transversal critical trajectories that we can account for how material media: “produce something that is in virulent excess of the sum of its parts. Indeed such parts can no longer be disassembled; they produce an ecology. Not a whole, but a live torrent in time of variegated and combinatorial energy and matter” (173). If we think about this approach and look back to (Fig. 1) as an example, we can see how a transversal approach between ecological registers gives us a new reading of the scene, as perhaps the force of the deer works malevolently at the very edges of human perception in a manner that is strangely hostile toward the couple. This deer, described by Williams as a ‘stalk[ing] mute dewy nightmare’ is in truth a force intent on further provoking an affective suffering by keeping our protagonists apart—and a far cry from

the cute and metaphorically representation of some natural force. This deer is not, in fact, friendly. With an ecological methodology, it is helpful to not think about animals as “metaphors but as relays in the wider structuration of the biopolitical regime of the technical media age” (Parikka xxi).

2) The Swarming Ecology of *Redacted*

In many ways, De Palma’s *Redacted* lends itself quite easily to an ecological reading. De Palma designed the film as a swarming aggregate of different media sources that together produce a coherent story of the Mahmudiyah killings: actively building a gestalt narrative from different media forms and various political points of view. In *Redacted*, this multiplicity of style makes for a mise-en-form instead of mise-en-scène. De Palma responded to the political sensitivity of the Mahmudiyah killings by imbuing his docudrama with the impression of being ‘found’ media sources. The standard, and I feel simplified reading of *Redacted* stresses how the film’s attempt to counter the spectacular media-construction and justification of the Iraq war by revealing falsity by overdetermining media reports. Michael Shapiro points out that *Redacted*’s narrative of “governmental complicity in illicit violence and/or its cover-up” has a target in the revelation of what Michel Foucault called a “truth weapon,” or how a “series of publicly offered, duplicitous rationales for an invasion by a government that went to war against nation-states when their actual antagonists were from violent extra-state networks. Those in power had created their own version of truth” (38, 40). One of the subversive currents running through *Redacted* is undoubtedly a formal media critique of George Bush Junior’s pitch and sale of the Iraq War; De Palma explicitly designed the film to sway public opinion away from a position supporting the conflict—an opinion the director unabashedly made clear in almost every interview he gave regarding the film (Dumas 196).

Insofar as *Redacted* stockpiles variegated media ‘truths’ and lays them out in an explicitly politicized choreography while displaying no qualms about the ethics of his attempt to directly influence the spectator, watching the film also becomes about questioning De Palma’s candid politics throughout the documentary drive for truthful origins more generally. The differing aesthetic forms in the film range from the fictionalized Private Salazar’s first-person video diaries entries called ‘Tell Me No Lies,’ to surveillance footage, online videos embedded on Jihadist websites, YouTube vlogs, iChat conversations, embedded journalism, and a fabricated French-language documentary called ‘Barrage.’ As tempting as it may be, *Redacted* cannot be boiled down to simple questions of media overdetermination, censorship, truth, or sweeping political narratives. I feel that focusing on the ‘truths’ that are so obviously held on display in *Redacted* only scores easy points that entirely miss some of the weird and swarming choreographies that De Palma achieves with his on-screen bodies and forms.

One of the glaring problems with the film is, as Chris Dumas points out: “in [*Redacted*’s] structural deployment of extreme spectatorial unpleasure [...] there is no place, in Film Studies as we understand it, for a conceptualization of what that [extreme unpleasure] might mean” (196-7). Dumas argues that *Redacted* has a radical visual genealogy brimming with references to various forms of online material. De Palma originally intended to make the film entirely out of online sources and it was only out of legal frustrations and the palimpsestic nature of the Internet that we have the cumulative fiction in its current form (Pisters 279). If the film simply wants to show the raw truth and origin of a digital war narrative today, why is it so hard to watch and even more difficult to talk about?

‘Cahiers du Cinema’ blogger Marie d’Origny was quick to compile some of De Palma’s digital source material through a series of embedded YouTube links, while acknowledging the futility of curation and citation in the digital age:

De Palma makes an unprecedented foray into this shapeless ocean. Finding the original sources for *Redacted* is a difficult task. Only approximations come out of our genealogical study: tracking down images to their source is tantamount to a grand fishing party. For every big fish (the full text of the imprecating young punk on YouTube,) we came across multiple schools of fish, of micro-films shot by American soldiers unconsciously aggregating in motifs and sub-genres. (“*Redacted*, a Genealogy”)

The wonderful thing about d’Origny’s archival work is precisely that she does not claim to have exact inspirations for De Palma’s film, but instead aggregates playful suggestions that may be somewhat removed yet have a patterned resonance with the film. While it is not possible to say ‘De Palma *definitely saw and thought* about these videos,’ d’Origny’s collection displays an intuitive impulse toward the expanded media ecology of *Redacted*. She traces the film’s inspiration from a direct influence of the ‘Irate Blogger’ (whose digital presence appears in the film as a part of the ‘Get Out of Iraq’ campaign) to a series of ‘Armed Farces’ gag-videos made by bored soldiers in barracks and at checkpoints, and even the viral YouTube hit ‘Dance Party in Iraq.’ What I feel is so important about d’Origny’s digital consideration is not the ‘correctness’ of whether these are the ‘true’ inspirations and origins of De Palma’s creative thought, but instead that the genealogy highlights how *Redacted* emerges from a pool of circulating digital influence where many rippling sources resonating together at once: there are immaterial and discernible media patterns found in the visual culture of the Iraq war. YouTube videos like ‘US troops taunt kids in Iraq with water bottles’ are as much a part of *Redacted*’s formal archaeology of ‘truth’ as any authorized influence: “Boredom at the checkpoint, continued. We play with what we have—a bottle of water, for example. In *Redacted*, a plastic bottle is crushed in rhythm, a soldier spits out water in lovely fountain. Idleness” (d’Origny).

One of the stranger videos featured in “*Redacted, a Genealogy*” depicts a Sergeant in Iraq chasing a group of ducks while barking orders: “Just another gag video, if it weren’t for the two murderers from *Redacted* both wearing ducks on their heads, in a weird sequence to pay tribute to a deceased companion. This might be a coincidence, but the ducks, happily inviting themselves into these images of war, show us how the ones that have been had are, in fact, the soldiers” (“*Redacted, a Genealogy*”). I feel the connection d’Origny makes between a marine’s joke on YouTube and the bizarre duck hats worn by the two killers is actually very sharp despite her ironic tone: what can we make of the animals ‘happily inviting themselves’ into our ecologies of war?

Following Jussi Parikka’s recent endorsement that in immanent ecologies *animals are a form of media*, suddenly the ducks, insects, and dogs in *Redacted* open up new critical territory.

Parikka writes that:

Plants and animals constitute their being through various modes of transmission and coupling with their environment. They contract the forces of the cosmos into environmental relations, couplings, which is perhaps not a reflective (human) relation but is still a lived one of relations actual and virtual (potential) [...] Media are contraction of forces of the world into specific resonating milieus: internal milieus with their resonance, external milieus affording their rhythms as part of that resonance. An animal has to find common tune with its environment, and a technology has to work through rhythmic relations with other force fields such as politics and economics. (xiv)

For Parikka, the animal is a condensation of specific percepts and affects that constitute a world of difference. For this reason, Parikka believes that the affective relations that humans form with animals are the same process as the links we make with more traditional media. *Redacted*, a film that is explicitly about telling a story through different media forms, is an ideal illustration of why criticism needs to move beyond standard readings of form and content, instead penetrating deep into cinema’s ontology where—like the significance of ‘loose’ inspirations noted by d’Origny—screen animals also have a relevant if neglected presence inside the media ecology of

Redacted.

3) De Palma's Animality & Refrain

During one of the 'Barrage' portions of *Redacted*, De Palma documents the protagonist soldiers operating a checkpoint in Samarra. The most striking image from this sequence is a series of close-up images following a large scorpion as it is slowly overwhelmed by a multitude of ants (Fig. 2). This image, while a linear and heavy-handed poetic metaphor indicating that slight stature and superior numbers might vanquish a physically larger monster, also has a familiar presence in cinema history. The direct allusion is to the same insect metaphor employed in Sam Peckinpah's 1969 western *The Wild Bunch* (Fig. 3). In Peckinpah's film, children create a wooden pen as an arena for several scorpions to battle a constant stream of fire ants, before the kids set fire to the whole environment. Peckinpah uses the metaphor to foreshadow the film's narrative conclusion: that the better-equipped American outlaws will inevitably fall prey to their poorly trained yet numerous Mexican enemies. This imported significance might have an easy reading in *Redacted*: is De Palma's version suggesting that America, like the scorpion, will eventually fall to the disadvantaged multitude of insurgents? Jussi Parikka cautions that animality: "is not a mere metaphor but a vector that can be used to more thoroughly understand the affect life of modern subjectivity" (83). In our ecological consideration of *Redacted*, the representational reading of the insects is likely a small part of De Palma's intended effect, but an transversal consideration of the image reveals how the media ties of these insects run deeper into both cinema and political history.



Fig. 2 The battling insects in *Redacted*



Fig. 3 The same image found in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*

It's no secret that Peckinpah's film, at the time of release in 1969, was by far the most violent film produced in Hollywood history. To contemporaneous audiences, *The Wild Bunch* felt like much more than a representational import of the carnage in Vietnam through to the fantasy space of fictional narrative cinema. Uncensored and graphic violence permeated the

news coverage of the Vietnam War and this media already had its place in the home—often televised during dinner and remembered as ‘the living-room war’ (Hallin 114-58). The violence of Vietnam already had a ubiquitous presence in American media by 1969, yet the carnage of *The Wild Bunch* still managed to shock and abhor moviegoers. Instead of simply showing gratuitous death on-screen (a familiar sight to those watching the news), Peckinpah took further steps to disturb audiences: “publics were anaesthetised by television’s coverage of the Vietnam War, and [Peckinpah’s] purported intention was to shock an apathetic public with the repulsiveness of violent death by amplifying its mechanisms through slow motion and montage” (Tait 339). *The Wild Bunch* elaborately staged ultra-violence through the novel use of formal technologies like slow motion, montage and blood-squibs. This constituted a radical planning and choreography that made an intervention at the level of the sensible: audiences had *never seen* violence like this. Peckinpah’s film worked the audience through a choreographed programmatic experimentation in hyperviolence that: “render[ed] the passage of bullets through the body, and used blood packs that spurted geysers of blood, and often had raw meat attached” (Tait 339). Peckinpah employed technology as a way to create a collaborative intervention with spectators so to work toward a gestalt shift in perception through his film. The sterilized calculation of his choreographed bodies and death made the masochistic unpleasure both stylized and beautiful. It was through this affective draw to an imperceptible world of slow motion, the affected smells made available by the punctum of dead meat, and the blood-spray bodies of ultraviolence that Peckinpah was able to go further than simply showing the bodies of Vietnam, *he imported the tactical calculations of military policies through his radical use of technology*. War ceased to be just or dirty, and became a choreographed concert and program in sensation.

The American military policies targeted by Peckinpah were the developing attention toward attrition warfare and tactical body counts; Peckinpah used new technology to map the intellectual policies into already habituated images of uncensored televised death. The strategy of ‘they can’t fight if they have no one to recruit’ was becoming increasingly visible through the gradual revelation of the My Lai Massacre in 1968, and *The Wild Bunch* confirmed for the American public that a high-enough body count left no one standing. For Peckinpah, an anti-war film wasn’t about simply showing the violence to America—the news took care of that. Instead, he reworked a violent foreign policy and channeled it into his art, the frontier and historical home front, as: “Vietnam served as an ostensible justification for ultraviolent cinema, rather than ultraviolence serving as a means to engage with the costs of war” (Tait 339). Here, cinematic geography, territory and mise-en-scène become mixed-up in the churning media ecological movement of a war abroad. It is in the collision of technology, policies, and cinema that we find the affective interrelational forces charged with a politics of resistance flowing through the insects and not in their metaphoric or representational value.

The Wild Bunch and its imagery of valiant scorpions perishing to the endless ants seemed to confirm in advance the impossibility of Vietnam and the popular sentiment echoed by the protest movement—photojournalism, television, and cinema *did force* a gestalt shift in perception of the conflict (Pisters 275). By fictionally recreating a document of Western imperialism in the heart of American genre cinema, Peckinpah’s cinematic territories depicted Manifest Destiny as an apocalyptic pile of bodies swarmed with the racialized enemies of abroad. *The Wild Bunch* foreshadowed and brought to light the concealed racist logic of an American military policy designed to produce dead bodies; horrifyingly officiated by General William Westmoreland in Peter Davis’ *Hearts and Minds* (1974): “the Oriental doesn’t put the same high

price on life as does a Westerner [...] We value life and human dignity. They don't care about life and human dignity."

De Palma, following Peckinpah, channels all of these politics, relations, and forces through the temporally bundled on-screen interaction between scorpion and ant. Here, insects function as media or as Deleuze and Guattari comment, as a monument and temporal refrain reverberating Peckinpah's nomadic efforts of 1969: "the whole of the refrain is the being of sensation. Monuments are refrains. In this respect art is continually haunted by the animal" (1994: 184). Keeping with our example of the ant and scorpion, we can see that while these animals have and live a world very different from our own: the lived-information of territory. In our anthropomorphic vision of *Redacted*, we glean a legacy of American cinema and politics from the creatures, while the animals remain oblivious of the human significance that they embody and perform. However, just because the insects aren't aware of their own cinematic history (and they certainly aren't getting paid for it) doesn't mean the immaterial ties aren't there or can't be established. Just as *Redacted* is 'made-up' of converging media forms and influences, the insects are similarly composed by both human and non-human drives: this ecological reading attempts to bring those *umwelten*, intrinsic, and hidden worlds out into the open where we can talk about how they work. Just like the force of the ants swarming the scorpion and Peckinpah's cameras swarming the action, De Palma's film swarms a narrative with different forms—displaying the distributed intelligence of animals moving in unison toward a single and choreographed target effectively a transversal thinking together of form and content.

The 'refrain' is a logic of mobile and shared territory that carries along percepts (mental images formed through perception in time) and affects (what is thought and felt in the present) across a temporal series of presents, or as Deleuze and Guattari write:

How rhythm stakes out a territory from chaos that resonates with and intensifies the body. Territory is always the coming together both of spatiotemporal coordinates (and thus the possibilities of measurement, precise location, concreteness, actuality) and qualities (which are immeasurable, indeterminate, virtual, and open-ended), that is, it is the coupling of a milieu and a rhythm. A refrain is the movement by which the qualities of a specific territory or habitat resonate and return to form it as a delimited space, a space contained or bounded but nonetheless open to the chaos from which it draws its force. (Grosz 19-20)

Order and meaning is established in the refrain: drawn from the chaos of the vibratory liveness of matter itself. The reason we are able to discern insects as metaphors (or as iconic images of cinematic politics) is due to the refrain structure of knowledge and information; an embodied “extraction of a vibratory rhythm from chaos” (Grosz 20). At this point, I would like to theoretically pivot the argument by turning the focus toward what makes the differing media forms of *Redacted* non-exclusive in their use of the refrain: what shared patterns and rhythms build intrinsically and across an apparent variegation of form and content. The key to this, I believe, lies in the film’s environmental choreography—where techniques of melodrama *are refrains* that seep out and animate the mise-en-scène of the film. In this sense, refrains are the affective territory marked out and carried by the collaboration between form and content. The refrain works against representation in favor of a cooperative logic that develops through repetition, duration, and ultimately a mutual creation of difference.

4) First Refrain

An entry point into how *Redacted*’s use of mise-en-form is relinked by a series of affectively choreographed refrains lies in De Palma’s use of durational shots. ‘Barrage’ is scored by the ceremonial Sarabande taken from George Frideric Handel’s ‘Keyboard suite in D Minor,’ a song best known for its use in Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975). (The irony of pairing the dirty aesthetics of the Iraq War with the song Kubrick used to communicate the ‘grandeur’ of The Seven Years War is lost on no one). The Sarabande carries with it the territorial resonance of

pomp and circumstance military march cinephiles would immediately associate with Kubrick's film. The song itself is traditionally a form of dance performed in triple meter (where a triple drum pattern demarcates three decisive beats with three drum strokes). The version selected for De Palma's film is the same performance used in *Barry Lyndon*: composed of a string section playing the primary melody, while a harpsichord fills in the counter-melody and deep bass drums keep the march.

We first hear the Sarabande during the opening sequence of 'Barrage' following a brief introduction made by the French documentarian and a brief flute melody. *Redacted* deploys melodrama primarily through the music and pretentious camerawork of the 'French' documentarians. The Sarabande, long zooms, and use of poetic camera movement paints the entire scene—which is ostensibly about the extreme boredom the soldiers face operating the checkpoint—with an overblown melodrama of sheer excess; producing epic affectations inflecting world historical ceremony throughout the mundane. The Sarabande plays in entirety (3 minutes, 35 seconds) and during the sequence several other rhythms join in concert alongside the classical music. The film highlights these particular sounds as no amount of ambient noise or other sound competes with the Handel: just the sounds carefully selected to convey the material boredom of the checkpoint in collaboration with the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. The loud crackling made by the scorpion's shell while swarmed by ants is the first environmental accompaniment during this sequence. The noise of the fighting insects is designed to supplement the harpsichord by holding a similar tone and rhythm—ants biting and baroque instrument work to mutually emphasize a counter melody. This co-operative effort is quickly followed by the double-time beat made by an Iraqi woman striking a hanging carpet—a rhythm intended to balance the thundering drums with an added offbeat.

Shortly after, we receive a close-up of Specialist McCoy as he watches several Iraqi farmers herding goats, during which we hear the sound of crinkling plastic at regular intervals. The source of the noise is a mystery, but the popping plastic responds in a material call-and-response to the dominance of the primary string melody. The sound continues through a reverse shot which traces the movement of the farmers, before ‘Barrage’ cuts back to a final close-up. The camera slowly zooms out from McCoy’s face over a long-take (twenty seconds in total) and in the final seconds revealing the McCoy’s impromptu and playful instrument: an empty plastic water bottle crushed in a bored resonance with the non-diegetic rhythm of the Sarabande.

De Palma employs the length of this final shot to an ontological effect famously noted by André Bazin that defines how we read durational cinema: “[the long-take implies] a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his[/her] part to the action in progress” (35-6). The basic function of the shot type is apparent here: the long-take works as a technology that produces affective sensation through the collaboration of spectator and environmental elements of De Palma’s explicit and emphasized style. This manufactory affect is inextricably bound to duration. Here, the gradual identification of McCoy’s bottle as the noisemaker imbues the object with several new meanings: an instrument, a part of an orchestra, an expression of boredom, and an impossible link between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Understanding ‘Barrage’ becomes a difficult task as the shot expires; the spectator is faced with several competing ways to read the scene. First, the environmental concert that accompanies the Sarabande could be a marker of McCoy’s wandering attention—Handel’s music is playing in his imagination and the diegetic noises of his surroundings including the accompaniment of his water bottle occur as harmonic traces of itinerant and bored thought. However, we need to recall that this portion of the film is a faux-documentary and is presented as a part of *Redacted* only

after an editing process—making the collaboration of Handel, insect, carpet, and bottle a possible product of a carefully planned montage and retrospection. In this sense, the territory produced between spectator and film assemblage collapses the distinction found between form and content in order to form instead a mutually generative machine productive of affect to be carried through to subsequent refrains.

This durational refrain works to troubles the relational poles of subject and object, much as we noted with the insects above: are they bugs living their insect world or performing world historically in ours? Is the Sarabande an imaginary comforting hum of McCoy, or a collaborative structure made by the fictional editors of ‘Barrage’? I think that we can say that this terse ecology also produces an emergent consideration from between these two readings: De Palma uses a melodramatic musical refrain as a technology to destabilize the documentary mode while pointing to ontological problems of ‘representation’ that far too often go unperceived. This sequence is a model example of how *Redacted*’s melodramatic excess works to animate the mise-en-scène by way of mise-en-form. McCoy’s bottle becomes its own form of media participating in the extra-diegetic musical history of warfare and dance while at once ‘cooperating’ alongside the insects, the woman beating her carpet, and Handel’s music to draw a singular and meaningful structure from material chaos—a refrain.

5) A Bridge & Platform

As suggested by the rich media relations found in the insects or the environmental symphony of ‘Barrage,’ it is not enough to think about *Redacted* as an experiment in convergent media storytelling. Mark Straw argues that *Redacted* produces a ‘male masochistic’ spectator: “in an implicated, ‘guilty’ position of inactivity,” as the viewer is “assaulted by a multiplicity of media forms and a constant babble of voices and images, the subject becomes hystericized and

undone” (92-3). While I agree with Straw that *Redacted* calls for a theory of spectatorship replete with ethical concerns (the film, after all, documents a rape and massacre), it is still too simple to say that clashing media forms inflect a diegetic conflict within the audience. Straw’s implication of the spectator within the horrible events present in the film speak to the extreme affective discomfort provoked by the film, even if it frames the real problem as a problematic guilt or inactivity: why is it that the explicit violence and sexuality in *Redacted* are not made to be exceptional? What techniques make the scene in question both difficult to watch and simply another sequenced refrain in the film? I find Straw’s comment useful in supporting the affective chaos unleashed by *Redacted*, but the relegated passivity of the spectator is a difficult to settle. As we will see when we get to the rape scene itself, there are ‘impotent’ cameras within the film itself—although presence is always a form of activity figural activity.

Ken Provencher puts forth a different take, noting that: “we see how new media escalate violence, and also how they sublimate violence, or at least allow for uniquely personal condemnations of violence [...] De Palma seizes the power of mediation from those who commit atrocities, and renders those same atrocities in such a way that condemns brutality” (38-9). Provencher displays a keen emphasis toward the variegated visual forms within the film. This take on *Redacted* is the popular opinion—that the media overdetermination of the film is a political comment about the informational nature of war today and the drive for documentary origins—but we have to seriously ask what falls out of focus when the focus is *only* on form. The project of this argument is demonstrate why and how this film goes so much further than questions of passivity or form which pushes some of the greater questions that are present in the margins to the side: the ants, the scorpion, the visual environment, and the excessive style of

melodrama. I feel that there is a greater critique at work that runs through relational streams working through and across the mise-en-form.

The most extensive work on the cinematic representation of the Second Gulf War belongs to Patricia Pisters' attempt to update the work of Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard into the 'Logistics of Perception 2.0'. Pisters nods to the ecological complexity at work in *Redacted*, although she firmly locates her ethical questions in arguments that focus on consciousness and screen technologies:

Filmed, distributed, and remediated on all kinds of different platforms and screens, these war diary images become the traumatic kernel of our collective screen culture. Because of its complex entanglement in the vortex of multiple screens and multiple perspectives, an ethics of the image seems to be related to a consciousness arising from the paradoxical affects of this new logistics of perception. (289-90)

The intersection of technology, perception, and ethics requires serious consideration throughout contemporary war cinema, yet I am not convinced that the problem entirely resides or finds resolution within the boundaries of a logic of 'consciousness' or ubiquitous screen culture. In short, as I plan to address an ontological ethics of spectatorship throughout this thesis, I feel that theories of media spectatorship bound to critiques centering on human conscious (the screen, the film, the photograph, the recording, the frame, the brain) stop short of important and provocative questions regarding non-human cooperation, organization, singularity and agency. In an ecological approach, spectatorship is directly relational to media and *never* 'mediated.' 'Mediations' is the wrong word for what's going on in this film because it suggests hidden worlds beyond a technical veil or some amount of removal or layering between 'the real' and the screen. We need only think back to the insects, or the musical collaboration in the film to show how the relations are direct and *immediate*: it's not like the on-screen insects are a part of or represent a different world, rather they are an *active process* that is *worlding alongside and in*

collaboration with the spectator. I feel that questioning screens and roles they play in consciousness rules out the subtle complexities of a film like *Redacted*. Is there room for the im/material implications of the insects in Pisters' consideration? Do impotent cameras mean inactive cameras or can they play an active or agential role in *Redacted's* collaboration as well? How and why might De Palma *fashion, design, and maintain* melodrama across a variegated form? I feel that while these are questions of spectatorship, they fall into a category of process-driven ethico-aesthetics that are left terminally unanswered by critical inquiries emphasizing mediation, human consciousness, and screen technology.

Part of the reason I find Pisters' reading unconvincing emerges from how *Redacted* made its way into international headlines in the aftermath of a terrorist incident in 2011. Pisters argues that:

In spite of all the capturing forces that operate on our multiple screens, it is possible to see the media as a gigantic network of baroque perspectives where particular points of view and the psychological effects they entail become affectively entangled [...] Our real and virtual bodies are involved in complex ways that cannot be translated into simple ethical rules; we need instead an affective openness to be brought to the idea of cinema and (into) the world itself. By creating images, or simply by being affected by these images, we can participate in bringing reality and feeling back to the vortex of our multiple screens. Paradoxically, it is possible to conclude that in the face of the multiplication of ever-increasing screens, as monadic nomads, reality does not disappear but returns with an affective vengeance. (298)

The argument advanced in this chapter is deeply indebted to part of Pisters' suggestion: that media requires expanded analysis to determine the immaterial operations of affect, that perception can be indexed by politicized aesthetic design, and that we remain open to a future where creative thought, spectatorship, and ethics can coalesce in difference. It is difficult, however, to reconcile Pisters' faith in the virtual body (the possibility of difference found in a reservoir of political potential, a belief I share) as she phrases her project as a reinvestment in the body as a site of authenticity or human exceptionalism. In effect, a logistics of perception 2.0

still participates in a separation of spectator and ecology. It's not about reality returning 'with an affective vengeance,' the senses are extensions of, with, and in constant collaboration with reality already. A topological consideration of form and content rejects the hardline distinctions between subject and object, screen and reality in order to show that a different kind of work: isn't this what's at stake in considering *Redacted's* insects *as active* media? The logistics of perception, instead, work toward a special or exceptional state for humanity structured through the narrow sights of anthropomorphism; mediation, as such, works at a level of representation rather than an affective evaluation of pure process.

It's for this reason that I prefer Matthew Fuller's argument for an increasingly expanded analytical project, tasked with determining: "the different kinds of such qualities in media systems with their various and particular or shared rhythms, codes, politics, capacities, predispositions, and drives, and how these can be said to mix, to interrelate, and to produce patterns, dangers, and potentials" (2). One such danger or cautionary tale that arises within our consideration of *Redacted's* media ecology are the bizarre series of events surrounding the 2011 Frankfurt Airport shooting: a double homicide committed by a German lone gunman named Arid Uka. While never considered a threat by any intelligence or police organization, Uka was found guilty of murdering two US air force servicemen and injuring two others, as David McHugh reports:

Prosecutors said Uka was an example of a lone-wolf extremist who became radicalized on his own by reading and watching jihadist propaganda on the Internet. During the trial, they introduced as evidence dozens of files containing songs and written material pulled from his cell phone, music player and computer. [Uka] testified that he wanted to stop U.S. service personnel from going to Afghanistan after viewing a video on Facebook that purported to show American soldiers raping a teenage Muslim girl. It turned out to be a scene from the 2007 Brian De Palma anti-war film 'Redacted,' taken out of context. ("German court sentences US airmen's killer to life")

As of 2013, the twenty-three year old Uka is sentenced to life in German prison, and many questions surrounding this particular media ecology remain unanswered: what exactly inspired an untrained, unmarked, and unaffiliated terrorist to act ‘independently’ and of his own volition? However interesting these questions may be, I believe that they work in a false consciousness: we want these answers because we want to believe that screens, networks, and media work in a linear and effects-based manner—that screens shape, make, and design violent impulses.

Some of Uka’s rhetoric borders on amnesia, which further mystifies and supports the conspiratorial thought: “I thought what I saw in that video, these people would do in Afghanistan [...] I killed two people and opened fire on three others [...] today I can’t understand myself how I could have acted this way” (“Kosovan”). Almost as a self-fulfilling prophecy, Uka’s words resonate with the warnings forwarded by Pisters: “now, after being held hostage by the spectacle of the ‘nonwar,’ we say that in the logistics of perception 2.0 we are all participants in the battle of screens that is quite literally mind-blowing” (290). We should be skeptical of any argument that tries to force a connection between form and action—systems of relation are much more complex than linear effects. What I feel we can take from this profoundly sad example is to say that whatever unknown transactions that occurred between Arid Uka and De Palma’s film—somehow the terrorist looked awry, missed a sustained part of the work inflected by the film constituting a misrecognition and skewed vision of the resistant forces at work across *Redacted*. For this reason, it is helpful for us to return to the refrain function of the film as the territorial resistance that emerges from the collaboration between spectator and film elements builds as though a careful programmatic of experimentation. The refrain is a choreographed process of affective forces that are non-exceptional and ultimately characteristic of the ethical drive to *make*

sense differently.

6) A Second Refrain

We see the rhythmic pattern of the refrain resurface in *Redacted's* depiction of Jihadist websites. Following a sequence where Private Salazar records a senior officer blown apart by a landmine, De Palma cuts to a static shot of a computer screen. The screen depicts a Taliban propaganda website with an embedded video of the same soldier's death—surveilled at a great distance (Fig. 4). The banner running across the top of the screen features decorative automatic rifles alongside the silhouette of a mosque, Arabic font, and Iraqi flag designs used between 2004 and 2008. The embedded video takes up the center of the screen, and when the computer's assumed observer presses play, the streaming video depicts much of what we have just seen from Salazar's hand-held camera: an explosion and body parts raining on the site. The audio of this shot splits two ways: first, we hear the explosion and grainy screams of the soldiers through the sound picked up by the unknown terrorist's camera, while a second layer of sound clearly plays a voice-over of 'Allahu Akbar' repeated and the song of a Muslim call to prayer echoes in the far background. Using at least two distinct layers of sound, the film constructs two diegetic environments: the world rendered by the terrorist's camera and the off-screen environment in the world of the computer screen.



Fig. 4 Choreographed smoothness of the Jihadist website.

The shot runs long at twenty seconds without any camera movement. Only toward the end of the scene do we understand that the image and sound have together synthesized an anonymous body lodged somewhere between the embedded video footage and the screen in front of us. (This third presence or tertiary spectator inhabits an off-screen world). The voice we hear praying while viewing the online video exists outside the diegetic and temporal flow of the film—in front of an unexplained screen located only in absence and in uncertain time. This ambiguity drawn out in De Palma's long-take is made increasingly apparent by the durational demand to synthesize and understand three levels of spectatorship: the cameras watching the event, the unknown body watching the computer screen, and the viewer watching the film proper.

The surprising detail that emerges from this shot has nothing to do with De Palma's startling production of an off-screen body, although the film's power to create a politically charged yet invisible environment testifies to cinema's thought provoking power (who do you

imagine is watching this screen and where is it?). Instead, what I find to be the most curious feature is the notably smooth space linking the layers between the three screens. The terrorist video contains the speck and grain that we normally associate with a film camera, which runs steadily within the frame of a computer screen and finally within the tertiary frame of De Palma's exterior camera. What I find interesting about the smooth visual harmonies of the screens is actually the tranquility: the absence of a flicker between the three screens. Those of us familiar with frequency refresh rates of computer monitors and camera frame rates realize the logistical nightmare of this shot: synchronizing three discrete frame rates is a difficult task. Unless the kilohertz frequency of the computer screen matches up with the frame rates of either the terrorist's film camera, or De Palma's outermost camera capturing the exterior layer of the *mise-en-abyme*, we would see flickering horizontal lines of dissonance disrupting the image from within.

The absence of the flicker in this synthesis suggests a visual resonance and vibrational harmony operating in silent unison. Much like how the scorpions, the carpet, and the bottle cooperate alongside Handel's *Sarabande* earlier in the film to collaboratively produce a territorial refrain, we have another moment where the duration of a shot produces a complex affective choreography: another entry in *Redacted's* melodramatic mode that underpins, links, and works transversally across the heterogeneous sequences of the film. As the shot continues, the spectator feels the pull of the distant call to prayer interweaving with the screams of US soldiers, a forceful wrench toward the dismal recalcitrance of the conflict in Iraq. The disjunctive temporalities within this static image never feel accidental, but instead play together like an *immaculately choreographed visual collaboration*: three heterogeneous screens linked at once as a smooth "set of speeds and slownesses between uniformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects" (Deleuze

and Guattari 1987: 262). The smoothness and harmonies of the interrelating visuals, bodies, and sounds intensifies to the point that the shot ceases to be about variegation; but instead the synchrony provokes an affective tug toward the interrelations of a much larger operating machine of war. Just as Peckinpah used techniques to show policies in action, this shot reveals how the smooth spaces of the world at war seep down through audiovisual technologies into a polished and harmonious anesthetic.

7) De Palma's Metallurgy: Melodrama & Technologies of War

Félix Guattari introduces the historical thrust of the 'war machine' into his treatise on ecological politics and ethics as an organizational assemblage that carries the promise of potential and resistance to counter the oppressive trappings of state organization: "Cosmic and human praxis has only ever been a question of machines, even, dare I say it, of war machines" (2000: 43). The war machine, at least for Deleuze and Guattari, initially has very little to do with war as conflict. Deleuze explains in *Negotiations* that:

The aim of war machines isn't war at all but a very special kind of space, *smooth space*, which they establish, occupy, and extend. *Nomadism* is precisely this combination of war-machine and smooth space. We try to show how and in what circumstances war-machines aim at war (when state apparatuses take over a war-machine that's initially no part of them). War-machines tend much more to be revolutionary, or artistic, rather than military. (1995: 33)

The war machine is first a mode or technique of organization and not generally a machine or apparatus in the traditional sense. Instead, the war machine is a specific assemblage of people, object, things, and environmental territories that in themselves form a cooperative movement away from hierarchical organizations of thought, matter, and modes of living that establish majoritarian constitution; in most cases this dominant social structure is referred to simply as the 'state.' In this sense, the war machine is itself a participatory ecology distinct from ideological puppetry.

Deleuze and Guattari make an important distinction between the weapon that we might normally term a war machine (a sabre, for example) and the social material flows that bring such an object into being (the metallurgists that first learned the innate qualities of steel before forging matter into a useful weapon). In the case of the metallurgist (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 405-15), the initial creative spark that initiated the preparation of metal is also a part of the assembled war machine. The primary creative ideas that reimagined the uses of steel were constructive and had little to do with the final and fatal purpose of weaponry: the arming of state forces. That first creative spark then, is a thought of difference gambling on the unknown future for that particular practice or set of ideas: difference can go anyway, the metallurgists may or may not have harbored violent intentions. If we have learned anything from history, these moments of creativity eventually fold into the purposes, intentions and practices of the majoritarian state as Gerald Raunig explains: “the martial dimension of the war machine consists in the power of invention, in the capacity for change, in the creation of other worlds. It is only under the appropriation by a state apparatus that can transform the war machine into a military apparatus, a war” (57-8).

Artistic and creative practices of resistant, alternative or novel thought eventually fall into the growth patterns of the majority state, which in turn makes use of that knowledge to further an expansionist, hierarchical and therefore representational agenda. However, the initial shock to creativity is nomadic in its spontaneous occurrence outside of hierarchical territory, even though the inception always occurs from within a space complacent to state structures—the new only finds creation from inside the well-known toolbox and boundaries of majoritarian knowledge.

Deleuze and Guattari write:

You don’t make an atomic bomb with a secret, any more than you make a saber if you are incapable of reproducing it, and of integrating it under different conditions, of

transferring it to other assemblages. Propagation and diffusion are fully a part of the line of innovation; they mark a bend in it. On top of that, why say that crucible steel is necessarily the property of sedentaries or imperial subjects, when it is first of all the invention of metallurgists? It is assumed that the metallurgists were necessarily controlled by a State apparatus; but they also had to enjoy a certain technological autonomy, and social clandestinity, so that, even controlled, they did not belong to the State any more than they were themselves nomads. There were no deserters who betrayed the secret, but rather metallurgists who communicated it and made its adaptation and propagation possible: an entirely different kind of ‘betrayal.’ (1987: 405)

The war machine is ultimately a materialist consideration of how a specific flow of information and its application first traverses a revolutionary space while inevitably becoming an instrument of majoritarian programming. The playful logic of the war machine runs from pillar to post while locating a non-normative ethics in a process-driven and micropolitical approach where the initial line of creative thought becomes a consistent impulse for those seeking difference in the world. I argue that we can see the emergence of one such nomadic effort or historical flight of thought in the aesthetic developments of the mid-century American melodrama.

A recent revival in academic debates addressing cinematic melodrama have shied away from the term ‘genre’ in favor of words like “style, mode, sensibility, aesthetic, and rhetoric” (Mercer and Shingler 78). In line with this critical recovery of melodrama as an activated form rather than institutional genre, I would like to suggest that the lineage of American melodrama as it surfaces in Brian De Palma’s *Redacted* be termed a kind of ‘war machine’ or ‘technology.’ I am not the first to stress the link between technology and melodrama, rather as Horace Kallen pointed out in 1910, the melodramatic form maintains a coevolutionary relationship with technological concepts: “of all dramatic forms, [melodrama] has to keep pace with the march of the times. Telegraphy, the telephone, the automobile, the air-ship, the rapid-fire gun, and the North Pole are made familiar to the public by means of the melodramatic stage long before they could be brought concretely to the public attention by other means” (Qtd. in Singer 149). For

Kallen, melodrama is a great aesthetic communicator of information flowing from advancement (like the network that disseminates the ‘secret’ of metallurgy), precisely because melodrama is an organizational mode that folds technical invention into its own creative impulse: novel technical objects are creatively reworked as affectively forceful ‘characters’ within the *mise-en-scène*. Melodrama is a technology because it is constantly inventing (through communication) and re-inventing its own modality, otherwise a nomadic movement where artists: “not only invent war machines, but *become* war machines, when they develop inventiveness as a specific mode of action and subjectivation. Here invention means not only the invented device and invented stories, but beyond this the capability of inventing new worlds” (Raunig 70-1). Melodrama is a technological force that creatively bridges the known world into new and unthought realities.

In rephrasing melodrama as a more active form of communication (as a mode, technique, or technology), we can see why Linda Williams insists that we should not take melodrama as a generic function of cinematic storytelling but quite the reverse: as a machinic, driving and inspirational force. Williams argues:

Melodrama has been the norm, rather than the exception, of American cinema [...] Film critics have often not seen the forest of melodrama—the sense in which all these genres, and many more, partake of a basic melodramatic mode—for the trees of these individual genres. They have not seen the way in which melodrama constitutes the larger cultural mode driving the articulation of specific genres. [Melodrama is] held in tension and transformed by infusions of realism—whether of content or form—yet best understood *as melodrama*. (2001: 16-17)

Analyzing melodramatic qualities in a film doesn’t denote structuration of genre, rather directly examines a technological mode that underpins American cinematic production. A cursory observation of *Redacted* reveals that De Palma deploys melodrama as an aesthetic and emotional instrument to heighten spectatorial investment in the politics surrounding the Iraq war. However,

this point also opens up a more aggressive irritation of the difficult politics in the film: if melodrama is a mode that works actively across medium and genre, and De Palma employs this technological mode as a refrain, what does this say about the rape scene that is the object and origin of the docudrama? De Palma seems to suggest that we, as responsible spectators, should take a long, hard look at the shared qualities between the different aesthetic forms in his film—and further, that while the explicit sexual violence of the rape is difficult to watch, it is already built into the much larger acceptable and available machine that forms the melodramatic mode.

The most popular argument addressing the mid-century peak of American melodrama belongs to the extended project of Laura Mulvey, who points out how resistance works through this activated mode:

Melodrama is the genre of displaced meanings in which the ‘unsaid’ and ‘unspeakable’ find cinematic expression in the *mise en scène* [...] This is almost an extra-diegetic mode of address, reaching out to the spectator who is prepared to find meaning through cinematic style [...] meanings are encapsulated, materialized and mapped onto the image through the signifying potential of cinema itself. (147)

Mulvey demonstrates how melodramatic aesthetics allow cinema to affectively and non-representationally ‘speak’ words otherwise impossible to think within majoritarian registers of control. Melodrama is not known for its subtlety; instead notable for its visual excess and explicit painting of themes in thick layers across materiality of the *mise-en-scène*. Mulvey points out how that this formal excess is where this cinematic mode carries a politics of resistance (queer sexuality implicitly rendered into hetero-normative home life or racial activism located within symmetrical set designs of golden age Hollywood productions). Working within the boundaries of the state, melodrama fashions out a pocket of resistance by providing lived alternatives to present categories of belonging, otherwise forming war machines “where a single possible world

is divided up in the logic of state apparatuses, the singularities of invention distribute themselves among different possible worlds” (Raunig 71).

De Palma employs the melodramatic mode to a similar effect: developing subversive thought through the refrain function of the long-take and excessively stylized mise-en-form. The major problem with *Redacted* is best phrased (in utter exasperation) by Chris Dumas:

De Palma was clearly infuriated, both by the governmental idiocy that would allow Vietnam to occur all over again *and* by the cultural idiocy that made proto-fascists such as Bill O'Reilly suggest that De Palma was guilty of treason for making *Redacted* [...] And yet he knows in advance that no one will care, that no one will even bother to read his film in any terms other than their own preconceptions about Brian De Palma; therefore he explodes the narrative into a thousand pieces, encourages his cast to perform exactly as if they are high-schoolers (or very young American soldiers) displaying themselves on YouTube [...] and ends the film with a horrifying montage of atrocity photographs from the front lines in Iraq [...] This is how De Palma might be said to have a purely *negative* politics. (197)

For a fictional documentary to enforce such explicit politics, over-the-top acting, exaggerated stylization, and disturbing sexual violence, there is both a way and no way talk about it—but that's the point. The film is a very blunt political instrument while also committing to a very implicit and subtle kind of work: making us *feel* how a participatory programmatic of experimentation or choreographed affect of intolerable events in the world like rape, military violence, and the bad politics of the Iraq war *can be ecologically refashioned so to stimulate novel thoughts and feelings for an as-of-yet unknown future*. Not unlike Deleuze's nomadic metallurgists, De Palma reworks well-known melodramatic technologies into a freshly shaped mode that brings new politics of difference to the table and show how the 'betrayal' of thought to the majoritarian state works in excess of a conscious intentionality.

8) Final Refrain

The rape scene itself is somewhat of an elephant in the room for *Redacted* where the overarching question surrounding the scene addresses how to depict such an event without

falling into a ‘purely negative politics.’ Then, creating the one scene that narrates the event itself: the bored, drunk, and horny American soldiers brutally raping an Iraqi teenager before murdering the whole family is, in short, an ethical problem. However, through De Palma’s use of a affective choreography as refrain function, he instead provides a rigorous programmatic that leads to difference and potential by carefully experimenting with perceptions already built into the body. Just as melodrama constitutes a painful but pleasurable experience, it also opens up into a form of spectatorial production that is ultimately ethical in its creation of difference especially while keeping in mind that melodrama remains the dominant mode in American cinema.

De Palma presents the reenactment of the crime as a single and continuous five-minute shot, caught on tape by aspiring filmmaker Private Salazar who rigs a camera to his helmet in a prior scene. Salazar does this so to achieve ‘fly on the wall’ cinema-verité status and document the event without the knowledge of the rest of the squad: “I don’t want ‘em getting camera shy” (*Redacted*). The device itself sits about 30 centimeters above Salazar’s eyes attached to the top of his helmet (Fig. 5). *Redacted* captures the entire scene from Salazar’s diegetic camera; painted with a cheap green low-fidelity night-vision filter and digital grain that we might expect from home video.

It’s difficult to keep track of camera presence and lines-of-sight during the scene as *Redacted* consistently undermines logical continuity. The camera catches Specialist McCoy’s face in a brief profile while arguing with Flake and we see that his helmet has a camera stand similar to Salazar’s, although the machinery itself is missing (Fig. 6). Later in the shot, a camera will appear on McCoy’s helmet although we will never see the footage it records—McCoy’s camera is present but impotent (Fig. 7). This inconsistency destabilizes the long-take and instead

builds a sequence held together by imperceptible cuts lost in the quick pans of Salazar's camera: an illusion of continuous duration. A second major inconsistency follows from how the soldiers converse with Salazar: McCoy, Flake, and Rush repeatedly address the camera directly instead of where we might expect Salazar's eyes (30 cm below) (fig 8.). This Brechtian tactic of breaking the fourth wall is not for the purpose of alienation, but instead designed to give us a radical example of the impossibility of origins by proliferating the gazes and points-of-view within the event. While at once critiquing the documentary drive to truth, the immersive vision and activity found in impotence and amongst the overdetermining presence of cameras also serves to affectively interanimate the scene: "the mute world, the voiceless things once placed as a décor surrounding the usual spectacles, all those things that never interested anyone, from now on thrust themselves brutally and without warning into our schemes and maneuvers" (Serres 3).



Fig. 5 Salazar's camera 30 cm above eye-line



Fig. 6 McCoy without a camera



Fig. 8 McCoy directly addresses Salazar's head-camera, well above his eyes



Fig. 7 An impotent camera appears on McCoy's helmet

The scenario awaiting the camera inside the home is horrifying: Rush holds a young woman captive over a stairwell bannister, while Flake corrals the remaining family members into a side room with his pistol. The camera's point-of-view flashes between three diegetic points of action: the protesting McCoy located near the entrance on screen left, the bound girl held directly in front of Salazar, and the family held hostage down a hall toward screen right. The film negotiates the problem of the home's tight-space by quickly panning between the three limited areas where the action takes place. As though three stages surrounding an audience, the rape and murder of the Iraqi family plays out in faux-duration like a soap opera; wherein a single performance is redundantly captured for coverage by multiple cameras and subsequently presented as a linear structure. This use of technology signals the utter ubiquity of the scenario: the problematic scene of the film has more in common with an amateur home video than any high-budget staging, which would assuredly use other media forms and likewise make the rape available to more traditional sensory registers. In a similar movement to the technological flows that brought night vision from the military to the home use of the handy-cam, the scene affectively relocates the violence abroad through specific sensibilities *only* available to technologies of the home. This radicality emerges from a topological flattening of form and content; working to intensify the familiarity and commonality of the ways in which this scene *can* be known ecologically, the domicile, the 'oikos;' a radical sensing anew of the habituated 'living-room war.' The soldier's amateur acting, exaggerated gestures, and unconvincing lines further enforce the scene's melodramatic undercurrent while potentiating the virtual potentials available to the mode.

Despite the non-naturalistic filmmaking, the scene is horrible to behold but not due to either form or content alone. De Palma takes this relation between melodramatic form and

content to very different ends: this long take works to show us how the implicit and cumulative production of territory through the refrain builds an accessibility across the mise-en-form. *Redacted* makes the explicit sexual violence a decidedly non-exclusive event, but simply an extended process working through the film. That rape is a ubiquitous narrative trait in Hollywood melodrama, and it's difficult for us to imagine an award-winning actress who has not been subjected to some form of melodramatized sexual violence certainly plays into the assemblage as well. But here, the programmatic choreography turns Salazar's camera into a conductor's baton where each character looks to the lens for a cue so to hit an exaggerated gestural pose. In these brief moments of melodramatic tableau, we see the interrelation of character, form, content and environment surface at once as a territory. The affects flow, animate, and forcefully compose the characters on-screen, as each soldier briefly emerges from the informational chaos drawn of the green-speckled home video. The technologies of American masculinity and the 'beefcake' nature of the soldier's terrifying misogyny undergoes a redomesticization through the techniques of the film—relocating the affective work of engagement within a close proximity to the home. Where Peckinpah used technologies to beautify violence and redistribute the suffering of Vietnam on the home front by channeling policy through to sensation; De Palma achieves the same by creatively reworking masculinist technologies of war into new and domestic sensibilities. *Redacted* is a programmatic experimentation for the purpose of *making different sense of the future*.

Redacted, then, is less a film about exposing or revealing the truth, or even educating the public about the origins of a crime—this is shown to be impossible through the inconsistent and impotency of cameras and bodies. Rather, De Palma *makes new sense into a forceful and domestic necessity*, as: “throughout the film the imperative to look again and see what has all too

often gone unperceived, not because it is not visible but because its affective openness has already been predigested and coopted into recognizable images—clichés” (Thain 8-9). The sexual violence in *Redacted* may provoke strong affects of disgust; but this has less to do with the narrative act than how we know that we’ve seen it before but will look differently in the future. Ultimately, it isn’t about the sharpness of the pain but instead about whether the film can make you feel more and differently.

9) Coda: A Motor Program of Experimentation

‘Mistress, 1) You may tie me down on the table, ropes drawn tight, for ten to fifteen minutes, time enough to prepare the instruments; 2) One hundred lashes at least, a pause of several minutes; 3) You begin sewing, you sew up the hole in the glans; you sew the skin around the glans to the glans itself, preventing the top from tearing; you sew the scrotum to the skin of the thighs. You sew the breasts, securely attaching a button with four holes to each nipple. You may connect them with an elastic band with buttonholes—*Now you go on to the second phase:* 4) You can choose either to turn me over on the table so I am tied lying on my stomach, but with my legs together, or to bind me to the post with my wrists together, and my legs also, my whole body tightly bound; 5) You whip my back buttocks thighs, a hundred lashes at least; 6) You sew my buttocks together, all the way up and down the crack of my ass. Tightly, with a doubled thread, each stitch knotted. If I am on the table, now tie me to the post; 7) You give me fifty thrashes on the buttocks; 8) If you wish to intensify the torture and carry out your threat from last time, stick the pins all the way into my buttocks as far as they go; 9) Then you may tie me to the chair; you give me thirty thrashes on the breasts and stick in the smaller pins; if you wish, you may heat them red-hot beforehand, all or some. I should be tightly bound to the chair, hands behind my back so my chest sticks out. I haven't mentioned burns, only because I have a medical exam coming up in awhile, and they take a long time to heal.’ This is not a phantasy, it is a program: There is an essential difference between the psychoanalytic interpretation of the phantasy and the antipsychiatric experimentation of the program. Between the phantasy, an interpretation that must itself be interpreted, and the motor program of experimentation. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:151)

Structured through nine refrains as a program, Deleuze and Guattari painstakingly walk the reader through their ethics of care: the force of affect shaking loose the potential of the virtual in the everyday. In reading this selection, Deleuze and Guattari guide us through a series of experiments designed to draw a certain amount of pleasure from the productive qualities

inherent to affect. Here, pain becomes productive as we experiment with what's built into the body. Melodrama, like Deleuze and Guattari's quote, is also a motor program of experimentation quite distinct from fantasies. De Palma shows us how to choreograph or program affect so to ethically produce new capacities of sensation. Here, we experiment through the refrains of *Redacted* and arrive in a place and sensation of difference. The program isn't about a violence committed on the body, it's about making you feel an excess, and making you feel more.

Redacted ends with Specialist McCoy moved to tears while attending his homecoming party. The scene takes place in a neighborhood pub and is shot from the point-of-view of an off-screen friend carrying a handy-cam. Presented as a single take, his friends begin to insist on McCoy telling a war story. He begins slowly, but this quickly builds to a helpless rage about the terrible things he has seen in Iraq. Something has changed for McCoy; he's been exposed to the same unpredictable affective excess that we have as we now share a territory structured by the program of the refrain. Appearing useless, as though totally disassociated from his surroundings and immobilized by sensation, McCoy's eyes begin to water as his rant reaches a fevered pitch. The surrounding bar drowns out his voice with cheers of support, much to the bewilderment of the soldier. Somehow, being back at home no longer makes any sense—McCoy's seen too much and cannot recuperate. A non-diegetic score kicks in to further hammer home a melodramatic extravagance to the scene. De Palma takes this final song from Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*, a melodramatic opera about torture, rape, and revenge. The bar patrons and McCoy's friends are blinded to both the soldier's pain and the musical history aiding their reactions: the patrons and friends are unable to see their complicity and enabling activity in the war. Much like the bettors present for Goya's 'Fighting With Cudgels,' McCoy's friends and family remain oblivious to the shared materiality of ecology. We however, you, I, and they are now programmed differently.

Curiously, all of that makes me think of a past or future war: night trains, air raids, fallout shelters, small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life. He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Those memories whose only function had been to leave behind nothing but memories. He wrote: I've been round the world several times and now only banality still interests me. On this trip, I've tracked it with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter.

~Chris Marker

Standard Operating Procedure (2008): Making Sense of the Myopic

1) A Barometry of Light

One scene left on the cutting room floor of Errol Morris' documentary of the events surrounding the infamous Abu Ghraib images details a little known encounter between former Brigadier General Janice Karpinski and an imprisoned Saddam Hussein in the days immediately prior to his execution by hanging. Karpinski was responsible for supervising the prison system and military police in Iraq and, by extension, was accountable for the US military officials that created the well-circulated images depicting the sexual humiliation and torture enacted upon Iraqi prisoners. The pictures are widely distributed and well known, perhaps an enduring institutional self-portrait of the US military complex during the second Gulf War. While Karpinski was never directly held responsible for the events at Abu Ghraib, the Bush administration responded to the embarrassing photographs by demoting Karpinski to a rank of Lieutenant Colonel following a peripheral investigation—the reason for punishment officially justified as a response to minor charges including shoplifting. Karpinski remains the highest-ranking military personnel officially, even if indirectly, tied to the debacle (Smaill 82); but here there was no clear-cut case for whose head had to roll, so it became a question of how important and how many had to fall on the sword. While Karpinski claims ignorance to the events at Abu Ghraib, she *was* privy to the highly classified information flowing out of the torture chambers. This position between lack-of-knowledge and too-much plays out in a strangely ambivalent

manner through the interviews Karpinski gives in Morris' film—a sense of sovereign privilege balanced with embittered resentment. This difficult emotion surfaces most clearly as she recounts her anecdote about Hussein.

Karpinski clarifies that her brief meeting with the deposed leader was a display of power, that: “he *was my prisoner*” (*SOP*). Hidden in her narrative is a strain of sanctioned logic that tips the ethical questions surrounding warfare, torture, and violence into the philosophical territory of perception. She relays how Hussein asked for two things when they briefly met: first, he wanted something to eat (he preferred pears and apricots to the apples and oranges provided in his cell), and second he asked Karpinski to repair his glasses so that he might read the Koran before his execution (Fig. 9). Taken aback by the strange requests, Karpinski empathetically promised to help the former dictator and asked his jailors for some context. Hussein's CIA handlers revealed that they had ordered the military police to actually *switch out the corrective lenses in his glasses for a much weaker prescription without Hussein's knowledge*. Karpinski rounds off the interview by justifying this act as a small part of the submissive power games that constitute ‘standard operating procedure’ (here, the military's philanthropic gift of clear sight becomes a benevolent act).

On the surface, sabotaging a pair of glasses seems a banal measure, but the idea of imposing a state-sanctioned myopia upon a prisoner of war carries profound philosophical clout, if not for the deception than surely in the active effort to, as Chris Marker quips in *Sans Soleil*, have “small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life”. Here, fuzzy apples and oranges bend myopic into the interrogation process. Rephrased, this ‘interrogation’ seems to go beyond the normal registers of subversive tactics forcing submission: how can we interpret the act of altering someone's visual world at the slightest imperceptible level as a form of torture? What kind of

work might uncorrected vision inflect upon a person, and how might blurring Saddam Hussein's field of vision by tinkering with a technical object fundamentally alter the lived experience of his final days? Morris realizes this scene by floating the camera through a reenactment of the jail cell, shot in such an extreme shallow focus that only the smallest flecks of dust remain clear. The blur and haze of this visual field is suffocating: the camera seems to drown in a fine mist of light particles, flowing colors, and blurred cell architecture—all process, loosely defined (Fig. 10).

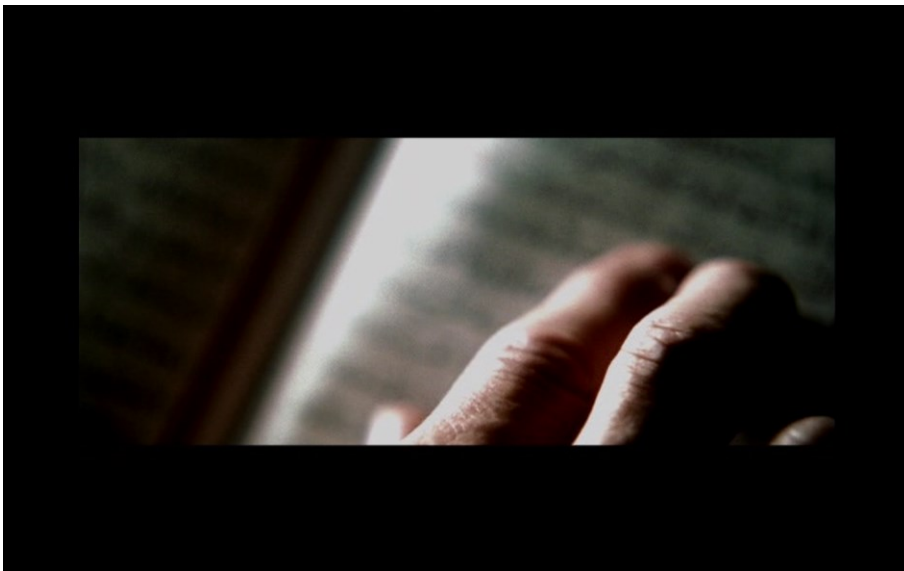


Fig. 9 State sanctioned myopia

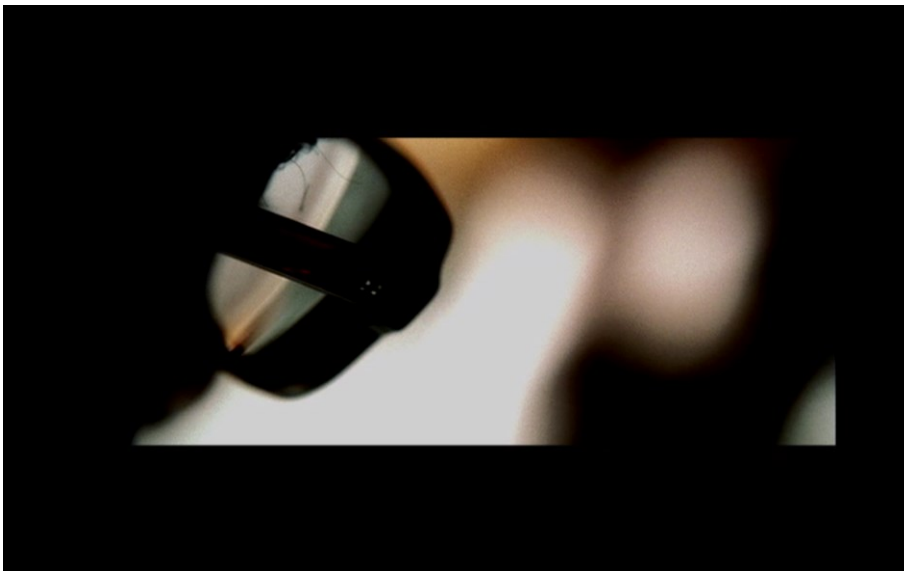


Fig. 10 All process, loosely defined

2) Toward a Sensory Ethics of Machine

This is not the place to speculate whether the US military treated Hussein fairly, or to judge the handling of past events through an applied ethics based on sovereignty and individual responsibility, but instead to speak philosophically about how technical objects impact, inflect, and fold into the process of sensory experience: how war machine provoke flights of perception for a different future. That said, this chapter is primarily theoretical in scope and method, pursuing three central questions: what are the political relations between machines and humans? How does technical invention work alongside sensation? How might Morris' use of new technology constitute an ethical approach to the perception of images? The history of cinema technology and warfare is well-examined, particularly how film operates to control audiences in a weak perspectivalism as famously noted by Paul Virilio: "weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception" (6). More recently, this line of thought finds an update following the turn to digital filmmaking and burst of cinema from American incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan:

The screen has become a weapon in the sense that it works on our minds, in a psychological warfare. This oversaturation of spectacularized images and perspectives creates on the one hand an effect of disconnection or distance from reality as 'pure spectacle.' On the other hand [...] actual reality keeps on returning, as mediated by affective screens, to mobilize us politically and ethically. (Pisters 273)

Patricia Pisters suggests that screen culture documenting contemporary conflict needs to be addressed in terms of the 'work' it does; otherwise how these films 'image' violence both as a visual depiction and as an active verb in the shaping of public apprehension. However, this work or force always seems to be a one-way street, as both of these critics insist throughout their thought that the cinematic 'mediation' of war—for better or worse—enacts a form of 'distancing' from 'actual reality.' My analysis departs from this approach in an attempt to think around the

problem of the screen as a ‘mediation’ of conflict, instead I opt for a model that considers imaging technology in a more immersive, immaterial, and multilateral network of sensory relations. Drawing on Félix Guattari’s theories of the ‘machinic,’ I wish to pose *Standard Operating Procedure* as a documentary deployment of technical imaging that troubles the spectator’s immediacy to conflict by working to immerse the viewer into a politically charged and fluidly immaterial interaction between the human and non-human assemblage of audiovisual sensation.

As Morris himself writes in the film’s production notes: “what if we could enter history through a photograph? What if we could enter the world of this war, as if you were using the photographs as a portal into history? Photographs are often used to accompany historical narration, but here we use them the other way around” (Qtd. in Smaill, 84). The questions driving my investigation of *Standard Operating Procedure* do not ask whether the film distances or mediates the politics of war; but instead focus on Morris’ attempts to make his film into a machine that folds together the subject position of the spectator with cinematic environment of the film. In the example of Hussein’s malfunctioning glasses above, Morris doesn’t just try to vividly recreate the cell as a second order copy—he tries to *take the spectator there* by making us *think and feel* an experience of drowning in sensory confusion and the tactile weight of blurred vision. It’s not often that art shocks us into recalling that both light and air share material qualities of density and speed: how do we talk about a film that makes us feel the thick weight of immersion in the optical world? We use barometry to translate the imperceptible forces of air pressure into anthropomorphic information, is it possible to use cameras to affect the densities or speeds of light and what kind of politics does this sensible documentary evidence inflect upon the spectator?

Guattari defines the machinic as a model of subject formation that refutes psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions that traditionally privilege a discrete body. Bernd Herzogenrath describes this concept as a response to how the: “natural-artificial distinction is untenable, [the machinic] serves to counter any conception of humans and their relationship to the world in terms of a stable, unproblematic nature (whether human or nonhuman)” (47). To consider the machinic then is to contemplate the role and agency that assemblages of matter and information display in material or immaterial interrelations that play and flow over time. The affective qualities of a machinic assemblage can occur within or beyond human sensible registers—we often use technology to translate immaterial information into more discernible forms like X-Ray photographs or Geiger counters. Rather than thinking of particular machines as tools or prosthetic extensions of self, the machinic spectator engages media as a processual event marked by a fluid interaction and inflection rather than as a mediated experience which would insist on some degree of layering from the documentary origin relying on a physical marking off of the human from the machine.

This turn to rethinking the relations between technical objects and the human being is indebted to the thought of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. Working to replace the ‘individual’ with the active process of ‘individuation,’ Simondon considers the transaction between technology and human being as always being a form of mutual, creative, and cumulative exchange where the polar ends of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ fold inward during the process of ‘transduction,’ leaving both poles thereafter different. Thomas Lamarre explains the interrelational event through the example of writing, where:

Individuation in the act of writing is not a matter of adding predications to an object or subject. Rather, writing becomes a process of predicating, through which objects and subjects become individuated. Such writing is not only a matter of an inversion that makes objects transitive to their sensible qualities, for the subject is not given in advance,

either. This act of predicating is not a matter of transitive or intransitive, but of both: *in the mode of the transductive*. (Emphasis added) (Combes xvii)

Simondon's thought addressing the being of technical objects hinges on a kind of responsibility: human beings need to dispel with the idea of anthropomorphic intentionality in favor of reinvesting in the material qualities of machines and information. This comprehension of technical objects calls for a redressing of mediation, or 'medium' by rethinking perception as what Brian Massumi calls "embodied cognition," which is instead: "direct and *immediate*" (82). To rethink mediation as an '*immediate*' *event* gets at the real stakes of the theory of machinic spectatorship I am suggesting here: it's never about a lack of agency or a relegated passivity for the spectator, because there is never the recourse to look away (*immediate* environment is pre-individual and always ongoing). Transduction is not limited to instant of singular technical interactions, as the spectator is rather immersed in fields of both sensible and insensible material information; otherwise, what we have termed media ecologies. The ethical question rephrased through ecology is not an application (did s/he behave with good intent in this event and can we hold s/he responsible?) but instead: how do we embrace the technical, the machine, and the material world so to get at a different future? The way out lies in an ethics of creation: "all arts are occurrent arts because any and every perception, artifactual or 'natural,' is just that, an experiential event. It's an event both in the sense that it is a happening, and in the sense that when it happens something new transpires [...] not as 'media' but according to the type of experiential event they effect" (Massumi, 82-3).

Guattari notes that while dwelling on the interrelations of machines, humans, and thought, there are always dangers—like those stressed by Virilio and Pisters—alongside the potential found in material experimentation:

The machinic production of subjectivity can work for the better or for the worse. [...] At best there is the creation, or invention, of new Universes of reference; at the worst there is the deadening influence of the mass media to which millions of individuals are currently condemned. Technological developments together with social experimentation in these new domains are perhaps capable of leading us out of the current period of oppression and into a post-media era characterised by the reappropriation and resingularisation of the use of media. (1995: 5)

Here, we have the closest possible program to an ethics of media ecology: creation is always a gambit for better or worse (with effects far-ranging into future politics), but Guattari notes that our current position is not exactly healthy, rather plagued by cliché and oppression. Instead of considering thought patterns that singularize as a molarity or a macropolitics, Guattari instead advocates a resistance located in transversal thought, where the ‘betterment’ hopefully enabled in difference is a product of thinking across political and ecological categories normally thought discrete (concretization is how and where dangers occur: war and peace, pollution and health, ecology and animal extinction, the variegation of capitalist labor, etc.). A machinic consideration of ethics attempts to leave behind the traditional builds of moral judgment like good, bad, truth that serve as concrete evaluative criteria serving to uphold such ‘molar’ thought patterns:

As for morality, it has to be admitted that a pedagogy of values does not exist [...] Values only have universal significance to the extent that they are supported by the Territories of practice, experience, of intensive power that transversalise them. It is because values are not fixed in a heaven of transcendent Ideas that they can just as easily implode [...] intellectuals should no longer be asked to erect themselves as master thinkers or providers of moral lessons, but to work, even in the most extreme solitude, at putting into circulation tools for transversality. (1995: 129-30)

Ethics leaves the realm of application and judgment in favor of affective evaluation, practice, and lived techniques. Thinking back to *Standard Operating Procedure*, we can see how the documentary anesthetization of Saddam Hussein’s jail cell moves passed the explicitly political evaluative criteria of educating us on patterns of military control. Instead, Morris displays a will to environmental design where he *makes us feel a basic mistrust in the material environment*

governed by technical objects that index a politically controlled politics. Morris' film isn't simply about showing us 'this is what happened to Hussein in his final days, isn't this a curious torture tactic?' but instead about making the spectator *feel* the affective tug of a lived resistance by forcing a shock to thought—technical objects govern our thought *all the time* and *the state knows how to coopt the agency of machines*. Enacting an ethics of difference means going beyond 'seeing' control and instead making it *thought and felt*; Morris' documentary is a radical political intervention at the level of form that affects new perceptual configurations through a process of transduction.

3) What Is Ecology?

How, exactly, do the machinations of *Standard Operating Procedure* work as a part of an ecology? The machinic is never limited to artificially technical objects, as machines form in nature all the time—displaying an impulse to 'cooperation' or 'self-organization.' Our habit to name objects with proper nouns is a false consciousness hiding our knowledge that matter is always closer to an active verbal form (the slowness of evolution, the animation of decay). Transversal logic aims to break this consciousness by considering machinic agency in terms of ecology, which takes into account how classified 'objects' in nature are correlatively similar, but in fact always a forceful process. Following Alfred North Whitehead's observation that the world "is made up of events, and nothing but events: happenings rather than things, verbs rather than nouns, processes rather than substances" (Shaviro 17), ecological criticism attempts to account for the agency, and will displayed by processes when they reach a specific singularity and form intuitively working machines. Deleuze and Guattari call this 'cooperation' the 'machinic phylum,' or:

Some have spoken of an 'ecosystem,' not only situated at the origin, in which work tools and weapons of war exchange their determinations: it seems that the same *machinic*

phylum traverses both [...] materiality, natural or artificial, and both simultaneously; it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation, matter as a conveyor of singularities and traits of expression. (1987: 395, 409)

To speak about a media ecology then, is really to talk about how machines, both artificial and natural, interact with human beings while also keeping an eye on the ‘responsibility’ and ethical implications of the machinic processes underpinning our ‘oikos’ or home. ‘Responsibility’ lies in acknowledging how these open, evolving, and proliferating networks display a will to organization (that which we name as singular or discrete) while also coalescing from material flows well beyond habitual definitions. I feel that ‘responsibility’ is the correct word for these ethics, as the term implies a certain amount of care taken to the task of transversal environmental upkeep (which should also indicate the political urgency of the project), while the prefix ‘re’ displays an impulse to repetition: difference will only arise from an autonomous imperative to ecological *responsibility*.

To tie this back to our initial example from *Standard Operating Procedure*, the responsible cognition that occurs (thinking and feeling the immaterial tendrils of state control) works to dispel thoughts of blame and reverse action (does Saddam deserve this treatment?) in favor of a heightened awareness carried intuitively to an unknown future where a horizon of processual events awaits (how is everything different now that I’ve *felt* this?). In an ecologically responsible ethics, we work to dismantle notions of the sovereign subject and the prioritization of secular agency so that we might design a different future.

Manuel DeLanda speaks about the machinic phylum in order to articulate his form of vitalist materiality through *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*. For DeLanda, the impulse toward the self-organization of the machinic phylum indicates a kind of ‘non-organic life’:

All processes in which a group of previously disconnected elements suddenly reaches a critical point at which they begin to ‘cooperate’ to form a higher level entity [...] the

individual spin of atoms in a metal ‘cooperate’ to make the metal magnetic; the individual molecules in a chemical reaction ‘cooperate’ to create the perfectly rhythmic patterns of a chemical clock; the cells making up an amoeba colony ‘cooperate’ under certain conditions to assemble an organism with differentiated organs; and the different termites in a colony ‘cooperate’ to build a nest [these ‘machines’] are at some deep level essentially similar. (6-7)

The ‘cooperation’ of non-human actants is essential to this build of ethics as the concept provides a coherent example of why sovereignty-based applied ethics maintain a shortsighted scope of reality. Cooperation entails an autonomous impulse to singularity: many moving parts form a singular and higher order structure that is not necessarily biological, or ‘conscious’ in anthropomorphic terms. The cooperation of material liveness shows how a machine is a unique condensation of natural forces: information that together passes a threshold and produce a gestalt effect. If we want to speak practically about how this vital self-organization finds a use-value in our contemporary socio-economic milieu, then we need to seriously address the prospect of *designing political ecologies*. Cooperation in an ecology is not a special effect of subjective relativity—material forces move and work autonomously with or without human thought and agency. The real stakes of an ethical and responsible ecological design then, lies in whether we can make systems pass the singularity threshold of the machine so to autonomously bridge the divide between affect and lived thought, or as William Connolly asks: “if affect retains an element of autonomy that pulls thinking beyond the steady control of intellectual governance, how could this dimension of thinking itself be refined or sharpened? If affect, that is, *becomes organized* into habits of feeling and judgment that flow into the intellect, by what means can this dimension of being be *reeducated*?” (Emphasis added) (2002: 76). My answer to this question finds its legs in our push to think past the discrete ‘film-object’ and instead account for how a documentary like *Standard Operating Procedure* might instead work as a finely tuned

audiovisual environment that autonomously affects the spectator in an ethical and responsible treatment of an ecology currently producing war.

4) Morris as Responsible Designer; Technician; Inventor

My suggestion in this consideration of *Standard Operating Procedure* is that Morris has created a media ecology that self-organizes in its variegated use of technical perceptions that fluidly interrelate with the spectator through a series of mutual exchanges or becomings. This swap of information (between media ecology and spectator) is what makes this documentary special: it's not a film about compiling and presenting information, but instead a dramatized sensory ethnography of Iraq working to have both spectator and ecology move away from current political flows. Documentary here ceases to be about relaying information in the traditional sense of exposing a governmental cover-up or educating the audience about the events at Abu Ghraib, and tries to leave behind some of the perceptual trappings enforced by the incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan through a cooperative effort between screen environment and spectator.

As Morris has stated repeatedly in interviews, his film isn't about how the images constituted one of the worst scandals in American military history, but instead how the government rebuilt the ontology of the photographs so to deflect popular criticism and dissent. The government made the public act of recognizing the Abu Ghraib images into a supporting force for the war by working the blame onto a particular and small group of people: "[the Bush administration] were able to manipulate it to their advantage, and it became a different kind of issue" and that influence occurred at cognitive level where "we all come to photographs with a certain set of expectations and beliefs that determine what we see" (Brink and Oppenheimer 314). *Standard Operating Procedure* sets about doing the exact opposite of the US Government's

attempt to modulate identification to political ends. Morris feels that we have already had our glasses tinkered with and the formal stylization of his documentary attempts to counteract or help us see possibility beyond that control: fluidly forcing a new political environment where the Abu Ghraib images are divorced from their prior structured context and understood as a part of a new political ecology. Both film and spectator enter a new set of politics by the end of the interaction.

Morris' visual environment employs a variety of stylized reenactments rendered by 35mm and digital cameras, CGI animation, and images generated through an array of still photographic devices. Several very different machines maintain the relatively complex visual environment, a process further complicated by novel technologies that penetrate deeply into the imperceptible folds of reality (the Phantom v9 high-speed digital camera and Errol Morris' self-designed Interrotron), not to mention the curious presence of animals. Machine, perception, and thought are an assemblage tightly wound by the extreme stylizations of Morris; these new technologies in particular demonstrate how: "the concept of the machine functions to describe a life that is at one and the same time a capacity for connection, integration, system and meaning [...] the eye, as an organ of the body, it is both territorialized according to the organism's spatial and social milieu extending or deterritorializing itself through visual technologies that expand the organism's range of movement and power" (Colebrook 20). Colebrook points out that the spectator's engagement with a particular media is not a technological extension of self or form of sensory prosthetic, but instead an immersive relationship that takes the spectator into a world only made possible through technology while affectively feeding back information that is retained for any future reality. Thus, the machinic is always a fluidly two-way transaction between self and expanded sensory environment. In order to demonstrate how I feel Morris' perceptual machine works to ethically recalibrate the sensations of the spectator, I wish to

closely analyze the workings of his unique machines before returning to the gestalt cooperation of the film.

5) Ethics & the Problem of ‘Mediation’

Much of the secondary criticism addressing *Standard Operating Procedure* pays close attention to Morris’ use of technology; pairing style and form with ethical takes on his mediation of torture. The quick leap to say that Morris is working reflexively or to paint thick layers of removal between viewer, screen and violence is an argument that he has decried on several occasions: “I have a very different attitude about photography and images and war that comes from a very, very different place to, say someone like Susan Sontag, who is concerned with the relationship between distancing, empathy and violence” (Brink and Oppenheimer 312). I would like to take Morris at his word and stay far away from mediation and empathy by instead suggesting that *Standard Operating Procedure* is an active attempt to politically intervene at the level of the sensible or to enact a similar process as the tinkering with Hussein’s glasses—effectively changing apprehension for future encounters. Morris’ technical media environment is a push to *make sense* of the myopic. Ethics, here, is the difference found in the creative, new, and collaborative sensations made available through ecological design.

Morris’ use of the Interrotron is no stranger to academic criticism. The camera, of Morris’ own design and copyright, is a technological refashioning of the better-known teleprompter (Fig. 11). Using a system of mirrors to channel light between remote live-stream cameras and screens, the Interrotron displays the face of the interviewer overtop the camera lens pointed at the interviewee. The effects of Morris’ system bring the Interrotron into close proximity with the machine’s namesake: a recorded *interrogation* allowing a two-way face-to-face encounter that also takes advantage of the durational shooting allowed by digital hard drives (Janice Karpinski’s

interview added up to 17 hours of footage over two days—as any filmmaker could attest, an experiment in cinematic torture (1276 Danchev)). The novelty of the Interrotron technology bears heavily on the film, while explicitly concentrating formal attention on *Standard Operating Procedure*'s narration of interrogation and torture.

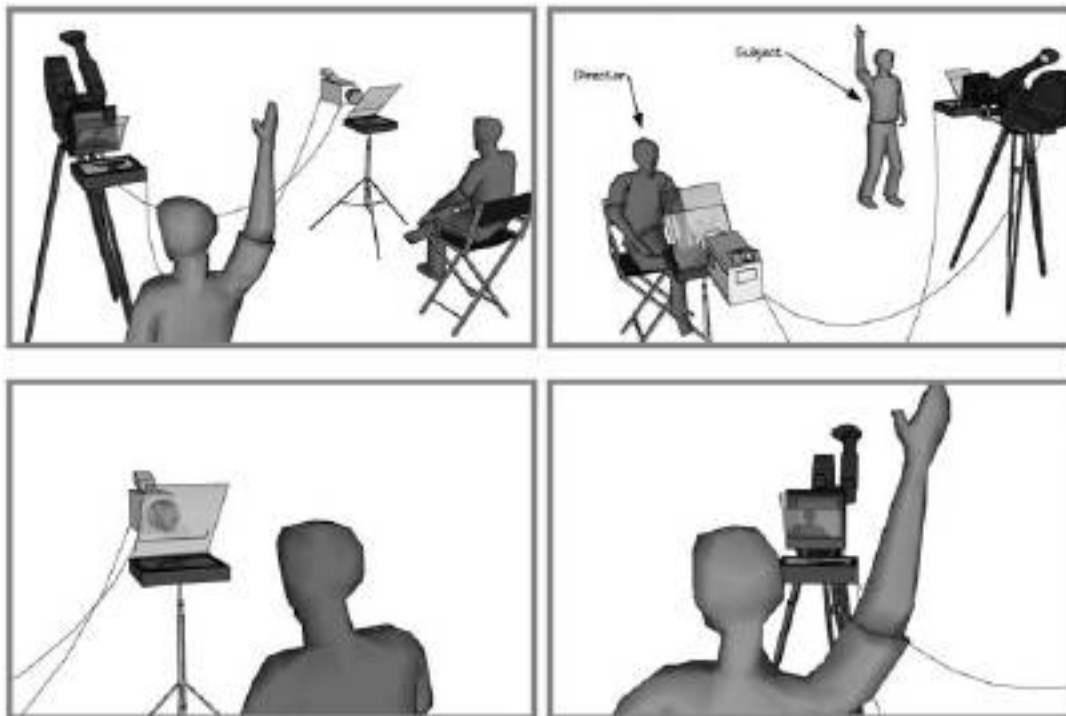


Fig. 11 The Interrotron – Illustration by Steve Hardie in *Ethics and Images of Pain* 64

There is a strong critical tendency to read the Interrotron alongside questions of ethics. Through the build of face-to-face morality posed by Emmanuel Levinas, Alex Gerbaz argues that: “our empathy shifts according to this new perspective, the Interrotron enables us to empathise with Morris, who shares the camera’s line of sight” (26). Similarly, Caetlin Benson-Allott insists on the camera posing a physical intervention, as Morris: “uses the Interrotron’s first-person architecture to destabilize our faith in documentary transparency. *Standard Operating Procedure* values the Interrotron for its ability to debunk the viewer’s faith that any photographs (including the Abu Ghraib photographs) ever speak directly to [the spectator]” (41). While these critics say very different things about the work committed by the Interrotron, both

insist that its primary commitment is to mediate the event: that the camera helps expand a chain of blockages between Morris, the interviewee, the spectator, and the events at Abu Ghraib. This logic brings us back to the dangerous aesthetics of distance noted by Pisters and Virilio; where multiplied screens become ideological tools rendering conflict as raw information. This logic can in turn lead to problematic critical assertions: “so war, when it has been turned into information, ceases to be a realist war and becomes a virtual war” (Baudrillard 41).

Insisting on the concreteness of the camera ultimately fails to account for the particular affections made available by the Interrotron. Gerbaz’s attempt to read the machine together with a Levinasian ethics forces conclusions that are similarly difficult to those advanced by Jean Baudrillard’s infamous proclamation *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*: “the Interrotron adds to the mediating effects of the screen while simultaneously creating the illusion that mediation between character and viewer is minimized [...] we submit our consciousness to the Other—in other words, respond[ing] ethically—depends on how [we] understand mediation” (Gerbaz, 26). Deleuze and Guattari dedicate an entire plateau to dispelling the attempt to think about the face as a form of radical alterity that forces an ethical recognition of a life beyond the spectator’s body—as advocated by Levinas. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari remark how the face is not human at all, but an ‘abstract machine’ that: “does not assume a preexistent subject or signifier but it is subjacent to them and provides the substance necessary to them” (1987: 170). The abstractness of the face stems from how within the material world (utterly emptied of representation) the face has no real meaning (meaning is anthropomorphically actualized). Instead, the face always presents an imperfect and inhuman signification of internal thoughts or emotions. The face is only human insofar as it is an abstract placeholder for social identity politics (which more often than not lead to discrimination of the attached body). The machinic

operations of the face are only discernible from the surrounding ecology through the semblance of self that surfaces in the act of perception and recognition. Therefore in recognizing any ‘other’ face, we’re not seeing another being but a sense of personal politics mapped onto a body that is only linguistically and representationally privileged from the surrounding environment, or as Massumi points out so eloquently: “all perception is immanent—in the case of animal life, to the bodily milieu of its own becoming. When we see an ‘object’ ‘out there’ we are seeing a semblance of our own life’s passing, immanent to its own occurrence” (27). For this reason, it may be better to rephrase the face-to-face ethics as a machine-to-machine interrelation—an apt material metaphor for this exchange of information might be the two-way mirror, where the faint index of ‘self’ reflected on glass always taints the sightline and recognition of an ‘other’. The face is a collaboration of bodies and environment, ‘belonging’ to no one, alone.

6) Two Way Mirror: Drawing Face with the Interrotron

We are now getting to a place where the idea of mediation can be permanently thrown out of ecology: a camera is not an inert object, but itself a facial machine that we are able to recognize against the noisy backdrop of the perceptual world. What’s more, cameras relay their own compact and specific experience of a sensible environment; that we eventually digest as film. The Interrotron—while not itself an entirely new invention—enables a unique type of perceptual understanding where the camera at once draws a face upon the interviewee (both by making the individual recognizable in close-up and by eliciting reaction through Morris’ surrogate face) while also working to draw face upon the spectator. (*‘Drawing face’* taken two ways and mutually). As I see it, the spectator is encouraged by the film to activate certain facial patterns for two distinct reasons: first the affective back-and-forth interaction between us in the theatre and the on-screen face; but also the imperceptible draw we might feel to react as Morris

does on the pane of glass between lens and interrogated subject. In other words, those of us seated watching *Standard Operating Procedure* are not only communicating with those interviewed, but also beckoned to join in alongside the invisible yet implied facial gestures of Morris himself.

Linda Williams notices the strange affective pull of Morris' face, and briefly speaks about a scene when Morris is interviewing former Specialist Lyndie England describing an event when Sergeant Chip Frederick forced blindfolded prisoners to masturbate in public view. Her face framed by the Interrotron's lens, England reports that one of the prisoners masturbated for a full forty five minutes and pauses for a moment before reinforcing the incredulity of the situation with a laugh and a follow-up: "no joke" (*SOP*). Williams notes that a form of affective contagion rippled throughout the theatre in this moment, as she writes:

It is possible to recoil at the inhumanity of [England's] laugh. Though it is worth noting that in the public screenings I attended, audiences sometimes laughed uncomfortably along with England. It is further possible that this snigger may itself be a response to Morris' own facial reaction—raised eyebrow perhaps—to her recitation [...] the present-day snigger invites our uncomfortable complicity at the 'joke' of a human body become machine. (2010: 45-6) (Fig. 12)

Here, Williams describes how the film forms a very live immaterial connection between viewer and screen: as England responds with a laugh (to the projection of Morris' face overtop of the camera lens), the audience forms a similar interfacial contract as the spectator tries to affectively fill the mold of disbelief expressed on Morris' face.

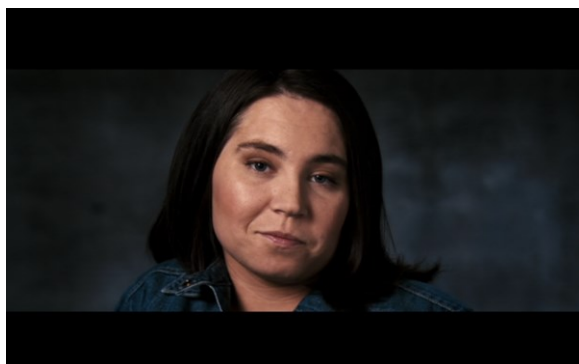


Fig. 12 The snigger and raised eyebrow ... 'joke' of a human body become machine

This affective response, I feel, is testament to the Interrotron's machinic ability to *draw face*: the presence of Morris, the image of England, and the reception of the spectator form a connective tissue and discernible interaction. Anna Munster describes these bonding media events as "interfaciality," or how: "the interface functions as glue, tenuously holding together the impossible worlds of the machinic and the organic [...] [spectators are] trapped in the psychosis of the digital makeover, which denies its relation to the organic but solicits the human face to 'communicate,' to engage, to permit expressivity" (116, 130). In *Standard Operating Procedure*, the interviews do not simply function to create a sense of empathy, nor to distance the viewer from conflict through layers of mediation, but instead work to draw forth the face of the interrogator as through a bodily and imperceptible affective dialogue.

7) Image, Face, and Consumption: A Speculative Interlude

Matthew Fuller, in his reading of Vilém Flusser's *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, suggests that cameras—as they exist in media ecologies—are much closer to living creatures than a simple object or tool:

A technology is a bearer of forces and drives, is indeed made up of them. Second, it is composed by the mutual intermeshing of various other forces that might be technical, aesthetic, economic, chemical—that *might have to do with the capacities of human bodies as affordances*—and which pass between all such bodies and are composed through and among them (emphasis added). (56)

I think that Fuller and Flusser are getting at a kind of post-humanism where an apparatus, like a camera, finds its material or 'concrete' composition through the interrelation of multiple ecological flows of information. That *we* sense an object's inertness is due to human habit and ignorance: "if we focus exclusively on the chunkiness of the object as it slothfully presents itself in the flow of change, we are living the abstraction that the world comes in fundamentally

inertial chunks of what we are habitually tempted to call matter *as opposed to* life” (Massumi 27). In this immanent approach to ontology (where an ‘object’ is an ‘abstraction’ but ecological ‘objectness’ might be better termed a *process* of informational negentropy), cameras are apparatuses capable of ‘capturing’ information: a process that amounts to a vital understanding of the sensory capabilities of non-human ‘objects’ (a camera is composed of informational flows and also captures information: a sensory exchange). Recalling Massumi’s point that “every perception is a creative activity culminating in the production of an event of change. A perception is its own event” (27), then what would happen if the process of a camera’s capture begins to document its own autonomy? In other words, if a camera can ‘perceive,’ what if it could also—like a human—acknowledge its own political preconceptions brought to the table in the moment of capture? Are inert apparatus of capture capable of political ecological reflexivity? Let me explain...

The Interrotron is as much a physical system of mirrors and digital circuits channeling photons into digital imagery, as it is the receiver of visual information from the interviewer, translator to interviewee, cartographer to celluloid, transmitter to DVD hardware, drawer of face on the audience, etc. The Interrotron is part and process of all of these various probeheads extending from a web of information—as much a consistent composition of circuitry as of the social milieu that produces the camera and the one it helps produce. These chains of immaterial interrelations extend *ad infinitum*: the limit only tops out with our imagination (if a logical connection can be drawn, it’s there), and sometimes these chains help us get beyond imaginative cognitive limits. Such is the work of a machine in immanence: a process of folding technology into an ecology of bodies through an environmental production of different sensibilities. The ethical gesture lies in how we form these environments to work and spark thought while altering

perception by proliferating the points of contact. If Morris' project is, as I argue, an attempt to counter-act the dangers posed by Virilio and Pisters (where war cinema functions as "stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system affecting human reactions and even the perceptual identification of objects" (Virilio 6)), then we must address how Morris' technical aesthetics go further than simply drawing critical faces out of the spectator. Another place we can see an aesthetics of machinic resistance at work in *Standard Operating Procedure* lies in how the Interrotron *forces us to recognize the machine's own immaterial genetic code: that cameras, Abu Ghraib, and the images produced there, are immaterially linked through memory and the felt complexity of time.*

There are two points in the film when the Interrotron seems to fold in on its own ecological relations, or rather *capture/eat itself*. While England is asked to describe a photograph depicting her holding a leash attached to the neck of a naked Iraqi prisoner, her eyes begin to wander around the frame as she describes the image in front of her. The spectator clearly understands that the camera no longer holds the projected image of Morris' face, but that the screen covering the lens now holds the image that England is presently describing (Fig. 13). The film cuts to a framed still of the picture, enforcing the boundaries that England's eyes seem to be exploring. If, as I have argued above, the Interrotron works to draw forth the face of the interrogator, how does the audience react when the map that the camera is draws forth cease to be a face at all and becomes an image?

While England inspects a photo detailing her own past actions, we also begin to feel as though she is closely analyzing our own face (if the 'face' of the audience is an image, in a second occurrence Specialist Krol (Fig. 14) draws close enough that it feels like he's searching our pores for molecular blemishes). In this moment, I am reminded of W. J. T. Mitchell's

observation regarding the media circulation of the 9/11 attacks, that: “everyone carries with them some imprint of the images of destruction [...] everyone recognized the ways in which these images reminded people of things they had already seen” (2011: 80). This is certainly the case with many images in an ecology of war; we need only think back to the narration of Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* and how overhearing an elderly Japanese couple pray for the protection of a deceased cat named Tora is transversally linked to immaterial and perceptual memories of the military code name for Pearl Harbor: “Tora! Tora! Tora!”. Are these battle cries in memory of the cat, or vice versa?

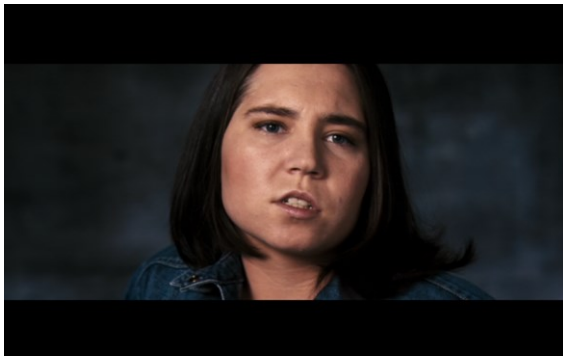


Fig. 13 No longer look at Morris

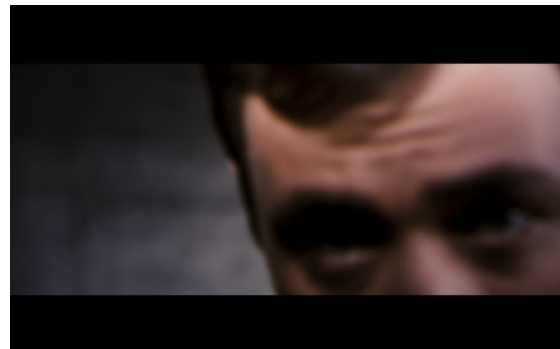


Fig. 14 Inspecting the camera as though a face

September 11 seems to be a special case that exists in the periphery of the Abu Ghraib images; but a very direct relation exists and I think we can read the ‘lives’ of these images quite closely. Mitchell has pointed out that the staging of the terrorist attacks in New York are almost cinematic; how it almost seemed as though the scheduling of the planes were timed so that news cameras would be set up to catch the explosion of the second tower (2005: 323-4). Similarly, Brigit Richard has suggested that: “the aim of this destructive terrorist attack was to create a symbolic image that will remain in the subconsciousness of the West for many years [...] it is not only about killing and destroying but creating a monumental image of the destruction” (211). I think that what Richard is describing is not so much the work of a symbol, as the work of

affective territory located in the refrain addressed in the last chapter. The refrain is, as Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, how: “a child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of calming and stabilizing, calm and stable at the center in the heart of chaos” (1987: 311). Perhaps the images of September 11 and those produced in Abu Ghraib aren’t just ‘imprinted’ as Mitchell says, but more than that: an immaterial relation that we carry along with us through space and time that is a part of a much larger ecology—the cooperation of a world at war. We now *need* these images as an immaterial crutch to *make sense* of our contemporary political environment: a time when the world is constantly in a state of war (as opposed to the old days when a drone attack targeting people in Yemen or Pakistan *just may* have violated a treaty or sovereignty...). Then, in this moment when the Interrotron seems to collapse on itself by turning Morris’ face into a series of torture images, and by extension asking the spectator to feel that shift as well, doesn’t the camera itself seem to speak: ‘it’s not as simple as dismantling *your human* preconceptions about the Abu Ghraib images; but even *my own* material workings are caught up and composed by these political ecologies.’ *Standard Operating Procedure* is once again about opening up the two-way transductive street; forcing us to realize that not only are images of war and violence burned into our retinas and hummed in our walk home, but that every photograph taken after Abu Ghraib is—in some immaterial way—also inextricably connected to that specific media event. I’m not saying that Abu Ghraib or *Standard Operating Procedure* have fundamentally altered the practice of photography, but I am saying that both have made major and radical interventions at a level of form, content, and the ecological politics of war, and that between these two disparate series there arises a logic of delay and perhaps an ethics of time. Morris’ cannibalistic Interrotron

allows us to: “distance ourselves from human intentionality and enter into the concrescence of technical systems in order to understand the mode of existence of technical objects” (Combes 58).

8) Techniques of Reenactment: Speed, Texture, Scale & Vertigo

The other piece of technology that stands out in *Standard Operating Procedure* is the Phantom v9 high speed camera that allows a filmmaker to, as Morris says: “go from 300 to 1000 [frames per second] and you don’t even see the difference. It’s all so slow” (Samuels). Elsewhere, Morris insists that the camera is “the closest thing to a still photograph without being actual still photography” (Goldman). Then, the Phantom v9 is a philosophically interesting machine: it shoots at speeds over 10,000 frames per second and because it’s digital there is next to no wait for the image to translate and render (allowing playback at 24 fps almost instantly). Morris employs the camera to full effect during a few reenactments: Saddam Hussein cooking an egg, a dud mortar landing in the middle of the Abu Ghraib compound, ants swarming a child prisoner, dogs violently provoking interrogated prisoners, are only a few examples. The purpose of these stylized reenactments is immediately clear: Morris isn’t trying to recreate an accurate or ‘true’ simulation of what happened—he’s trying to open up an imperceptible world for the audience. Taking advantage of the age old maxim offered by Walter Benjamin in 1955, Morris attempts to rework the formal powers of cinema so to problematize conceptions of distance: “the painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue” (35). Of course, we’ve known about this potential of cinema almost since the inception of the moving image, so what does the Phantom v9 bring to the table that’s new and different?

Mark B. N. Hansen points out in *New Philosophy for New Media* that technology rendering extreme visual speeds constitutes a radical ontological intervention at the level of the

sensible. While speaking about Bill Viola's *Quintet of the Astonished* (2010) (shot at 384 fps, a figure paled by Morris' 2008 use), Hansen writes that this novel access to visual speed:

Literally exposes the viewer to the imperceptible: to incredibly minute shifts in affective tonality well beyond what is observable by (nontechnically supplemented) natural perception. When the viewer takes in this intensely oversaturated temporal object, the guiding mechanism of cinematic temporality—the perceptual coincidence between the flux of the film and that of consciousness—gives way to a kind of affective contagion through which consciousness, by being put face-to-face with what it cannot properly perceive and yet what constitutes the very condition out of which the perceivable emerges, undergoes a profound self-affection. [Media] is a mechanism for exposing the fundamental correlation of life with what Gilbert Simondon calls the 'preindividual,' the domain of a nonlived that is strictly contemporaneous with the living and that forms the condition of possibility for its continued viability in the future. (264-5)

Hansen's observation is important: extreme frame rates (at least in this fresh stage before habituation) do the impossible work of *affectively making sensible lived information lost to sensory perception*. This is as important as it sounds because when immersed in these hyper-slow visual environments, we actually see not only what we (as a conscious living self in the present) sensibly miss during everyday life, but also the inverse: that technical objects live these other hidden worlds and the collaborative forces that affect non-human objects becoming increasingly felt in the micro-economies of time made increasingly available by technology. Extreme frame rates *make us think and feel alongside a decisively non-human sensory environment*.

One issue I find debatable about Hansen's observation is how the 'oversaturated' temporality of extreme slow-motion footage also comes with a limiting set of conditions that the apparatus seems to self-recognize in the recording process (this is unacknowledged). Notably, the Phantom v9 has constrained visual borders imposed by qualities of light, plane, and depth-of-field. Where I think that Morris' use of the Phantom v9 differs from Viola's use of similar technology, lies in the camera's will to take documentary technology to its very limit by bringing

slow motion into closer proximity with the ultra-slow material speed of a photograph, while also attempting to display the ecological binding of image to texture, and scale: the intervention of fast film comes hand-in-hand with other sensory considerations.

Partway through the documentary, we receive a reenactment depicting an interrogation at Abu Ghraib when military police shaved the eyebrows of a captured elite Iraqi general. This torture was, ostensibly, part of a similar pattern of submission and shame used on Saddam Hussein with his glasses. In order to visualize the process of this humiliation, Morris gives us an extreme close-up of the elderly eyebrows slowly shaved by a cheap plastic razor. The shot occurs in slow-motion (we see small hair particles flying away from skin) and lasts exactly one minute (Fig. 15). What is most notable about this shot is not the speed, but the accompanying depth-of-field. High frame rates like the ones available to the Phantom v9 require *a lot of light*. In order to fully expose the frames at speeds as high 1/1000 of a second, the camera requires three things: a massive amount of intense light to fill out all of the environmental information, a very ‘fast’ lens that allows for a large aperture to accommodate the light, and an aperture setting to focus a happy medium between the two technical factors. The more one opens an aperture, the shallower the depth-of-field as an increasingly small point of focal light remains legible on the field of view. For those familiar with the basics of photography this is elementary business, but it’s worth pointing out that there is a strong technical correlation between slow-motion photography and shallow depth-of-field. At speeds like those that Morris employs in *Standard Operating Procedure*, it is clear that he does not shoot with extremely shallow focus entirely for the sake of anesthetization—but partly under the influence of the camera’s abilities to capture the world (functionally bound to a shallow image by the incredible speed).

Sadly, the philosophical implications of depth-of-field remain a somewhat underdeveloped area in cinema studies, especially with relation to new and emerging audiovisual technologies. The major arguments have largely focused on the temporal relations made available by deep-focus and the multiple sheets of time opened up by the depth staging and duration of the plan-séquence: “what must be noted is that depth of field sometimes shows us evocation in the act of occurring and sometimes virtual sheets of past that we explore in order to find the recollection sought” (Deleuze 1989: 109). Today, shallow depth has found an increasing amount of critical attention, mostly due to the efforts of Laura Marks to articulate the affective charge of a ‘haptic image.’ Marks thinks about how sensory modes have the ability to stimulate synaesthetic experiences when one ‘sense’ bleeds over into another. “Haptic, or tactile visibility” for Marks, works to: “invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well” (2). Traditionally, we would locate the remarkable shallow depth-of-field that couples with the extreme slow motion of the Phantom v9 as a sequence of ‘haptic’ images. I feel that *Standard Operating Procedure*, however, can show us that the work of depth-of-field is both different qualitatively and politically to the cross-sensory experiences clarified in Marks’ argument.

Brian Massumi thinks that the feeling of ‘hapticism’ generated by a fuzzy, out-of-focus, or shallow image is really a misnomer: “it refers to touch as it appears virtually in vision—touch as it can only be *seen* [...] texture is an example of haptic vision: you immediately *see* how it feels” (57, 71). Massumi is mostly speaking to a critical vein of philosophy addressing how the senses have become part of a hierarchy and art stimulates a tactile sensation in a dominantly visual field constitutes a radical political intervention into the structuration of sensory perception, amenable to cooptation, control, habituation, etc. While thinking about texture in the general

sense, Massumi uses ‘hapticism’ to point out that the “movement-feeling” (71) we experience when looking at textured object has nothing to do with ‘touch’ but is ‘touch-like’ only through a strictly visual capacity. From here, Massumi moves on to suggest that what we’re looking for in terms of a sensory politics is located through what he calls ‘abstraction’ or as he notes of experiencing depth in perspective painting:

The experience of depth has been made to take off from the usual experiential framing and enter a different frame [tapping] into the abstraction already at the basis of object perception, and carry[ing] it to a higher power where the object itself, and not only touchings of it and movings-around it, are abstracted, that is to say, really appear virtually [...] You’re seeing *through* the canvas into an abstraction that has taken off from it, and is a qualitatively different perceptual event. (55-6)

Abstraction is simply sensory perception of an object termed concrete, but certain artistic practices make us radically rethink the simple equation of recognizing an object’s discrete divorce from the surrounding environment. In the case of perspective painting, we don’t experience a ‘simulation’ of depth; we experience depth proper. Looking at a plane that provokes a sense of depth may or may not ‘actually’ be there still creates an affective contagion across the surrounding environment, or a sense of immersiveness that extends beyond vision into and across each sensory organ; a sense of sense itself. These experiences are the ‘thinking-feeling’ of recognizing ‘the semblance of our own life’s passing’ in an object: “a semblance isn’t just a force. Its ‘likeness’ *is* a force, an abstract force of life” (56). The semblance or the abstract force of life located deep in the potentiality of the material world gets politically reworked into another kind of ‘likeness’ in *Standard Operating Procedure*: the problem of documentary reenactment.

Morris’ shallow images go beyond the depths-of-field that we are accustomed to as they show concise focus that only extreme frame rates *can show*. Partly out of the demands made by frame rate, partly a product of the limits of lens speed, the fine visual gradients used by Morris to catch single eyebrow hairs or render clearly an ant’s mandible are part of the wholeness of

sensation built into the camera: imperceptible speeds make for extreme sense of depth (Fig. 16). The activation of the worlds hidden by our slow vision also activates the film's creation of a planar depth so drastic that it affects a sense of horizontal vertigo (a feeling of falling sideways into the screen). The eyebrow hairs and the ants become huge in an effect similar to tilt-shift photography, where depth of field is employed to make large objects that are far away look as though they are much closer and much smaller. Morris' use does almost the exact opposite: he uses extreme depth-of-field to make small, minor, and molecular movements into targets that we fall towards; a sense of 'diorama' available only to those miles above the earth or looking down upon miniatures (Fig. 17). The strange loss of balance brought about by the contradiction of a proximal distance also bring along radical politics to documentary reenactment in the larger sense, by affecting what Meaghan Morris calls a "vertigo of critical distance" wherein: "the figure of the observer [...] is part of the simulacrum, where the hierarchy abolished in vertigo is not only that regulating the division between the Origin and the first-, second-, third-order copies, determining authenticity. It is also the secular projection of that process in hierarchical myths of space (the top of the tower) and time" (151). Morris' documentary reenactments, bad copies, and unbelievable simulacrum of the 'real' event become confusing in these visual moments as they realize a radically anti-hierarchical grain to space where 'focus' cease to be precise, but instead becomes an active process under constant revision and tuning; revealing an "uncanny excess of actual objectivity" (Massumi 56). Space is restructured by gradients, light patterns, and flecks of material dust flowing from objects and trapped in light. These reenactments discredit the relations of the documentary will to index, instead working to overhaul sensory information and dismantle hierarchies of sense (ocularcentrism, perhaps) in favor of full body affective reactions, while also destabilizing the desire for the perfect documentary simulacrum.



Fig. 15 A single hair



Fig. 16 A single mandible

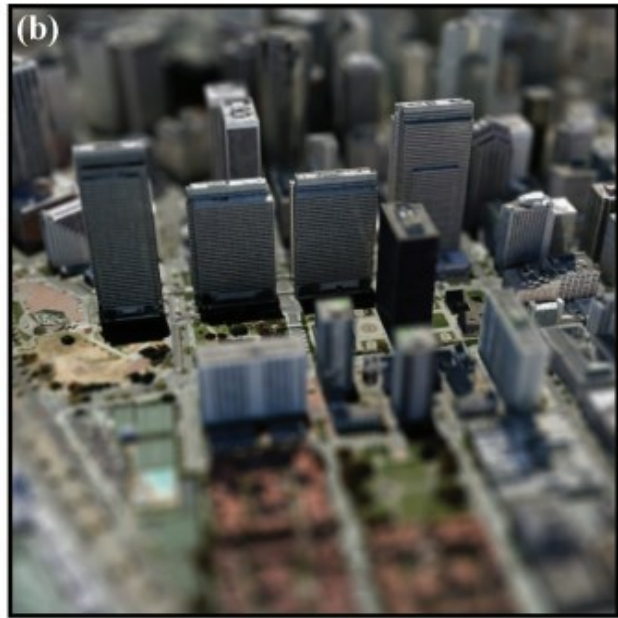


Fig. 17 From “Using Blur to Affect Perceived Distance and Size” Held, Cooper, O’Brien, Banks

The hierarchy of sense and the desire for index are directly related in this political ecology; a relationship *Standard Operating Procedure* is keen to disassemble. Morris’ film works to counteract those dangers that work to privilege sight above all and showing us how a claim to reality through pictures begets a structuration of sensory authority that lands the soldiers, otherwise the scapegoated ‘bad apples,’ in prison stripped of personal liberty. Then, Morris works to actively resist an applied ethics that would sentence those responsible for producing the Abu Ghraib images to a prison term for the act, without ever taking in to account the ecological flows of im/material information that play a heavy hand in the event itself. *Standard Operating*

Procedure isn't about clearing anyone's name, or out rightly exposing a 'cover-up' in the conspiratorial sense; it's about *making sense of the myopic* and developing new corporeal habits of perception, to serve a novel and different refrain.

9) Coda: 'Aliveness Engines' & the Screen Animal

As I have noted elsewhere in this thesis, the figure of the animal is never far behind the machines of war. Specialist Sabrina Harman tells a story about how once the power went out at Abu Ghraib, and thousands of fire ants swarmed the cell of a teenage Iraqi prisoner. She helped the boy stamp out the creatures with his shoes while holding a flashlight overtop the seething chaos below. Later, she tells another story about the military police bringing their attack dogs to the prison to aid with interrogation. They held the dogs on leashes while letting the animals propel themselves violently toward the captive humans. One of the Iraqi prisoners, screaming with fear, tried to get away from the animals, but not before the trainer released a dog just enough to allow for a deep and bloody bite into the human thigh.

Morris films the reenactments of these scenes in the same manner that I have outlined throughout: with extreme frame rates and an accordingly shallow field. This is particularly pronounced during a sequence where we watch a dog snap repeatedly at the end of a leash—coming within centimeters of the lens (Fig. 18-21). A small piece of dog spittle slowly arcs as an extension of the animals leap landing squarely on the lens itself. In an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, Morris quite squarely states that: “the job as I see it is to capture; you can't ever be successful at doing this, so the futility of the attempt is also of interest” (323). These slow and extreme reenactments have absolutely no place in our current anthropomorphic reality, as these scenes paint *decisively non-human environments*. However, as I have pushed throughout this essay, politically radical interventions at the level of the sensible are located in just such

environments; especially when the hallmark of an uncanny or material liveness emerges from the art so to fold within the spectator through a mutual interaction and leave a trace of that work for sensations thereafter. Screen animals, might be an example of this process *par excellence*, as Akira Lippit writes: “from animal to animation, figure to force, poor ontology to pure energy, cinema may be the technological metaphor that configures mimetically, magnetically, the other world of the animal [...] the cinema developed, indeed embodied, animal traits as a gesture of mourning for the disappearing wildlife” (196). Lippit suggests that as humanity entered modernity, we increasingly waged war against the animal; an argument foreshadowed by Guattari in *The Three Ecologies*. The disappearance of the animal is a macropolitical historical movement that Lippit thinks occurred in a countermovement to the rise of cinema. This macropolitical exchange is an interaction fundamentally linked by human perception: as the animal gradually vanished from our lives (an ongoing process perhaps best evidenced by rapid extinction, and climate change), we created media ecologies *because within anthropocentric rubrics of reality the liveness of the animal and the uncanny animation of cinema are essentially similar processes to the senses*. As a macropolitical agency, cinema worked to increasingly archive the disappearing animal body. The creation of a film featuring screen animals might constitute a micropolitical event helping along two much larger interrelated systems: cinema’s networked response to animal death. If cinema can gradually respond to a great ecological shift in the natural world, how might a single film affect a micropolitical intervention in the macropolitical flows of war and peace—and might that impulse toward difference constitute an ethical imperative?

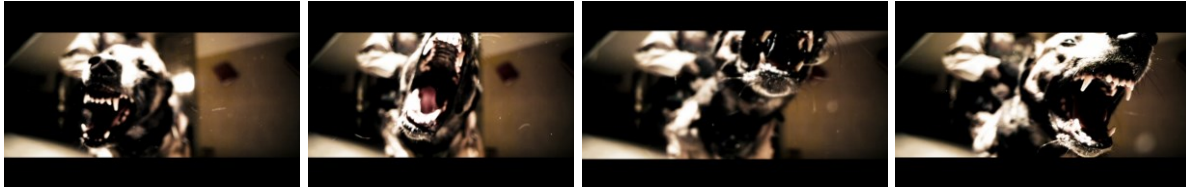


Fig. 18-21 The Screen Animal – Decisively non-human environment

Brian Massumi argues, I think similarly, that: “the senses themselves are technologies of lived abstraction, doing hard fusional labor every microsecond of every day, between every living breath. Technologies are not ‘prostheses of the body.’ The senses are that already. Technologies are abstract-event multipliers and disseminators. They are prostheses of the life of abstraction. Aliveness engines” (147). The new technologies employed by Morris in *Standard Operating Procedure* are notable for the way they work with machinic agency to fluidly ‘multiply and disseminate’ the liveness of matter; here, for the purpose of *making different sense of the images of war*. That said, the Interrotron or the Phantom v9 are simply new species in our world: we’ll get used to them eventually and probably stop listening, but right here and now they are telling us to look, feel, and think very differently about war as we see it in the ‘fusional labor every microsecond of every day.’ Morris’ reenactments are aliveness engines, slowly recalibrating our sensory gears with the hopes of making a new, different, and hopefully less violent sensation of the future.

In their plateau titled ‘Apparatus of Capture,’ Deleuze and Guattari write of our rather apocalyptic future or present, depending on which way you see it:

The Third World War is already upon us. The war machine reigned over the entire axiomatic like the power of the continuum that surrounded the ‘world-economy,’ and it put all the parts of the universe in contact. The world became a smooth space again (sea, air, atmosphere), over which reigned a single war machine, even when it opposed its own parts. Wars had become a part of peace. [...] There arose from this new conception of security as materialized war, as organized insecurity or molecularized, distributed, programmed catastrophe. (1987: 467)

Things don't look that great and we're running out of tools to turn our wars around. It is comforting to know that there are people out there like Morris who are actively engaging, creating, and inventing new techniques of living and sensation that hopefully counteract the large and transversal wars that we wage against ecology. *Standard Operating Procedure* concludes with a monologue spoken by Tim Dugan, a civilian interrogator employed by the government during the heyday of Abu Ghraib. He speaks, rather philosophically I feel, about disappearing animals. To conclude, I would like to quote the passage in full and ask a question, where do the birds go and what does it feel like?

Within five or ten minutes after sun-up millions of frickin' birds took off out of the date palms and just blacked out the sunrise to the east where I'm lookin'. And they fly north, northwest to go over the top corner of the post. And I'd try to get out of my booth, or take a break, a cigarette break, around sunset, because those birds came back every night about 30 minutes, 15 minutes before sunset, and landed back in the date palms. So I started my day every day at least watching those guys, the birdies take off, and at least thinking something in the world was still normal. (*Standard Operating Procedure*)

In this respect artists are like philosophers. What little health they possess is often too fragile, not because of their illnesses or neuroses but because they have seen something in life that is too much for anyone, too much for themselves, and that has put on them the quiet mark of death. But this something is also the source of breath that supports them through the illnesses of the lived (what Nietzsche called health). ‘Perhaps one day we will know that there wasn’t any art but only medicine.’

~Deleuze & Guattari

***The Act of Killing* (2012): Killer, Artist, Doctor**

1) The ‘Making Of’ Political Ecology

Early in *The Act of Killing*, we meet Anwar Congo and Herman Koto, both in very high spirits as they plot the film they are making. Anwar tells Herman that: “whether this ends up on the big screen, or only on TV, it doesn’t matter, this is who we are, so in the future people will remember... step by step we will tell the story of what we did when we were young” (*AoK*). We find variations on this sentiment in many documentaries: the participants want to tell their version of the ‘truth.’ Of course, Anwar’s opening affirmation is not exactly the straightforward ‘truth’ that we might expect. We soon learn that Anwar and Herman are two small-time gangsters living in Medan Indonesia and both are complicit in the country’s murderous past—the horrific genocide of 1965-6. Today these killers lead comfortable lives, socializing with the popular paramilitary organizations, media moguls, and high-ranking politicians. *The Act of Killing* documents the bizarre camaraderie of murderers while relating their rise to fame, celebrity, and stardom. Joshua Oppenheimer, who shares directorial credit with two co-directors (Christine Cynn and an artist known only as Anonymous for safety concerns), essentially made a nightmare ‘making of’ documentary, following the killers over seven years as they self-erect a cinematic monument to their bloody past.

Following a military coup in 1965, a new Indonesian government formed under President Suharto. The military hired out paramilitary death squads to cleanse the nation’s dissenting

factions, targeting the world's third largest communist party (the PKI), the intellectual community, artists, and the ethnic Chinese minority. While the film cautiously cites the number at one million disappeared, other authorities place the figure at 2.5 million people murdered under the military regime's two-year transition to democracy (Žižek 322). These histories remain unclear today as this particular moment prompts many competing voices and some of which have had authorial access to the history books for too long to speak with total clarity, but the event of the genocide itself is by no means a secret. The contemporary Indonesian government is a development from the cultural foundations laid by the massacres and currently allows the 'premen' (Indonesian for 'gangster' and a derivative of the English 'Free Men') to speak openly about their past crimes without judicial or social consequence. When Anwar and Herman say that they wish to narrate a story for future audiences, it is their complicity in the murders that they wish to clarify for the camera.

Today, Anwar remains a 'premen' in Medan. From the film, we understand that he spends his days hustling neighborhood businesses for cash while helping out on the occasional illegal gambling operation or political campaign, or as Benedict Anderson puts it: "a sort of half-hidden left hand of the New Order Leviathan: uncivil servants" (Brink and Oppenheimer 281). Anwar and his gang of former death squad associates are known colloquially as the 'movie theatre gangsters' who made their first illicit marks by selling movie tickets to popular Hollywood cinema in the early 60's, a practice banned by the then-influential PKI. Throughout Oppenheimer's documentary, these men maintain that the embargo on Western cinema infringed on their lucrative business, as Hollywood films were the most popular and greatest attraction for their customers. As if the complex historical mess of victims, gangsters, Indonesian politics, and American film was not difficult enough, the killers insist that the Hollywood boycotts fuelled

their hatred for the people they murdered. What follows from this difficult ecology is one of the more shocking claims advanced by the film: the ‘premen’ repeatedly insist that Western cinematic aesthetics helped guide their hands as they acted out the contracted assassinations. Anwar and his friends are fluent in film history and show a deep adoration for Hollywood cinema, and as Anwar says, [watching a] “happy film like an Elvis Presley musical,” [would allow me to] “kill in a happy way” (*AoK*).

The cinephilia of Anwar and his friends inspired Oppenheimer to adopt an unusual documentary style that defines *The Act of Killing*: he asked the killers to recreate their memories and dreams of murder by making their own film. The results of Anwar’s collaborative cinema are striking, as the killers qua filmmakers produce surreal and beautiful renditions of familiar images: variations on the western (Fig. 22), film noir (Fig. 23), musical (Fig. 24), avant-garde (Fig. 25) and even aesthetic nods horror (Fig. 26). A surface reading of the film leads to some immediate and alarming conclusions: the cosmopolitan influence of violent Hollywood cinema has created and maintained murderers in a psychological safety-net of fiction, fantasy, and spectacle. Slavoj Žižek comments that this initial and “easy” recourse of “placing the blame either directly on Hollywood or on the ‘ethical primitiveness’ of Indonesia” might actually be a subversive rhetorical attempt on Oppenheimer’s behalf with intentions of “undermining the ‘symbolic efficacy’ of traditional ethical structures” (323). While Žižek does not elaborate on how the film works to dismantle or complicate the spectator’s urge to condemn the killers to prison or hold American cultural hegemony responsible for a complicated and non-linear historical moment, he does begin a conversation addressing how *The Act of Killing* shifts the lens so we to think about cinema, perception, and ethics differently. The ‘symbolic efficacy’ is a suitable name for this particular problem, as the effectiveness of the *production* of second-order

and representation-based ethics becomes impossible in this particular example. As one killer named Adi Zulkadry quite rightly points out: in this particular ecology, there is *no way* he will every be taken and tried for war crimes—although the prospect of the infamy *does* make him giddy with excitement. A binary ethical system of ‘guilty/not guilty’ or ‘truth/false’ that might punish a sovereign subject through incarceration, revenge, or restoration is simply impossible in *The Act of Killing*; so what else can we do about this intolerable situation?



Fig. 22 Western



Fig. 23 Film Noir



Fig. 24 Musical



Fig. 25 Avant-garde



Fig. 26 Horror

2) Toward a False Ecology

The Act of Killing is deliberately difficult for those seeking truth through the traditional registers. Oppenheimer's decision to give the criminals a hand in the creative process frustrates a transcendent desire for true justice. The bad guys don't get punished and there is no hope of that on the horizon—these mass murderers help make our entertainment and enjoy a very comfortable lifestyle; the motto of the 'premen' is: "Relax and Rolex" (*AoK*). While the film does provide brief lessons on Indonesian history, Oppenheimer largely refuses to provide in-depth historical background surrounding the genocidal event itself. Instead, he opts to share the floor with the victors who form the privileged community out of the spoils guaranteed by the state. While many documentaries that commit to what I have termed a 'documentary production of truth' would lay clear the historical context and fully investigate the past through interviews, reenactments, and photographic montage; Oppenheimer takes as one of his targets the very system that manufactures skewed historical perceptions within the Indonesian political ecology. His project doesn't seek to 'explain' why genocide happened, so much as it tries to show how perception and media interrelate in a given milieu and habitual modes of sensation emerge in the midst. *The Act of Killing* isn't about documenting genocide, but about ecology:

Capacities of perception are immediately and explicitly politicized [...] the question arises of how such a configuration stabilized out as a norm, what the applicable domain of such a norm is, and how it produces effects of transduction, change, amplification, or erasure on other patterns, codes, and behavior that it comes into composition with. (Fuller 90)

For Fuller, as it is for Oppenheimer and Deleuze, the primary ethical question is how to tactically design audiovisual environments out of habitual patterns in a way that allows for the possibility of resistance by way of creative thought. The shared ethical perspective that I feel is carried by

these thinkers and artists is well-phrased by Ronald Bogue, as all believe in: “cinema’s distinction among the arts, [is to] most fully and directly [engage] the crucial philosophical problem of thinking differently by seeing differently” (Rodowick 2010: 126-7). I feel that Oppenheimer’s strategy is an attempt to bring differing perceptual modes and systems (simplified for now as a binary conflict between an Indonesian historical ecology and a Western-centric documentary production of truth) in a manner that interrelates, collides, and perhaps allows new forms of perception to arise and settle as a result.

The first place we see this technique (letting different perceptual ecologies come into conflict) occurs during the introduction of the film. An opening sequence sets forth a series of subtitles presenting a brief history of the Indonesian genocide layered over a crowded composition of the Medan cityscape: “in less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million ‘communists’ were murdered” (*AoK*). The text appears overtop a towering four-story McDonalds and the ever-familiar golden arch frames the shot. This corporate logo is, of course, an unmistakable trademark of Western commercial hegemony; but Oppenheimer’s particular image has a slight difference: the signage indicates that the food at this McDonalds is prepared in the Halal tradition (Fig. 27).

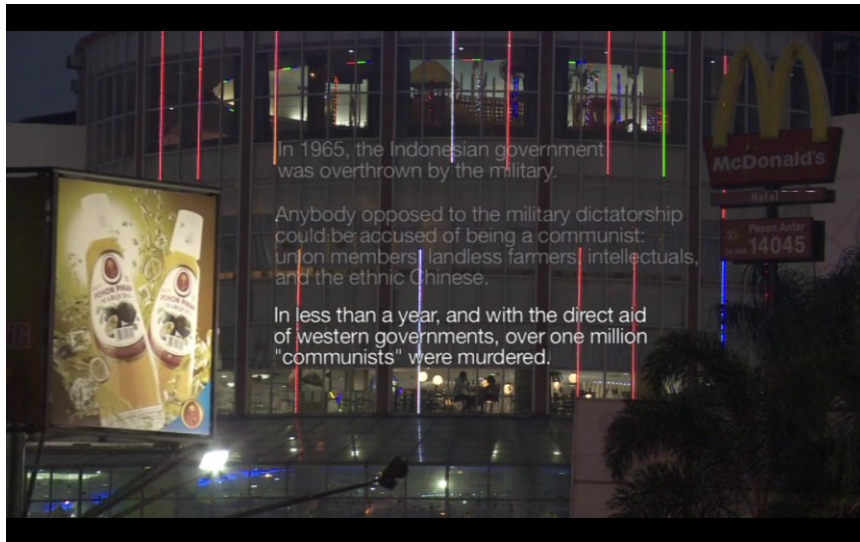


Fig. 27 Halal McDonalds

As insightful spectators, we need to ask why Oppenheimer might choose to frame such significant information as the film's contested historical background with this very particular and recognizable image. This early moment sets a precedent as Oppenheimer implicitly suggests that the history of the Indonesian genocide is irreconcilably entangled with the problem of cultural perception and difference: here, two groups of people could see the same object yet come to vastly different knowledgeable conclusions. A detail as slight as a Halal McDonalds seems trivial while considering the many cultural differences found between Western discourse and the Islamic governance of Indonesia, but this particular object is worth highlighting because of the significance allotted to the information in the frame. This is our first example of just how thoroughly regional politics saturate the meaning of the material world. Banal questions gain weight as the shot continues: Why is 'Halal' marked clearly in English? How does a fast food chain relate to a documentary about genocide? Does the film deliberately employ the same color, size, and font as the signage so to indicate a connection? The line of questions that fall away from this image explicitly target the muddy politics of materiality; the shot is trying to falsify our own majoritarian build of perceiving a corporate machine. McDonalds, when imbued in the

Indonesian cultural milieu and the tenets of Islam, means something quite different to the ‘truthful’ perception expected in the West: hamburgers and America, probably. This minor image achieves a micro-subversive status as the shot continues because it quite forcefully counteracts clichéd expectations so often enforced by documentaries produced in the West. This simple image linked to Indonesian history shows us the kind of ethical work that Deleuze calls the powers of the false: thoughts provoked by cinema that do not prove a falsity, but instead to trouble, falsify, manipulate or fracture pre-structured affective tracks within expected and clichéd environments. The powers of the false commit to, as Rodowick argues, a radically political cinema of perception that: “presents narrative situations where the adequation of subject to object breaks down along with the model of the true” (1997: 156).

Ethics and aesthetics dovetail repeatedly across Deleuze’s work on cinema, as he feels that film holds the powers to fine-tune the structured paradigms of perception and thought; potentially allowing for creative thoughts and feelings beyond established sensory modes:

It is not a matter of judging life in the name of a higher authority which would be the good, the true; it is a matter, on the contrary, of evaluating every being, every action and passion, even every value, in relation to the life which they involve. Affect as immanent evaluation, instead of judgement as transcendent value: ‘I love or I hate’ instead of ‘I judge’” (1989: 141).

There is an important difference here between Deleuze’s articulation of ethics and the binaries that we associate with Žižek’s failing ‘symbolic efficacy.’ In rephrasing the ethical thrust of affect as an immanent evaluation, the sought ‘outside’ of the ‘good/bad’ or ‘guilty/not guilty’ binaries can only be approached within the established moral stratifications of the state: to get at the ‘outside’ of thought, we start from a place well within the boundaries of the majority. Then, if a subversion of the binary exists, it is an affective process designed to explode and subvert from within the comfortable and known. When Deleuze speaks about ‘life’ phrased as an active

‘becoming,’ he means the mutual interrelationality of consciousness and ecology (perception and sense being collaborative, cooperative, coimagined and shared between ‘self’ and spatial/temporal environment). Then, the capacity consciousness holds in the present moment to potentiate change and transformation must hinge on belief: not a believing in the self in some form of transcendental world, but a sustained care and appreciation for the virtual and difference as a deep reservoir for new affections and potential. Losing faith is to disavow the new and to become stuck in the clichéd assemblages of the state.

For Deleuze’s sense of ethics (or, ethics of sense) to take hold, we must recognize that tapping into the reservoir of the ‘unthought of thought’ or the virtual potential of difference, we’re always affecting a kind of gambit. We can’t say that encountering difference promises safety or betterment as this is a model seeking to bypass the segmentary nature of morality and judgment in all its forms. Then, there’s not much in predicting which way a virtual activation settle—we can agree that the present is intolerable, but the future must *urgently* be for the better *or* the worse. It is this sense of urgency that nourishes this ethics of micropolitics as each rupturing event pushes toward something different and nothing else, but that’s hopefully better than a world steeped in warfare, terrorism, genocide, class politics, capitalism and principles of the state model. By sparking an ethical change in the present you get only difference: the future series of presents could be anything, but it won’t be the same (and this is the closes evaluation we have to a ‘good’). This is the operation of what Deleuze referred to as a ‘transcendental immanence,’ or the coexistence of virtual potential within the material world alongside those actualized perceptions experienced as assemblages with the majority, state, etc. The ethical process *par excellence* is to believe in a world where change can arise from the virtual or untapped potential that lingers in matter and those forces that alter the being of ‘our’ lived

experience and throughout our ecology. Nodding to the Nietzschean impulse in Deleuze's ethics, David Rodowick points out that every present moment is of crucial ethical importance in life's consistent affection of, with, and by ecology: "the virtual—the eternally recurring potentiality for new creation in each passing present" (2010: 108). These ethics attempt to break from the majoritarian rules we habitually use to cope with the present: organized religion might dictate a moral code, a documentary film might claim a kind of universal truth from a contested political territory, a nation state might employ 'nationalism' in the service of justifying warfare or genocide, and courts might apply a retrograde sentence terming someone's future. All of these examples present us with an immaterial force or cause that is no less 'real' than the ground beneath our feet: former virtualities actualized as human laws and techniques, some of which affect very present problems (like our conundrum in *The Act of Killing* where our contemporary judicial-ethical system achieves no satisfying application). It's not to say that we don't need these things to function as a society, but simply that nothing is mandated by ecology and every material is susceptible to a radically different human understanding. We need change to deal with the shared understandings of intolerability in the present. Then, the question as to what constitutes a lived Deleuzian ethics might be reframed as: "an ethics [that] evaluates expression according to the immanent mode of existence or possibilities of life it implies [...] Do we affirm life and remain open to its powers of continuous, qualitative self-transformation, or do we maintain an image of thought whose movements are stopped or frozen?" (Rodowick 2010: 101).

Cinema holds a special place in this build of ethics due to the proximity of moving images to thought, memory, audiovisual perception, and 'life' as we sense it (why the animal and media are so often found in bed together). By remaining open to the transformative powers to change affected throughout ecology, we can see how cinema also holds the power to falsify a

spectator's habitual and actualized modes of perception, and instead provides access points to new thoughts and different conceptions of reality. Ethics means evaluating, or *reevaluating* one's immanent surroundings both spatially and temporally in order to assess how consciousness affects and is affected by the world. Then, it is ethically essential to confront one's own thought with that which is unthought and fold the difference provoked by the media 'event' into the spectatorial body so to conceive the world with new eyes. The false is the urgent ethical route to difference and the new.

3) Documentary Production of Truth as Affective Labor

While the promise of a world rethought and recomposed through encounters with disruptive media sounds ideal, the process is made difficult when artistic tropes become cliché. Habituated images lose the power to falsify or 'shock to thought' as they become mobilized in the service of state or majoritarian systems and machines. Michael Hardt argues that the virtual powers of affect—although always potentially activated for the purpose of new or possible modes of thought—are commandeered as post-industrial forms of labor in contemporary society, where: "the corporeal and intellectual aspects [become] the new forms of production [...] such labor engages at once with rational intelligence and with the passions or feeling" (xi). Hardt is quick to point out that this stream of criticism termed 'affective labor' is ripe with both dangers and potentials. Citing examples like "health care workers, flight attendants, fast food workers, and sex workers," Hardt notes that these positions share a common product of emotive, intellectual, or other immaterial powers that bridge both "mind and body" (xi). This opens up new fields of critical study that take as their object the politics that emerge between the total incorporation of affect as a product and the opposite: the potential to draw bodies into autonomous ecologies where an openness to affect and be affected endures. Regardless of where

an affecting object resides along this scale of difference, we can say with certainty that affect can *be produced* as surely as it *produces* other affects.

I think that we can see a type of trapping, mobilization and industrial production of affect at work in documentary cinema that claims to territorial and ethno-centric notions of ‘truth,’ or as Deleuze notes, the truth: “*which was dependent on cinematographic fiction itself* [...] the ideal of the true was the most profound fiction, at the very heart of the real” (1989: 149). Deleuze argues that there is a certain will toward truth present in believing cinematic images, especially in realism when we believe in some inherent ‘truth’ to photographic indexicality. I feel that many documentaries are saturated with a will to produce a sensation of truth and therefore work to reinforce the same structure. If the documentary was able to speak as a genre, perhaps it might insist: ‘*this way of thinking (most prominently Western perspectives) is the right, just, and true way to think and feel about a ‘real’ event that occurred in our world.*’ Here, the stakes of Deleuze’s ethics become clear as we cannot talk about difference without caution: the mobilization of affect over time falls prey to immaterial policing in the service of capital systems of labor, or other oppressive state machines. The dangers posed by a piece of documentary art coopting truth are critiqued by Matthew Fuller as a: “will to power in the reactive form of the faculty of judgment [that] also equalizes and makes amenable to reification, transfer, exchange, and replacement that which it names as concepts, objects, subjects” (64). With these patterns of danger and potential in mind, I believe that *The Act of Killing* brings differing media systems into conflict so to grind out the Western production of truth and the documentary claim to indexical knowledge and judgment; for the purpose of affecting a new vision of the world.

Far too often documentary cinema addressing atrocity or disaster appeals to ‘truthful’ authority by channeling a form of spectacle: we buy the argument because the film makes us *feel*

convinced. Michael Moore might be the master of selling his version of ‘truth’ paired with documentary techniques spurring very specific rhetorical emotions. An example of this arose at the end of a long conversation with Alanna Thain, as we discussed how Moore’s use of montage in *Bowing for Columbine* (2002) spectacularizes atrocity to a specific political end. The film employs surveillance footage of the Columbine high-school shooting and cuts it together with sappy music, an overlay of police radios, and news broadcasters are heard describing the school as a war zone. Regardless of how we want to qualify the film’s politics (as that would be judgment, after all), we can instead immanently evaluate this cinematic moment and the powerful production of truth forced by the spectacle: Moore emotively sells a rhetorical argument by producing an affective labor that makes us *invest and believe in* his argument, regardless of whether we agree with it.

Moore’s avid will to truth is commensurate with contemporary models of bio-political control; itself a nefarious form of affective labor that: “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion [...] the media in general not only report information but also must make the news attractive, exciting, desirable; the media must create affects” (Hardt and Negri 108). As Hardt and Negri argue, the affective labor that we get from news media (the same production of a will to truth that I see at work in documentary) structures and maintains a machine designed to manufacture desire for that same feeling. Learning about genocide in documentary, then, is also a mode of intellectual labor and cultural capital: going to see something awful for the worldly credibility promised by high art. Elizabeth Cowie argues that there are pressures to make the affective or intellectual labor inherent to documentary a desirable commodity, which leads directly to the infiltration of: “disreputable features of cinema usually associated with the entertainment film [...] a desire for reality held

and reviewable for analysis as a world of materiality [and] a desire for the real not as knowledge but as image—as spectacle” (1999: 19). Desire gets structured and rerouted so that the promise of intellectual capital *and* the emotive work triggered by spectacular images become two parts of the same thought and feeling that affective labor attaches to the production of truth in documentary. A rather perverse thought but it needs to be said: we don’t go to see documentaries just to learn about atrocious problems elsewhere in the world, we watch these films because they come bundled with affective presets that cathartically wash away as we enter the greyness of the parking lot outside the theatre. Shock, empathy, charity, humanitarianism, neo-liberalism etc. are attached to ethnocentric documentary productions of truth, which might be epitomized by the nonchalant attitude of those driving home from the theater: ‘can we stop for a burger on the way?’

The Act of Killing collides media systems in a manner that disrupts the flows of affective labor found in traditional modes of documentary. This destabilization does not constitute a fully-fledged escape, line-of-flight, or wholesale jettison affective labor, but instead works through a soft and subtle reweaving of the clichéd ties we come to expect from documenting atrocity. This subversion occurs by amplifying well-known and expected affects; intensified to a boiling point where the cooperation between the film’s different artists and impossible worlds begin to break down and the clichéd images of truth begin to shake, flicker, and become impossible.

Hardt, while reading Spinoza, suggests this technique as a roadmap for those artist who hope to move spectatorial thought into a philosophical space where difference can occur:

We do not know in advance what a body can do, what a mind can think—what affects they are capable of [...] this analytical recognition suggests new political possibilities, bringing to light new and intensified forms of exploitation that are shared among a range of laboring activities and, most important, opening up avenues for political organizing and collective practices of refusal and liberation. (x, xii)

Hardt provides a consideration of ethics that breaks from human sovereignty and agency by instead insisting on the body's potential to consistently and autonomously create new forms of affect (thereby escaping modes of biopolitical control) by proliferating new connections. The spectator of *The Act of Killing* becomes an active site through which the forces of at least two impossible modes of perception activate. I submit that we can locate a positive ethics or a movement toward difference as Oppenheimer's film incorporates both perceptual habits of the Western spectator, and the political thought of various Indonesian artists throughout the film. By colliding these different artistic takes on the world, we see new modes of thought emerge from the unexpected collaborations that arise between different cinemas, distinct filmmakers, and several working artists.

4) Intensifying Affective Labor: Cliché to Contagion

There are many sides to this story. While cinema is by nature a collaborative medium, certain modes of address in *The Act of Killing* develop dominant characteristics. Many of the Oppenheimer's expository sequences take on a clichéd style that is amenable to Western viewership's expectations of affective labor. For example, Anwar asks his friend Adi Zulkadry, another death squad collaborator, to help reenact some of the scenes in their film. It's clear that the two men have not seen each other in years and Oppenheimer's camera follows them to a fishing club where they catch-up on the good old days. This exchange is captured in a formulaic editing style that we are more than used to: starting with an expositional long shot (Fig. 27), moving in to a two shot (Fig. 28), and closing with an exchange of close-ups between the two killers (Fig. 29-30). What are these conventional narrative editing techniques doing in a documentary moment that is supposedly candid?



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29



Fig. 30

Emotion and history build through the sequence as Adi says: “sometimes I think... if my dad was a communist and was killed, I’d be upset. That’s normal right? For example, if you killed my father, I would be upset with you” (*AoK*). This interaction is stilted and artificial, perhaps in part due to the incredible detachment of Adi’s voice, but also because of Oppenheimer’s stylistic choices and compositions. Adi’s face is captured in shallow focus while lit by both a natural source originating from screen left and an undetermined source acting to fill shadows from screen right—the realist credibility of a portrait studio. The film cuts to a reaction shot of Anwar’s indifferent response, and the spectator cannot help but doubt the moral discourse of the murderers as it is difficult to empathize through the plastic and generic exchange. The long shots continue the audio as voice over. It is as though the aesthetics of the documentary attempt to frame this testimony through as many visual clichés as possible, tactically undermining the words of the killers with a shot construction that we generally associate with fiction film. This disrepute of the documentary form is a pre-emptory formal critique working to undermine the film’s claims to objectivity and truth before the conversation even occurs. By intensifying the

clichés of production, a very serious conversation nears absurdity.

Oppenheimer's capture of Adi and Anwar playing the role of fishing buddies calls attention to the preset of affects expected by the scene: this eavesdropping *feels* like a technological manipulation of our emotions that defaults to cliché. It is difficult to imagine any world where people might discuss their involvement in genocide so casually and openly. This sequence communicates the strangeness of how the documentary production of truth can easily habituate violence and make it cliché. As Cowie argues, the serious world of the killer's discourse and the spectator's clichéd expectations of generic editing come into conflict and seem to contradict one another: why does this film turn two mass murderers into stock characters playing old, grumpy men? This liminal space found between two competing media systems works to challenge preconceived assumptions made by Western spectators approaching documentary. Elizabeth Cowie nods to the ethical potential in such moments, as she writes: “‘meaning potential’ arises not only from the complex and multiple reality recorded but also in its juxtaposition across the film and its impact upon audiences as shocking and unassimilable within conventional (Western) understanding” (149). Oppenheimer's portions of the documentary appear as a drastic departure from the cinema belonging to the killers by embodying an excessively Western-oriented and informational stance. As the film continues, the tropes of Hollywood convention begin to spill over and surface in unexpected places: as though the falseness of the fishing encounter has painted all ‘ethnography’ with wide fictional brushstrokes.

We repeatedly see compositions of Anwar and his friends conversing in the back of topless a paramilitary sport utility vehicle. While Oppenheimer positions the camera in a leading car, remote microphones capture the discussions and the voices appear diegetically. The heavy

repetition of this shooting pattern makes these scenes *feel* like we are watching fictional characters driving in a back-projection (Fig. 31-4). The killer's discourse is impossibly focused on their personal histories while quotidian narratives, environments, and memories slide around in the background of the vehicle. The sheer redundancy of this composition turns the surrounding streets into a passing blur; white noise serving to contrast and emphasize the star-qualities of the murderers and how they stand apart from the crowd. The intensification of this clichéd production carries over contagiously onto the Medan cityscape, lending a falseness to the immediate environments sheltering the murderers.



Fig. 31-4 Contagion: Driving in a Back Projection

This visual structure that contagiously proliferates cliché becomes most clear during Herman's political campaign. The segment is primarily dedicated to inform us about the role of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth in the Indonesian economy and how many of the supporters attend rallies and support political groups as a form of fulltime employment. The unique Indonesian phenomena of paying citizens to perform as political supporters has only one clear parallel in Western discourse: the labor industries of bit-players and extras in popular film and television. In Indonesia, the paramilitary groups mimic Hollywood employment policies by aesthetically producing supportive bodies (Fig. 35). In some ways, *The Act of Killing* seems to conjure up Indonesian communities for the sole purpose of subversively casting them as Hollywood extras: "almost invariably silent, and who outnumber speaking performers in virtually every film ever made, help to make the cinema both an assemblage of gestures and an archive of their historical transformation" (Straw 126). Oppenheimer's camera stimulates a

profound disconcertion by producing a documentary population that resembles an entertainment commodity; the people become a silent back-projection to the cinematic authors of history—the killers themselves. Oppenheimer's portions of the film betray a deep-seated visual logic that goes beyond ethnography by instead intensifying the clichéd productions of truth we expect from documentary. The falseness present in the strained staging of Adi and Anwar's fishing trip works to contagiously spread throughout the film, effectively turning ethnography into a plastic spectacle. The storytelling of Oppenheimer, the killers, and the surrounding environment of the Indonesian people at large becomes a mixed-up and interrelated spectacle. Oppenheimer's overly clichéd production of truth becomes too polished and too true to be anything but false and his cinema bleeds together with the fictions of the killers.



Fig. 35 Political extras

5) Fabulating the Witness

Thus far, I have tried to highlight some of the dangers associated with the desire for documentary truth and how Oppenheimer's ethnographic witnessing works to intensify and amplify affective labor, but we still need to think through how collaboration works between filmmakers. Leshu Torchin argues that the surfacing desire for documentary testimony of genocide displays a tension between truth and falsity that resolves with a fictive witness. Cinematic recreation of trauma and memory that is, in the first place: "deemed too terrible for expression," encourages the aesthetic turn toward: "fiction to rend the horror palatable and within the realm of apprehension" (73). Torchin suggests that the sheer horror of genocidal memory resides well outside the perceptive capacities of the spectator desiring that same truth. The impossibility of visually rendering those memories that store the mass-production of death mandates a turn to fictive storytelling in order to bring those atrocities that are located far outside perceptual experience into the sensible fold. What I find so compelling about Torchin's suggestion lies in how the event of genocide in particular carries the inherent expectation of *some* degree of fictionalized testimony (*it is* difficult to imagine a documentary about genocide composed of sterilized surveillance footage of mass murder; and whether an audience would *believe* it at all). I feel that *The Act of Killing* is a film that carefully negotiates the pitfalls of truth by exploiting this precise gap in how we expect documentary genocide to play out: in some capacity, we already presume a degree of falsity or embellishment in order to narrate these horrifying events. This is at least part of the reason that we grow to care for Anwar Congo over the course of the film; we know that he is a storyteller and a 'fabulationist'—and by trusting him to keep atrocity at arm's length, we develop a rapport.

The Act of Killing works in a tradition of documentary-fiction made popular by anthropological filmmakers like Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen. Rouch in particular is famous for developing a style of ethnographic fiction where he visited isolated ethnic minorities in the 60s and 70s for the purpose of making documentary film *with* them. Rouch taught his collaborators how to use cinematic technology changing both how the West saw ethnic practices and how these minorities saw themselves, as Andrew Dudley explains: “despite the care with which Rouch approaches the peoples he so respects, his films nevertheless meddle in a culture that is not his [endangering] cultural landscape and disturb[ing] the process and perhaps capacity of memory and orality” (Flaxman 2000: 227). In films like *Jaguar* (1967), it’s clear that both filmmaker and subject get mixed up in a mutual politics of exchanged ideas and perceptions. Located somewhere between documentary and fiction, Rouch’s work is testament to how cinema works ecologically to politically impact both a particular audience (Western conceptions of truth) and the collaborating Africans (the ethnic culture attaining cinematic perceptions) constitute a mutual exchange of politics where no party leaves the trade unchanged. While Dudley frames Rouch’s work as potentially damaging to his subjects, I think his point is valid in pointing to cinema’s creative powers as being capable of change, alteration, and difference: all parties involved see a different future after the storytelling is said and done.

Oppenheimer is working to harness this same power of shared creativity to affect difference both within Indonesian sensible registers and within Western discourse: a mutual exchange of politics altering perception across the board. This narrative style is largely critical of codified and ethno-centric moral conceptions of truth and ‘progress,’ working the ethical powers available to the false through what Deleuze calls the story-telling function of cinematic politics, otherwise ‘fabulation’:

A collective memory as legend or strategic mythmaking must be invented for the individual as well as the community [...] neither a psychological memory where the individual recalls a repressed history, nor simply a historical memory as the representation of the occluded story of a people. Rather, [fabulation] entails a serialism that transforms the individual at the same time as the collective [...] both the representer and the represented, the individual and the collective, are caught up in an indiscernible or undecidable relation where each stands in for the other as intercessor, each becomes other in a ‘mutual image’” (Rodowick 1997: 158-9).

‘Fabulation’ targets conventional modes of majoritarian filmmaking for the purpose of calling forth a “people yet to come” and “contributing to the invention of a people” (Deleuze 1989: 217). The idea of a ‘future audience’ is complicated in *The Act of Killing* as the film advances a thesis requesting the spectator to understand a historical mess of guilt, collusion, and responsibility in a new and different way. When Anwar speaks of how “the future people will remember” (*AoK*), the question he might be asking is: what kind of audience does a film like this demand? Cinema, here, attempts to covalently bond and cooperatively produce new perceptions from colliding media ecologies, giving rise to difference.

6) Her/man’s Collaborative Body

In the liminal space created between Oppenheimer’s clichéd documentary mode and the surreal fiction made by the murderers is a gap where the film intervenes in the documentation of genocide. The film opens up sensibilities found outside the limits of perception through the affective labor generated by collision of different media systems and the intervals that bind the multiple cinemas together. Then, the larger and overarching philosophical question posed by *The Act of Killing* finds resolve in the qualities produced in the ‘event’ of media collision and interrelation. If the collaboration between Oppenheimer and the killers produces a subversive kind of (intensified) affective labor, we need to think about how this exchange operates fluidly within any ecology that might arise thereafter. If the collaborative nature of fabulation affects all involved; it remains to be seen how—like Jean Rouch affection of those societies learning to see

themselves cinematically—*The Act of Killing* reaches out to Indonesian politics in order to animate an ecological difference.

One of the more obvious examples of the film's attempt to make new politics occurs through the bodies of the killers. Herman Koto, who we come to know best during his attempt to win a local election and extort business owners thereafter, often dresses in tight flamboyant gowns while performing under Anwar's direction. The resulting image is far removed from the patriarchal and masculinist speech that so often accompanies the frightening ranks of the Pancasila Youth: "if they're pretty I'd rape them all... especially back then when we were the law!" (*AoK*). We become very acquainted with Herman as a colorful performer. His use of heavy make-up and illfitting sequin gowns takes on extreme, bizarre and carnivalesque associations: at one point, he appears with an elaborate hairstyle while feeding Anwar slabs of raw meat (Fig. 36). Elsewhere, he appears in a neon pink fur-cuff dress with a matching fleece mitre and sings quietly beside a line of chorus girls (Fig. 37). These images border on the unrecognizable and constitute an imaginative challenge for the spectator. (It is difficult to understand these compositions). We inevitably default to reading these images through convention or cliché: how does Herman's strange body fit into customs of horror film? How is the recurring song and dance routine a function of the musical? How could these images *not* be related to generic clichés?



Fig. 36-7 Her/man variations

The artist is a central figure in Deleuzes ethics; perhaps closer to thinkers or doctors than

simply aesthetes. It takes a certain kind of artistry to take the sensori-motor schema, or how an audience habitually reacts to clichéd cinematic environments, and play with the conditions of possibility in order to generate new and different types of thought. Tom Conley explains that, for Deleuze: “the artist does not merely mutilate, manhandle, or parody the cliché for comic or performative end. [The artist] give themselves over to clichés. They invoke, accumulate, and multiply them in the name of ‘pictorial givens,’ which they draw out of the canvas in the act” (Deleuze 2004: 141). Art becomes the site of thought when the artist plays with perception as sensation finds structure in habit-forming adaption to genre and cliché. When clichés proliferate, mutate, and intensify such that they take on novel understandings—like the variegated and surreal appearances of Herman’s body—the spectator thinks outside systems of perception structured by conventional sensori-motor relations, effectively making the artwork shortcircuit thought. We can think of this genre play as a kind of ‘shock to thought’ or how we: “normally perceive only clichés. But, if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break then a different type of image can appear [...] in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be ‘justified’, for better or for worse” (Deleuze 1989: 20). Deleuze writes that this radical force that opens up in the breakdown of the sensori-motor is always left open to the future and a potential of the yet-to-be-defined.

The powers of the false are indebted to the figure of the artist and immediately give rise to politics, both on and off screen as Conley argues: “a perception of a reign of clichés in the mental and visual world alike gives rise to a politics. The cineaste who knows how to use them in a prefilmic way [...] yokes aesthetics in the service of politics” (Deleuze 2004: 143). If we take Herman’s body as a ‘prefilmic’ example of excess, aberrance, and primarily expressive performance; then the dress he wears so well should resonate as a political statement beyond a

simple critique of Hollywood genre. Yet, it is precisely in the interval found between Western viewership and an Indonesian audience that Herman's intervention is most apparent. Benedict Anderson writes that Herman performs a 'gangsterism': "filmable only in terms of costume, body language and kitschy imaginative excess [...] [Herman] dress[es] up as a communist woman. 'She' appears with the depressing glitzy outfit of a well-off, middle-aged transvestite in a TV competition" (Brink and Oppenheimer 283). Yet, for the Indonesian spectator Herman's body also fits into an Indonesian cultural understanding of 'Waria,' otherwise a nationally recognized third gender that is: "roughly translated as 'male transvestite' [...] salient members of Indonesian society [better] known as *banci* or *béncong*, these male transvestites are visible in daily life" (Boellstorf 160). The Indonesian overdetermination of the male transvestite is further complicated by the Bugis people, an ethnic minority that sees gender five ways: including both female and male variations of drag and the transcendental 'bissu': a spiritual amalgamate of all genders. It is difficult to read Herman's appearance without considering his body as part and parcel of these circulating politics, especially as the Bugis gender beliefs have won recent political gains and regional autonomy (Wieringa 156). While impossible to say whether Herman consciously engages with these modes of gender activism, we must acknowledge that his performance *maintains immaterial associations that differ significantly with culturally structures of perception*. Herman's body is a highly contested space that is not limited to any single perceptual framework, but is instead drawn from the chaos of many possible worlds so to become a cinematic body that is impossible. While Western viewers have many philosophical and critical methods of understanding transgendered performative bodies, these epistemological models lack the specificity needed to read Herman's 'reign of clichés' in *The Act of Killing*. Regardless of whether Herman *intends* his body as a site of resistance, the film refuses to appear

legibly through actualized understandings of gender and sexuality; forcing the spectator toward an intense question: ‘*how do I read this image?*’ Herman’s body is a collaborative composition that pulls together all of these political economies, in turn affecting a proliferated politics. *The Act of Killing* discloses very little ethnographic information and the blanks become space for radical thought and speculation: a distributed documentary without a sovereign document.

7) Anwar: Artist, Forger, Seer

Anwar is the film’s primary artistic figure, finding belonging in a category of cinematic characters that Deleuze refers to as forgers, or: “*the character of the cinema [...] he provokes the undecidable alternatives and inexplicable differences between the true and the false, and thereby imposes a power of the false as adequate to time, in contrast to any form of the true which would control time*” (1989, 132). Anwar is very conscious of his body: both as he appears off camera, and rendered cinematically throughout the film. *The Act of Killing*, or at least the director’s cut, runs quite long at about two and a half hours. The long running time also gives the spectator a lot of footage tracing Anwar’s body over the seven years Oppenheimer stayed with the killers. Anwar displays a prefilmic awareness of his diegetic body and takes conscious steps to aesthetically maintain it: he is the most consistent image across the entire film; yet also a strange site of deflection. We struggle to read Anwar temporally, as he seems to be undergoing bodily modifications. While this impulse mostly comes from Anwar’s anxiety displayed toward the gradual betrayal of age, as: “they will die soon, perhaps [Oppenheimer] will make them immortal (Brink and Oppenheimer 283).

Yet, Anwar isn’t that easy—he’s a forger, magician and trickster. There is a sense in which he repeats the same perpetual clichés that make the diegetic ecology of the film look like a Hollywood backlot. Early on, we follow Anwar to a dental office where he receives a set of

dentures and corresponding surgery (Anwar is shown obsessing over his teeth throughout) (Fig. 38). Soon after, he dyes his white hair to a pitch black; returning to a youth that we only catch in faded photographs (Fig. 39-41). While the irony of Anwar's attempt to appear attractive in the face of such bloody reenactments does not escape the viewer, we also begin to understand Anwar's attempt to recreate his body as it exists in his memory, he is also trying to create aesthetic pathways through his memory back to his murderous youth. In Anwar's attempt to visually fit into all of the cinematic culture and filmmaking that surrounds the documentary production, his body itself becomes a site with *replay value* in the way he continually maps and remaps himself for the perception of others and the camera. If Anwar carries with him a shared vision of how he is perceived through a camera—that which we might call a refrain—we also see that Anwar is effectively fine-tuning himself to be preserved onscreen, as a monument to the killer's past and for the purpose of future audiences.



Fig. 38 Self-Dentist



Fig. 39 White



Fig. 40 Grey



Fig. 41 Black

Anwar's body becomes a complex bundle of temporal relations in both his personal appearance and his actions. The gesture that defines the killer is Anwar's preferred technique for murder: tying a long string of wire to an anchor and handle before a bloodless strangulation, a visual refrain that the spectator comes to know well. It is no secret that he learned these methods from the cinema, as he boasts: "violent films... I'd see such cool ways of killing. And I copied how they killed especially how gangsters often kill with wire" (*AoK*). Yet, this is not a question of learned behavior—that's too easy. Instead, we see that Anwar uses the repeated practise of making the weapon as an activation of pathways through his memory that relay a past

lived experience: not remembering, but bringing a past and future-self into temporary contact in the present. The repetition and pride with which he holds his own murderous achievement borders on instructional and his compulsion signals that Anwar wishes to replace his cinematic heroes. By preserving the gesture forging the weapon for future engagements with an unknown and as-of-yet undefined audience, Anwar becomes cinematic himself. In Anwar's effort to recondition his present body through memory and turn his own body into pure media he becomes increasingly amenable to being captured by cameras in the present while also channeling the affective vibrations of the past; Anwar fashions his body into a lived monument to the murders never commemorated by the government.

The image of Anwar tying a long string of wire to an anchor and handle, before enacting a bloodless strangulation, is a visual refrain in the film (Fig. 42-5). The weapon is simply another affecting process in the threshold of media events that make up this particular ecology, as Anwar repeatedly contracts past, present, and future through the creation and recreation of the wire. Anwar mimics the agency of his weapon by using bodily actions and motor memory to activate *recollective pathways* that affectively relay past-lived experiences, bringing his former and future self into contact in the present. Not only is Anwar a forger figure, but his complex temporal relations also make him what Deleuze calls a 'seer' or the character who: "goes beyond the the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived. The artist is a seer, a becomer [...] He has seen something in life that is too great, too unbearable also, and the mutual embrace of life with what threatens it" (1994: 171).



Fig. 42-5 Weaponry Variations



8) 'Resistance to Death, to Servitude, to the Intolerable, to Shame, and to the Present'

While we could never deny that Anwar has seen something unbearable—he is personally responsible for the grisly murder of nearly 1000 human beings—we, as responsible spectators, struggle to believe that Anwar finds disapproves of the society he helped found. This is what makes the conclusion of *The Act of Killing* so difficult: the film builds to a grand resolve of Anwar's emotional repentance, a form of clichéd affective labor amounting to a cathartic forgiveness—an experience we are accustomed to seeing in the conclusion of many documentaries addressing atrocity. Somehow, after all this cruelty, Anwar wants us to see a light and a truth at the end of the tunnel. After watching a reenactment where Anwar himself is strangled death by Herman, Anwar begins to express a sense of remorse: “did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I ca feel what the people I tortured felt because here my dignity has been destroyed and then fear comes, right there and then” (*AoK*). Joshua then chimes in with the incredulous reason that any spectator might feel compelled to point out: “actually, the people you tortured felt far worse because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed,” to which Anwar responds “But I can feel it, Josh. Really I feel it” (*AoK*). This confession should

not fool anyone by this point, and the audience struggles to let this avowal sit easily. What good is remorse if it is perceived through the eyes that watched and created so much pain? The confession is for Oppenheimer's camera only and the audience struggles to have this avowal sit easily. The most spectacularized performance of Anwar's trickery is a durational shot of Anwar dry-heaving the souls of those he murdered while visiting a space where he killed many people. This is not repentance; nor does it feel good to watch a murderer's body convulse with guilt—this is still a performance. Anwar's journey resolves in lies and falsities for the camera. This leaves the presence of our fabulatory people-yet-to-come in peril: in a world where these men *will not* be held individually responsible for their actions, what work has Anwar's false confession and welding of past to present achieved to in the absence of justice and judgment?

This brings us back to the question of artistry in the film: what would be at stake in saying that any pursuit of a singular, individual, or auteurist cinema is an impossibly sovereign claim? While filming a Western sequence in Northern Sumatra, the killers break for a conceptual meeting. While discussing their costumes, Herman directs a sharp question toward Anwar: "how do you know you look good in red? We're the ones who see you!" (*AoK*). Anwar's responds callously and with directorial authority: "I know what looks good on me because I'm an artist. [You are not an artist]" (*AoK*). The bickering is interrupted by a quick cut to a shot of Herman brushing his teeth in the privacy of his home while the foaming toothpaste flows over his naked and overweight body. Herman grotesquely emits a guttural belche and he spits foam all over the room in a surreal study of anatomy. Every bit is the work of a beautiful, if deprecating, self-portrait of Herman. Oppenheimer's editing of the film seems to rush to Herman's defense, as if to say 'here, look—Herman makes art, also.' The collaborative form of the documentary is never felt more clearly. Three visions of cinema collide: Herman's sense of self, Anwar's

tyrannical ego, and Oppenheimer's invisible but guiding hand. The work to recuperate whatever affective value transpires in this clash falls to the audience, summoned to adjudicate the work as a single vision drawn from the distribution. It becomes impossible to distinguish between different cinematic voices in the film; *The Act of Killing* instead seeks to call forth a spectator to witness a clash of perceptions and the pure difference this clash produces. Fabulation, here, is in the service of a people-yet-to-come or an audience that: "consists neither in representing a determinate state of affairs, nor in raising the consciousness of given conditions, so much as in creating a new ensemble of relations and possibilities" (Flaxman 2012: 227).

In this film, the clichéd models of spectatorship that normally channel majoritarian forces of affective labor that produce desires for documentary truth are intensified so to break down and short-circuit in a very deliberate way. Whenever Oppenheimer replays the footage that the killers have shot as dailies, Anwar pauses to watch the progress made on his film. We never get a shot of him together with the screen displaying the dailies, only a subjective perspective showing the television proper. What I find most curious about these moments of tripled spectatorship (Anwar's film, Anwar watching, Oppenheimer's camera), is how the digital textures of the recorded world in Anwar's room, and the diegetic world on the television screen, always fail to match up and synchronize properly. Unlike the choreographed screens that we looked at in *Standard Operating Procedure*, one of these images is clearly superimposed upon the other and the synthesis of the two temporalities fails (Fig. 45-50). I feel that, in this moment of audiovisual dissonance, Oppenheimer is asking us to feel the tug of creativity that's found in the interval between the images that link very disparate times. The event that brings the past into the present insists on the possibility of a different world—perhaps one where we might not be so quick to pass moral judgment in application, rather to take seriously, embrace, and design media

ecologies as they promise an ethics of process, event, and ultimately creation.



Fig. 45-50 Tripled spectatorship – Cinematic grafts



Insofar as this composition is always a correlation of two images existing together and atop one another (the cinema of the killers and Oppenheimer's documentary footage), there is also a third spectator involved in this frame that makes itself felt in the interval between the conflictual modes of address. The strange forces that push and pull apart the two screens are what Deleuze calls the 'any-space-whatever,' or virtual conjunctions which "are possibilities for meaning and emotion expressed not in a determined and meaning-laden space [...] ready to act or to signify, but one does not yet know in what direction or what meaning. They are the virtual expression of choices yet to be accomplished" (Rodowick 2010: 104). The media ecologies and perceptual systems of the killers appear alongside Oppenheimer's documentary filmmaking in a manner that does not quite gel; there are two images of difference and a disparate link between them.

The ritualized scenes of reviewing the killers' cinema are an encounter with a shared image that demands to be read by all perceptive forces present. The vision of Anwar, Oppenheimer and us as spectator share and overlap in a collaboration that is nearly coherent:

The seer is alienated both within and from the world, but she sees farther, better, and deeper than she can react or think. This augmentation of the powers of sight and sensitivity to the injustices of the world may give the appearance of passivity, or an

impotence of thought before that which is intolerable to consider [...] what is outside of thought, which thought must confront as the unthought, is our existential and ethical relationship to time as an infinite reservoir of nondetermined choice, which is also an ontology where life and thought are inseparable (Rodowick 2010: 110).

If *The Act of Killing* seeks to call forth a specific audience, the impulse toward the impossible yet shared perceptions between each filmmaker, as many cultures, and the spectator form a collaborative ecology of new meaning; for this reason we say that the film works ethically, as it opens up creative and undefined thought in a moment when all parties together look for the disparate force that holds the multiple screens of perception together. This disjunction is thought and felt as a call to arms—above all as a purpose.

Conclusion

This project is an attempt to think transversally about the interrelations of both material and immaterial forces through an expanded, immanent and ecological consideration. By way of approaching technical objects and bodies as forceful consistencies composed by matter and informational flows, I have attempted to articulate a theory of ethics addressing how we relate and create media ecologies in an attempt to *make sense* of media violence. By focusing on documentary forms that trouble non-fictional accounts of warfare and intolerability, I stress a micropolitical ethics of difference that pays close attention to the virtual as a reservoir of creative potential. I contend that artists design media ecologies to spur the unthought of thought itself—in so doing, we can produce different techniques of being in the world that may resolve in a future of either danger or potential. Ethics, then, is a drive or impulse towards difference without an index or map to foreclose how future apprehensions might work: always transversal and across interrelated ecologies.

My project hinges on a responsible evaluation indebted to the powers of affect: ‘we do not know in advance what a body can do, what a mind can think.’ By remaining open to ecological systems that remain receptive in response, we might negotiate our membership within the macropolitical flows of political machines and keep an eye on ecological design and those opportunities that arise to tweak perception for future encounters.

In closing, I wish to return to the figure of the animal who, for me, *never* mourns to be human. While animals may not be compelled toward our ecologies, they autonomously return without animosity, but with forgiveness. I feel that, in a different future, I would take great comfort in sharing further territories with the animal, through lasting and less violent ecologies with relations of cooperation, health, and responsibility.

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