

Confronting the limits:

Renditions of the Real in the Edge of the Construct Film Cycle.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fragile perimeter that separates an illusory reality from the supposedly more authentic Real it conceals, which forms a key focus of Slavoj Žižek's work, and in this thesis I offer a study of the relations between this aspect of Žižek's work and film theory. In particular, this thesis is an elaboration on and interrogation of Žižek's employment of the Lacanian notion of the Real in critiques of the inadequacy of 1970s and 1980s film theory and its widespread adoption of a Lacanian model of film-spectator relations

By way of illustration, I consider the microgenre of films released between the years 1998 to 2000 that includes the *Matrix* trilogy, David Fincher's *Fight Club*, Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, and Alex Proyas' *Dark City*, which are all similarly fascinated by the border between a fake reality and an ostensibly more genuine real. However, I also argue that this cycle of films does more than illustrate a fascination with that which is in excess of signification: this cycle of films equally participates in the reappraisal of this important phase of film theory.

This thesis proceeds from a consideration of Žižek's assertion that Lacanian psychoanalysis is missing from the dominant field of film theory. To assess this claim, I re-examine the era of political modernism. From this it becomes clear that what Žižek is noting is not the total *absence* of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but, rather, an absence of the version of Lacan to which he is drawn. This thesis considers aspects of the Real that contaminate the form and matter of these films, in addition to the thematic exploration of the shadowy world beyond reality.

In pursuing this investigation, this thesis utilises the insights of the deconstructive work of Jacques Derrida, to consider the terms 'form', 'content' and 'matter'. These words are ubiquitous in film studies, and I aim to explicate not their final meaning, but the way in which the Real interrupts the very stability of vocabulary used in film studies.

I interrogate the concepts of gaze and voice as privileged instances of the way in which the Real can rupture the symbolic in narrative film. Without seeking to reject these aesthetic figures, through critical readings of key theories of embodiment, the grotesque and the abject (such as those of Marks, Shaviro, Sobchack, Bakhtin and Kristeva), I suggest how the body and its representation provides a more sustained motif where the Real leaves its trace in these films. This thesis proposes that it is above all through such representations that these films offer a response to the themes with which politically modernist film theory has been historically concerned. The Edge of the Construct films achieve this in their evocation of an intolerable namelessness at the centre of the human subject and the social world it inhabits.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Kate Greenwood.

18 December 2006.

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Introduction.

For Jacques Lacan, the act of representation contributes to the creation of meaning through its role of inadequately attempting to cover over an “*unassimilable*” “Thing” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 167; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 55); some remaining enigmatic excess consistently returns to undermine sense with nonsense. This troublesome leftover is precisely Lacan’s Real, and this Real has held and continues to hold great fascination for theorists of all forms of representation. It is above all in the study of cinema that Lacan’s Real, as well as his other teachings, have left a considerable legacy.

With specific reference to cinema, during the formation of what is now regarded as canonical film theory in the 1960s and 1970s, the Real was understood as something that could be discerned in what a film failed to represent, in a film’s fissures, silences and inconsistencies. For film theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream cinema was conceptualised as a representational screen between the viewer and (to consider the Marxist-Leninist approach) their material conditions of existence, and (to consider the psychoanalytical approach) the overwhelming totality of existence, which might be revealed in a film’s narrative or formal irregularities. This conception of cinema as contributing to a symbolic barrier between viewers and the incomprehensible entirety of existence brings us close to the Lacanian understanding of the Real; however, the development of psychoanalytic film theory in the 1970s and 1980s began to wane before an articulation of the relationship between the Real and cinema in a sustained and explicitly Lacanian sense could be made.

Slavoj Žižek's recent revision of Lacan's teachings is in many ways a resumption of this project, complicating and interrogating earlier attempts to theorise the relationship between the Real and cinema, as well as the understanding these earlier accounts held of the role of representation, or ideology, in culture. Žižek's intervention into this field is underpinned by his preference for the Lacan of the Real, focusing on Lacan's later work which sought to explore the border between always-already defective representation and the unspeakable thing it tries to hide, or the barrier between reality and the Real.

The concept of the barrier (be it physical, metaphorical, digital, or psychological) that separates the known from the unknown is ubiquitous in the science fiction genre. Gary K. Wolfe declares "that it transcends the label [of] 'icon'" (xiv).¹ Attesting to the enduring persistence of the motif of the barrier (and its inevitable perforation) in the last hundred years, Žižek proclaims that "The authentic twentieth century passion [is] for penetrating the Real Thing" (*Welcome* 12).²

The influence of the super-icon of the barrier that separates an illusory reality from a more authentic 'real' can be traced back to Plato's cave, and in narrative cinema can be found in a proliferation of dystopian popular films that appeared towards the end of the twentieth century. The ability that these films have to capture the social imagination points to a fascination with the catastrophe or crisis represented by reaching a barrier, actual or metaphorical, between one's fake reality and the more

¹See Wolfe pp 30-54 for an overview of the image of the barrier in science fiction literature. In *The Known and the Unknown* Wolfe is not using 'iconic' in its semiotic sense. Rather, he examines the iconic motifs of wonder, the spaceship, the city, the wasteland, the robot, and the monster, in addition to the barrier, in science fiction literature.

² This theme is explored repeatedly also in the work of Daniel F Galouye (see *Dark Universe* (1976), *Counterfeit World* (1965) [the story upon which *The Thirteenth Floor* (Rusnak 1999) is based], and 'Tonight the Sky Will Fall' (1974)). In addition to *Time Out of Joint*, Dick's *Valis* (1981) is another notable example.

genuine ‘real’ it conceals. In this thesis I will examine the *Matrix* trilogy (Larry and Andy Wachowski 1999-2003), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir 1998), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas 1998) and *Fight Club* (David Fincher 1999) as examples of such films. It is my argument that these films enact an interrogation of the place of the Lacanian Real in film studies, and, further, lead us to consider what some of Žižek’s blind spots might be in his attempts to apply his preferred understanding of Lacan’s teachings to cinema.

As Žižek argues, with reference to Phillip K Dick’s *Time Out of Joint* (1959), Brian Aldiss’ *Starship* (1959) and Michael Anderson’s *Logan’s Run* (1976), the desire to ‘penetrate the Real Thing’ is hardly new in popular cultural production (‘The Matrix’ 242-243; *Welcome* 14). However, it saw an intensification in the decade approaching the new millennium. The *Matrix* trilogy, *The Truman Show*, *Fight Club* and *Dark City* resist neat generic pigeonholing, identifying to varying degrees with the science fiction, *noir*, action, drama and psychological thriller genres (to name but a few). Despite this, they could be said to comprise an intensification of a cycle³, as they share depictions of protagonists who reach the edge of their constructed reality in either metaphorical, perceptual, or physical ways. Joshua Clover labels this cycle of films appearing in the final years of the twentieth century as the “Edge of the Construct” microgenre (8). Attesting to the intensity of their

³ Of the film genre cycle, and certainly pertaining to the group of films considered in this thesis, Adrian Martin writes,

Cycles are simply genres sped up, small sub-genres that quickly permutate and exhaust themselves. Critically, cycles demand an intensification of generic thinking – that is, a willingness to consider films as members of a swarming pack, an intertextual network, rather than as singular, closed, organic entities...each film in a cycle can be appreciated for the way it proposes its own novel variation on a loose set of currently available, recurring elements (themes, characters, settings, topical obsessions). (‘Unlawful Entries’ 66-67)

production, Clover observes that these films appeared during a period of fifteen months, where “there was never a moment where some cinema wasn’t showing an Edge of the Construct film” (*The Matrix* 72).⁴

Such an intensification of a cycle is important because, as Linda Williams tells us, popular genres work to “address persistent problems in our culture...[they are] a cultural form of problem solving” (‘Film Bodies’ 9). Indeed, it is striking that the theme (being at the edge of the construct) and the form (generic confusion, instability), seem to contaminate one another, in the sense that both evoke the notion of boundaries being crossed.⁵ If the films included in the Edge of the Construct grouping are anything to go by, the future moment will involve us (or, at least, the darkly handsome males among us) hovering on the edge of the barrier between our ideologically circumscribed, sham realities and the previously unknown ‘real’ that they conceal.

The popularity of the cumulative re-visitation and re-examination of variations upon the same crisis exhibited by these films could be seen to “rest on the desire to confront the remainder, or to be confronted with that which is in excess of signification” (Doane 236). Mary Ann Doane’s concepts of “the remainder” and “that which is in excess of signification” align with the Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of

⁴ Joshua Clover further includes in this cluster *The Thirteenth Floor* (Joseph Rusnak 1999), adapted from Daniel Galouye’s *Counterfeit World. Pleasantville* (Gary Ross 1998) can also be included in this cluster (Fitting 157). I would also note *They Live* (John Carpenter 1988) as a precursor to this theme which proliferated in the final years of the twentieth century.

⁵ Indeed, while these films superficially belong to disparate genres, ranging from science fiction, drama, and psychological thriller, the term “hypergeneric” may be more appropriate here. Following from Jim Collins, the hypergeneric is defined as “the foregrounding of a highly eclectic range of intertexts” which is prevalent in recent popular film, involving “a hybridity of conventions that work at cross-purposes with the traditional notion of genre as a stable, integrated set of narrative and stylistic conventions” (Collins 126).

the Real⁶ that I will explore in Chapter Three of this thesis as “the foreclosed element of discourse” (Sheridan x).⁷ Resonating with Doane’s concepts, Žižek writes in *The Fragile Absolute* that psychoanalysis “entails the acceptance and admission that all our discursive formations are forever haunted by some ‘indivisible remainder’, by some traumatic spectral ‘rest’ that resists ‘confession’, that is, integration in the symbolic universe” (98).⁸

Most analyses of these films are attended by speculations about the ‘cause’ or ‘reason’ for their paranoid tone. According to some, the excess of choice in liberal democratic societies leads to the desire for a hegemonic authority (Nunn), “an agent who will give structure to our chaotic social lives” (Žižek, ‘You May!’). Such agents may be exemplified by the rampant control of the Machines in *The Matrix*, the television producers in *The Truman Show*, the Strangers in *Dark City*, and Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*. Others suggest that these films reflect ambivalent millennial attitudes towards technology in general, and information and surveillance technologies in particular (E Miller; Wright; J Clover; Caster). Still others point to a pervasive late-twentieth century “‘American’ crisis and a crisis of white masculinity”

⁶ While many, including Lacan (and Žižek, sporadically), use the lower-case ‘r’ when denoting the Lacanian Real, for the reason that the Real is that which is beyond signification, and therefore cannot have a proper noun - or even a noun, for that matter - unless quoting in this thesis, henceforth the upper-case will be used for clarity’s sake. When the ‘real’ with a lower-case is used, it is understood to refer to a more authentic reality, which is not the same thing as the Lacanian Real.

⁷ Doane is writing here on information and the treatment of crises and catastrophes in televisual mass media, and I am transferring her ideas to film. This is not inappropriate, given Doane’s pedigree in feminist cine-semiotics.

⁸ Linda Williams tells us that melodrama and its attendant excess of emotion siphoned off into film style is “the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures” (‘Melodrama revised’ 42). As such, it could be said that all films working on an emotional register could be seen to confront the remainder, to confront the unspeakable. I would argue that while the films considered in this thesis could not comfortably be referred to as melodrama, generically. However, in key scenes where the protagonist encounters the border between a fake reality and another, supposedly more real reality, the films shift into a melodramatic register, befitting the subjective crisis represented in such moments. In this way, these films participate in the melodramatic mode’s tendency to want to say *all*, but be incapable to do so.

(Watson 15). While arguably all such attributions are valid, none of them approaches the notion of something that is *in excess* of signification; it is my contention that these films gesture towards that which is impossible to say: the unspeakable, the Real.

In a paper promisingly titled ‘Unmasking the Real? Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films’, Peter Fitting examines the theme common to the Edge of the Construct films: the idea that we inhabit “a comfortable but artificial world which screens a much more frightening ‘real’ reality ‘behind all this’” (157). The ‘real’ ‘behind *all this*’ that Fitting examines is “the real economic workings of contemporary society” where “all this” represents ideology (157). Accordingly, Fitting’s project situates itself within a Marxist critique, whereby ideology functions to mask material, economic conditions of existence. Yet, while Fitting implies that he will examine the unspeakable Real, ultimately he finds the determinant of this cycle of films in an identifiable, nameable cause. I am more curious about the unnameable that these films evoke.

In this thesis it is not my intention to reduce the prevalence of the Edge of the Construct films to a set of social, historical, economic, or political determinants. The existence of these films is surely overdetermined, and numerous texts examine these films for this reason (including those cited above). Instead, I will consider how the compulsive re-telling of the narrative of reaching the boundaries of one’s constructed reality engages with the Lacanian Real, a Real which is altogether more shadowy and incalculable than economic conditions of existence, or relations of production (which are indeed, according to these films, frightening). In particular, I will proceed from a consideration of Žižek’s provocative contention that Lacanian psychoanalysis proper

is effectively missing from the dominant body of film theory, and consider how these Edge of the Construct films, which thematise the boundary between the symbolic edifice of ideology and the Real it conceals, evoke the Real in ways that exceed signification through thematic content. In other words, in addition to the thematic exploration of the shadowy world that exists beyond reality, I will consider the vanishing trace of the Real as it erupts, lingers, and passes from aspects of the form, content and matter of these films.

In Chapters One and Two I mobilise contingent analyses that the rest of the thesis will revisit and rework. Chapter One considers the dominant history of studies of the relation between film, ideology and the Real, in order to examine the viability of Žižek's claim that faithful accounts of Lacanian psychoanalysis are missing from the area Post Theorists David Bordwell and Noël Carroll designate as Theory. Accordingly, I will engage in a historiographic examination of Theory, that "abstract body of thought which came into prominence during the 1970s" (Bordwell and Carroll xiii). Such 'Theory' is designated by DN Rodowick as the period of political modernism, which is perhaps more a comprehensive label, as it recognises that this period was not just a time of theorising, but also of theoretically informed creative practice. I will examine the film theory of this period for its interaction with psychoanalysis, Marxism and semiotics in order to understand how 'Lacanian psychoanalysis' came to be interpreted – applied as the analysis of the symbolic – in film studies. Chapter One identifies opportunities for the expansion of this interpretation via a revisitation of the later Lacan, the Lacan of the Real. The project of political modernism's application of semiotic, Marxist and psychoanalytic theories

to film resulted in mainstream narrative film becoming positioned as a barrier. According to this tradition, mainstream film as a barrier separates viewers from the 'real' conditions of their existence, and supplants these 'real' conditions with a comforting, illusory world of wholeness and completion. In the process, it becomes clear that the terms 'form', 'content' and 'matter' ubiquitous in film studies become weighted with political and rhetorical meaning.

Chapter Two considers the terms 'matter', 'form' and 'content', with a view to explicating not their final and absolute meaning, but, via Derridean deconstruction, the way in which the Real interrupts the very stability of vocabulary used in aesthetics in general and film studies in particular. Moreover, the resonance between the indeterminacy of form, content and matter, and the concept of the Real as an entity of unravelling, indeterminate form, is considered. Therefore, Chapters One and Two consider two vast areas of philosophical and theoretical pursuit, and of each of these areas I am considering but one aspect: the place of that which exceeds signification.

Chapter Three acts as a rejoinder to Chapters One and Two, and examines the Lacanian concepts deployed by Žižek in order to more fully grasp the significance of Lacan's Real in his overall project, and how it relates to ideology and subjectivity. In this chapter I qualify Žižek's claim that those who declare themselves Lacanians are 'missing' from film theory. Instead, I suggest that it is not that psychoanalysis is missing altogether, but that a particularly important concept of Lacanian psychoanalysis that is missing. This concept is, of course, the Real. In this chapter I examine Žižek's reading of Lacan's Real as the necessary impediment to the gesture of the symbolic to create an impermeable edifice or border.

In Chapter Four I consider the figure of the border in the Edge of the Construct films, and examine what it is they depict as existing on the other side of this border. I then consider Žižek's deployment of Lacan's *sinthome* as the Real's penetration of the symbolic edifice. In particular, I interrogate the concepts of gaze and voice as privileged instances of the *sinthome* in the Edge of the Construct films. Without seeking to reject these aesthetic figures, I suggest how the body and its representation provides a more sustained motif where the Real leaves its trace in narrative film, as an eruption of meaninglessness. In this chapter, via an analysis of *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*, I explore where the limits of gaze and voice as deployed by Žižek lie when applied to mainstream narrative cinema.

Chapter Five returns to the concept of unravelling, indeterminate form introduced in Chapter Two. This concept shares much in common with theories of the grotesque, the abject, the uncanny and the sublime. As both the form and theme of these films are contaminated by indeterminacy and boundlessness, so too are the representations of the human body in the Edge of the Construct films. Bodies in these films are recurrently grotesque, abject, and evocative of the uncanny and sublime. Consequently, this chapter considers the influential theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud, and presents an argument for how the body in various states of disorder is a recurrent motif in discussions of the Real. In an analysis of key scenes in the *Matrix* trilogy and *Fight Club*, I consider how the Real evokes the sublime, and the way in which the grotesque, the abject, and the uncanny grapple with the same nodal concept: the Real.

This thesis argues, then, that the Edge of the Construct films prompt a re-examination of the place of the Lacanian Real in film studies. This is the same re-examination induced by Žižek's statement that Lacanians proper are absent from a key period in the history of film studies. Beyond this, however, I argue that these films elicit a similar re-examination of the way cinema can traverse the Real in Žižek's view, and the role the body can play in this.

Chapter One

Film and Ideology: a critical account of political modernism.

“Classical cinema establishes itself as the ventriloquist for ideology” (Dayan 31).

Žižek’s Missing Lacanians.

Each of the films examined later in this thesis culminates in a scene where the main character realises the world as he⁹ has known it is a sham. At this moment the main character is able to peer beyond the limits of illusion, beyond the strictures of the symbolic, into a more authentic, although anxiety-provoking, real. Or so it seems: more accurately, while the new world revealed is not necessarily *more* real in each case, the process of seeing that another world exists casts into doubt the authenticity of the world the protagonist originally perceived as genuine. It is this moment of unveiling – the moment where the fake physical, perceptual, or psychological symbolic edifice is fractured, revealing a more authentic real world – shared by the Edge of the Construct films, with which this thesis is most concerned. In terms of contemporary critical theory, this ‘veil’, this perceived yet inauthentic world, is, precisely, ideology. Accordingly, these films depict (or, attempt to depict) what lies beyond ideology.

In recent critical theory, a compelling and rigorously revised framework for accounting for ideology and what lies beyond has issued from Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Žižek combines Lacanian psychoanalysis and Kantian notions of the

⁹ The protagonists in these films are invariably male.

sublime to elucidate a concept of the Real as the sublime object of ideology¹⁰. The

Real, according to Žižek, is simultaneously

both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolisation, *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency...the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolisation stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes); but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious; it is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. (*Sublime Object* 169)

It is this paradoxical and frustratingly unrepresentable Real that arrests the Edge of the Construct films, and those who view them. In evoking the Real, these films prompt a reconsideration of earlier theories of film and ideology.

Already in the title of this chapter – ‘Film and *Ideology*’ – a certain emphasis is revealed. Considerations of the Real during 1960s and 1970s film theory were secondary to consideration of film’s relation to ideology. This chapter will trace the way this emphasis came about. It will also explore how, for key historical accounts of the relationship between film and ideology expounded during the 1960s and 1970s, it is exactly the drawing aside of ideology depicted in this cycle of films that mainstream cinema *should* and *could* execute, but so rarely, the argument goes, does. On the contrary, for these influential accounts of the relationship between film and ideology, the action is quite the opposite. Hollywood cinema, we are told, “operates to legitimate dominant institutions and traditional values” and “its representational

¹⁰ It is important to note from the outset that while Žižek often describes the Real in terms tantamount to the sublime, that the Real is also the determining inconsistency in every symbolic system. As such, the Real is in every symbolic utterance, and is far from sublime. In this sense, the Real is also “crass” (Eagleton, ‘Enjoy’ 42), sharing the undifferentiated quality of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s body without organs. The Real, then, in its pervasiveness takes on a mundane dimension, and while the films Žižek most famously discusses – those of Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch, for example – often appeal to the sublime aspect of the Real, Žižek also seeks to explicate the Real (among other Lacanian concepts) via the “inherent imbecility of popular culture” (Žižek in Wiczeorek, viii).

conventions help instill ideology” (Ryan and Kellner 1). In the words of film historian Susan Hayward “The great dream factory makes the American dream come true” (66).

In 1996 David Bordwell and Noël Carroll published an ostensibly reformist call to the field of film studies. In *Post-Theory* they propose that film theory (lower-case ‘t’) should be released from the tyranny of upper-case ‘T’ Theory, defined as

an abstract body of thought which came into prominence in Anglo-American film studies during the 1970s. The most famous avatar of Theory was that aggregate of doctrines derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, Post-Structuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian Marxism. Here, unabashedly, was Grand Theory. (Bordwell and Carroll xiii)

Their suggestion here is that such Theory is waning. In the stead of this dwindling Theory, Bordwell and Carroll propose that a less rigid, more pluralistic face should be applied to film studies.

Following Sylvia Harvey, Rodowick refers to this period of Grand Theory identified by Bordwell and Carroll as “the era of political modernism”: ‘political’ in the sense that its imperative was to engage with theory and political exigencies to bring about social change; ‘modernist’ in the sense that it made these political changes contingent upon the evolution of an avant-garde aesthetic practice in line with that already established in the visual arts and literature (Rodowick 1; Harvey, ‘Whose Brecht?’ 47-48). Rodowick describes ‘political modernism’ as “the defining idea...of 70s film theory” (ix). He continues, describing it as a debate which “occurred because a diverse group of intellectuals and filmmakers were drawn, in

their own divergent and contradictory ways, to a common concern – the relation between film and ideology” (viii-ix).

Political modernism emerged and dominated humanities scholarship during the late 60s and 70s in France, England and America. This was a defining era for the discipline of film theory in general and studies of film and ideology in particular. During this time, interest in the relation between film and ideology took on a particular intensity, the result of a complex entanglement of political conviction, certain institutional links between France and England, and the advent and association of numerous critical theories including structural semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism. While I am not suggesting the phrase ‘political modernism’ is interchangeable with Bordwell and Carroll’s category of Grand Theory, which seems to suggest it was a period of theoretical outpouring with no creative element, clearly the two categories are concerned with the same aggregate of theoretical derivations.

In response to *Post-Theory*, Slavoj Žižek writes:

Although Post-Theorists acknowledge the inner differences in the field of Theory...they nevertheless emphasise a common Lacanian element as central...So who are these Lacanians?...I would like to claim that, in the global field designated by Post-Theorists as that of Theory, we are dealing with a ...mysterious ‘case of the missing Lacanians’:...I know of no cinema theorist who effectively accepts Lacan as his or her ultimate background...as a Lacanian, I seem to be caught in an unexpected double-bind: I am, as it were, being deprived of what I never possessed, made responsible for something others generated as Lacanian film theory. (*Fright of Real Tears* 1-2)

He continues:

...the reading of Lacan operative in the 70s and 80s was a reductive one – there is ‘another Lacan’ reference to whom can contribute to the revitalisation of the cinema theory (and of critical thought in general) today. (*Fright of Real Tears* 7)

Toward the end of this thesis I will return more closely to this, and suggest that Barbara Creed’s work using Kristevan theory within film studies is a step towards this ‘revitalisation’ of cinema that Žižek envisages. Creed’s work is exemplary of an application of Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theorisation of the abject to cinema. The abject is understood as that which is cast out of the symbolic, and yet upon which the symbolic relies. This notion of the abject shares much in common with the Real, and this will be returned to in Chapter Five.

Despite its rhetorical boldness, however, Žižek’s suggestion regarding the era of political modernism that “we are dealing with a...mysterious ‘case of the missing Lacanians’” should not be dismissed. While Lacan is unarguably a key theorist influencing political modernism, as this chapter will explore, the reading and application of Lacan within political modernism was often ambiguous. In this chapter I will spend time taking Žižek’s claim seriously, considering in detail certain of the French origins of influential theories of film and ideology. This choice has been made because in the majority overviews of this field of inquiry, the French origins are often overlooked in favour of their legacy in the English language (Bordwell, ‘Contemporary Film Studies’ 20-21). In particular, I will consider how two dominant threads of argument were produced which in effect resulted in the ‘case of the missing Lacanians’. It is important for this thesis to carefully investigate this situation, as it is not so much Lacanians in general who are missing, but Lacan’s Real

in its more complex conceptualisation. The reading of Lacan presented in French theories of cinema and ideology in the 60s and 70s resulted in two alternative but equally restrictive conceptions of the Real: on the one hand in the journal *Cinéthique* the Real was conceived in overtly Marxist terms. As such, the Real was considered to be the material conditions of existence of a film. On the other hand, in the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* the Real was described in vaguely Lacanian terms as something which lay in a film's formal gaps and interstices, the precise nature of which was never explicated. The latter outcome could be the result of the inherent difficulty of the Real, and could be seen as a way in which Marxist materialism rushed into the 'gaps' in the English translation and extension of this work. Moreover, it is important to note that Lacan began to emphasise the Real in the later part of his career (the late 1960s and early 1970s), contemporaneous with the advent of political modernism. Seen in this context, it makes sense that an emphasis on the Lacanian category of the Real is largely absent from politically modernist film theory.

The following is designed to establish the context in which the past has shaped current debates, and the circumstances in which I embark upon my analysis of the representation of the Real and ideology in the Edge of the Construct films. While wishing to avoid an overly schematic outline of work already done in the field of studies of the relation between film and ideology's concealment of the Real, a historiographic consideration of the key proponents in the debate can enlighten us as to how the Real has been historically conceived with relation to cinema, and the reasons for this. As will be discussed in this chapter, the topic of film and ideology has been shunned for various reasons of fashion and exasperation, leaving important

questions relating to the Real, ideology, subjectivity and cinema unanswered. This has left us in a situation where theory is only partially prepared to account for the way in which the Edge of the Construct films engage the Real.

Realism and Ideology.

I am interested in how it came to be that studies of the relation between film and ideology have historically privileged considerations of film form and materiality as they relate to ideology, as opposed to film content or subject matter. This is especially true of studies of mainstream Hollywood product.¹¹ One possible reason for this could be film studies' attempt as a discipline to establish itself against literary criticism's models. Here, for example, the classically opposed theories of Sergei Eisenstein and those of Andre Bazin come to mind. While the subject matter of Eisenstein's films is of unmistakable importance, in many ways this is overshadowed by his emphasis on the importance of the formal aspects of film art. Eisenstein is well known for championing a frenetic editing style devolving from a dialectical political philosophy whereby the spectator becomes an active participant in the creation and construction of meaning from film.¹²

Andre Bazin was critical of Eisenstein's theory and the films it influenced, arguing instead that a calculated use of *mise en scène*, the long take, depth of focus

¹¹ In this instance it is accepted that a film text is conventionally understood to comprise of both its form (its structural logic and materiality, its signifiers) and its subject matter, referred to variously as narrative content or diegetic content (the signified). This project is concerned to recuperate the importance of the 'subject matter' part of the equation, which part, as this chapter will explain, has been neglected by trends in the analysis of film and ideology. In doing so, the relative importance of the other factors in the equation will be maintained. Thematic content is identified as a crucial factor with respect to the contemporary Hollywood films under analysis here, given that they address the concept of ideology in their subject matter as well as in their form. This conceptual division between form, content and matter will be more closely scrutinised in chapter two of this thesis.

¹² As outlined in his 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form'.

and minimal editing would result in an authentic realism of the cinema.¹³ Thus two of the earlier approaches to film theory – Soviet Formalism and Bazin’s privileged realisms – can be seen to privilege film form at the expense of a discussion of content. Confronted with the Edge of the Construct films, I find myself only partially supported by this theoretical foundation. While these films *may* be formally innovative (and this will be considered in Chapters Four and Five) it is in their narrative content that they most obviously examine ideology’s function in society. Accordingly, parallel to my explication of conceptions of the Real in film theory, will be an account of the way in which such conceptions privileged form over content. I see this as a source of the impasse which has led to theory’s need for renovation in order to understand aspects of the Edge of the Construct films.

As alluded to in the epigraph to this chapter, Hollywood cinema is often considered to be synonymous with particular ideologies. It is imperative to understand how this equation came about, how, exactly, to reinvoke Dayan, cinema became viewed as ideology’s “ventriloquist”. Furthermore, an understanding of how ‘illusionism’ became a pejorative term that was equated with mainstream narrative cinema indicates, to some extent, how analyses of form became central to studies of film and ideology to the detriment of content. As we will see, certain formal methods (realist and classic cinema and their varying degrees of attendant linearity, internal

¹³ This conviction forms the foundation of Bazin’s entire project, and can be seen explicitly stated in his ‘Introduction’ to *What is Cinema?* where he writes of the centrality of “the objective reality of the film image” to his critical position (6). However, it must be noted that Bazin does not make a straightforward equation between film and reality, and his body of work presents a process of constant revision and re-evaluation. In the words of James Monaco, Bazin “rather describes a more subtle relationship between the two in which film is the asymptote to reality, the imaginary line that the geometric curve approaches but never touches” (407). It is through the use of the technological innovations of *mise en scène*, depth of focus and the long take that film could be “pushed ever closer, asymptotically, to reality” (Monaco 408).

coherence and transparency) came to be considered as intrinsically imbued by particular ideologies ('bourgeois' or dominant ideologies under the capitalist system).

One of the main determinants of Hollywood film's denigration as 'illusionism' was the dominance of Marxism as a theoretical approach. Consequently, before I proceed with a discussion of how illusionism came to be equated with dominant ideologies, an examination of Marxism's approach to ideology is important. After all, in an age where there are those who hail 'the end of ideology' (such as Daniel Bell)¹⁴, what does it mean for the question of ideology to be acted out and explored in popular culture, as carried out by the Edge of the Construct films under examination in this thesis? Indeed, as Glynos notes,

there are those who are keen to reassert the pertinence of ideology often precisely *because* liberal capitalism's ideals are becoming ever more naturalised and thus invisible. In this view, the fact that there is a widespread feeling that we have finally arrived at an end is itself usually counted as evidence indicating ideology's presence and strength of hold. (193)

Žižek is clearly one of these latter thinkers, and his work repeatedly attempts to account for precisely how an ideology transfixes subjects. Before exploring the concept of ideology for Žižek, however, and the way the films examined in this thesis prompt a reconsideration of such a theory, it will be useful to at first gain an understanding of the concept of ideology in modern capitalist societies in order to appreciate how Žižek works with and against prevailing notions.

As Raymond Williams observes, the concept of ideology does not have its origins in the writings of Karl Marx (55). The origins of the concept can be traced to ancient philosophy (Hawkes 13-31). However, as David McLellan emphasises, the

¹⁴ See also Jason Glynos 212n2 for comprehensive account of contemporary revivals of the call that the end of ideology is nigh.

influence of Marx's writings on the topic of ideology is directly responsible for the significance of the concept of ideology in critical theory and cultural studies today (10). Accordingly, I will return to Marx's discussion of ideology briefly as a foundation for subsequent work.

Žižek considers the earliest conception of ideology to have occurred in Plato with the opposition between "*episteme* and the confused *doxa* of the crowd" ('Spectre of Ideology' 20). For Žižek, this foreshadows the opposition traced by Marx in *The German Ideology* between life under ideology and some form of 'actual life' free of ideology ('Spectre of Ideology' 20). As I will explore later in this chapter, *Cinéthique*'s authors draw explicitly on Marx's conception of ideology as illusionist, and as serving capitalism.

Marx and Friedrich Engels first considered ideology in *The German Ideology*, where they adopted a condemnatory approach towards ideology for two main reasons: first, they perceived ideology as a concept to be founded on idealist principles rather than the materialist philosophical approach that they advocated.¹⁵ Marx and Engels' materialist view of history can be summarised by the statement in *The German Ideology* that "[l]ife is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (47). In other words, Marx and Engels inverted the prevailing notion among German idealist philosophers that the lives of people were shaped by a pre-existing consciousness. Instead, Marx and Engels argued that the material needs and activities of people shaped the consciousness of those people. Secondly, Marx and Engels considered ideology to be more than just one among many foundations of

¹⁵ Ideology as an object of analysis and discussion was not central to Marx's work (R Williams 55). Furthermore, Marx's own use of the term 'ideology' was not consistent, and has consequently been described as confusing and incoherent (McLellan 10; R Williams 60).

the social structure they criticised. For Marx and Engels, ideology was the key foundation of the unequal social situation that they abhorred (McLellan 11).

McLellan describes how Marx's conception of ideology was founded on his appraisal of religion and politics both perpetuating and producing a social world that was "so misconstrued as to generate these compensatory illusions" (McLellan 11).

In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels' materialist appraisal of ideology interrogates further the material conditions that generate these "compensatory illusions". Applying their approach to ideology, Marx and Engels conclude the following:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc. of a people...[M]en, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. (47)

The above passage makes clear that, for Marx and Engels, the way people think about their lives is the direct result of the material circumstances of their lives. Furthermore, Marx and Engels considered ideology to work in a similar way to the retina of the eye, or "*camera obscura*", manipulating the real circumstances of peoples' existence and their relationships to one another to produce instead a false representation (47). The significance of Marx and Engels' use of the concept *camera obscura* should be

noted for its implication of photographic apparatus and specular vision. This implies that there is an original 'actual' life that pre-exists the manipulation of ideology.¹⁶

Marx and Engels further developed their critique of ideology to argue that it was the product of unequal social and economic relationships involved in the labour process. Moreover, Marx and Engels sought to demonstrate that ideology also served the reciprocal purpose of perpetuating these unequal relationships. Marx and Engels argued that the activities of "enjoyment and labour, production and consumption" were divided unequally among the population, and that this uneven distribution was disguised only by ideology (52). Furthermore, they posited that the existence of private property had given rise to a situation where the interests of the individual were discordant with those of the community (53). Based on their observation of this discord, Marx and Engels asserted that

out of this very contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the community the latter takes an independent form as the *State*, divorced from the real interests of individual and community, and at the same time as an illusory communal life, always based, however, on the real ties existing in every family and tribal conglomeration. (53)

Following logically from this, Marx and Engels concluded that

all struggles within the State, the struggle between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another. (53)

Society as theorised by Marx and Engels was threatened by numerous conflicts of interest and structural inequalities. In order for society to avoid revolution, it was

¹⁶ It is important to note here that *The German Ideology* was written fairly early in Marx's career, when his conception of ideology was still evolving (McLellan 15). Furthermore, the object of *The German Ideology* was not primarily the capitalist system, but German idealist philosophy that is conditioned by the capitalist system, and in turn establishes favourable conditions for the capitalist system.

imperative that these conflicts and inequalities be concealed by ideas that represented society as cohesive, and which justified and naturalised the inequalities that were necessary to sustain capitalist society. It was the fact that certain ideas served to conceal inequalities in society that made these ideas “ideological” for Marx and Engels. Moreover, they suggested that the dominant class (those who owned the means of production) disseminated the ruling ideas that shaped ideologies:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force... Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (64-65)

It was the relationship between such ideas and their role in suppressing the class struggle that gave them their ideological force for Marx and Engels. Specifically, it was the fact that these ideas served the dominant class to justify and hence perpetuate class inequality that made certain ideas ideological.

Referring to the epigraph to this chapter, “Classical cinema establishes itself as the ventriloquist for ideology” (Dayan 31), popular film is seen by political modernism to perpetuate the situation described by Marx and Engels. Popular film disseminates the ideas of the class which rules materially in a capitalist society to normalise social inequality, and to conceal antagonism to the impenetrability of the edifice of ideology. However, it is not just at the level of ideas and their dissemination that a dominant class can be seen to exert force over subordinate classes. For politically modernist thinkers, it is also the formal organisation in which

these ideas are presented, and the medium that exhibits them, that reinforce dominant ideologies.

One of the most influential considerations of the formal organisation of a text and its inherent ideological positioning is Colin MacCabe's 'Realism and the Cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses' (1974). Here MacCabe considers the classic realist literary text, and how its principles translate to film narrative. His concept of the classic realist text issues from two basic premises: firstly, "The classic realist text cannot deal with the real as contradictory", and secondly, "In a reciprocal movement the classic realist text ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularity" (12). Arguing that the classic realist text serves to conceal its status as a fiction, MacCabe contends that the narrative is privileged over the narrational elements of shot and sound (11).

Rodowick cites Stephen Heath's argument in *The Nouveau Roman* as a way of understanding the relationship between realism (here understood to equate with illusionism) and ideology (Rodowick 16-18). As with several other aspects of studies of film and ideology, as we will see, the opposition of realism to modernism is indebted to literary modernist criticism and practice. In *The Nouveau Roman*, Heath refers to the work of Honoré de Balzac as exemplary of the realist text and asserts that realism is characterised by its "naïve" assumption that writing is the straightforward transcription of reality, as opposed to the very thing that circumscribes the reality it seeks to 'represent': "Balzac's [project stands] in relation to its object as the natural sciences stand to theirs..." (Heath, *The Nouveau Roman* 16). To be explicit, it is Heath's proposition that realism's naïve assumption is the result of a certain cognitive

process. This cognitive process, Heath asserts, corresponds with and serves to perpetuate the nineteenth-century ideology that accommodated the ascendancy of capitalism: namely, the understanding of science as a finitely perfectible framework that is neutral and objective in its representation of ‘reality’. Accordingly, Heath contends that the modernist text stages a critique of realism to the extent that realism “stands for everything the nouveau roman is concerned to call into question” (*The Nouveau Roman* 29).

In this way, we see the foundation of the opposition between realism and modernism. Where the realist text stands for apparent transparency, linearity and verisimilitude, the modernist text endlessly defers closure and demands an active reader whose role in reading is the equal to that of the author.¹⁷ However, the premises forming the basis of the work of MacCabe and Heath can be seen in an earlier, less explicit form in French journals *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

¹⁷ The debate over what was more ‘realist’ (and less ‘illusionist’) – and therefore able to uncover the material basis of culture – between realism and modernism was famously staged in the 1930s between Marxists Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács. Dramatist Brecht favoured modernist techniques of foregrounding and dislocation, whereas literary and political critic Lukács championed realism as a progressive model. For more see Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*.

The late 60s and 70s: the era of political modernism.

The literary modernist principles of active readership and evasion of textual closure carried over to the more general field of political modernism, which staged a similar critique of realist texts. However, the object of political modernism was not solely literature but all aesthetic objects, including film and visual art.

As already stressed, Rodowick outlines how it is less useful to think of political modernism as strictly a critical or theoretical category: it is equally a period of articulate and literate self-conscious film practice (2). Examples of this articulate and self-conscious filmmaking include the work of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Jean- Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet, Michael Snow and Peter Gidal, to name but a few. In this sense, the period of political modernism carried on the tradition established by the Soviet filmmakers of the early twentieth century, in that their work could be described as the practical enactment of rigorously theorised ideals. Here it should be noted that filmmaking in the name of political modernism occurred in the margins rather than in the mainstream. The relative inaccessibility of many politically modernist films today further locates them in a marginal, relatively unpopular category. To avoid oversimplification, it is also important to note that one of the defining characteristics of political modernism is that the various critics and practitioners were rarely, if ever, in consensus. Rather, the period is marked by intense debate and disagreement.

Despite the lack of consensus as far as solutions are concerned, for both filmmakers and film theorists alike, two fundamental, interrelated sets of problems can be seen as motivating the debate: firstly, the problem of film form as it relates to

ideology; and secondly, the relation between modes of spectatorship and film form. The former devolves in part from the heritage of the Soviet filmmakers and the already existing literary modernist practices of deconstruction and *écriture*. *Écriture* is understood in this context to refer to the process theorised initially by Jean-Paul Sartre and then Roland Barthes whereby the act of reading is viewed as equally productive as the process of writing (Rodowick 13-14). The emphasis on spectatorship is also a result of the literary modernist stress on the activity of the reader and is therefore inherently linked to the concept of *écriture*. However, this problematic is subtended largely by the interest in psychoanalytic theories of identification, elaborated by Althusserian-inflected apparatus theory. In this context, Teresa de Lauretis offers a concise definition of the imperatives of political modernism:

...it was argued that, in order to counter the aesthetic of realism, which was hopelessly compromised with bourgeois ideology, as well as Hollywood cinema, avant-garde and feminist filmmakers must take an oppositional stance against 'illusionism' and in favour of formalism. The assumption was that "foregrounding the process itself, privileging the signifier, necessarily disrupts aesthetic unity and forces the spectator's attention on the means of production of meaning". (155, interior quote Mulvey)

Another general characteristic of this discourse, again carried over from literary modernism and alluded to in the above quote, was the shared concern to critique and debunk the illusionism of mainstream Hollywood and realist cinema. The result is a tendency to draw hard binary oppositions between popular, illusionist, 'ideological' film, and avant-garde, formalist films, notionally free of 'ideology' (understood to be capitalist ideology). Rodowick summarises, "whereas popular narrative cinema was characterised by conventions of unity, transparency, closure, and ideological illusion,

the forms of counter cinema offered discontinuity, materiality, openness, and critical knowledge” (xxiii). According to this rhetoric, therefore, the potential to overtly engage with theoretical ideas or critical knowledge is by definition occluded from the subject matter of popular narrative cinema; or rather, critical knowledge is something that can be applied to the popular narrative film, but to which the popular film is by definition unable to aspire.¹⁸ Indeed, one criticism that has been levelled at the film theory of the 60s and 70s is that it was more concerned with elaborating its own complexity without necessarily considering the complexity of the object it studied – film (Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* 527). It is my argument in this thesis that the Edge of the Construct films are reflexive par excellence about Hollywood film and its illusion-making, and are perhaps more canny than theories of film and ideology to this point are equipped to cope with.

In general, film studies today regards the period of political modernism ambivalently.¹⁹ On one hand there is a sense of pride and respect for the era of political modernism for forging a space for film studies as a legitimate academic discipline, and for having a primary influence on the shape that contemporary cultural

¹⁸ The idea that popular film can ‘do’ or participate in dialogue with high-brow philosophical and critical theories is not entirely new, as Thomas E Wartenberg notes (‘Philosophy Screened’ 139): see, for example, Stanley Cavell’s *The World Viewed* and Ian Jarvie’s *Philosophy of the Film*. However, the amount of critical attention paid to the relationship between popular film and philosophy increasing, as demonstrated by the establishment of e-lists and e-journals (*Film-Philosophy*); print journals (*Film and Philosophy*); books (see, for example, Peter French’s *Cowboy Metaphysics*, Joseph Kupfer’s *Visions of Virtue*, Wartenberg’s *Unlikely Couples*, and Christopher Falzon’s *Philosophy Goes to the Movies*) and anthologies (for example, William Irwin’s series of anthologies devoted to popular culture and philosophy, including *The Matrix and Philosophy*) devoted to discussions of film and ideology and film and critical theory. The increased interest in the relation between popular film and philosophy, as illustrated by the proliferation of related literature, is undoubtedly symptomatic of the broader characteristic of postmodernism to view the popular as a legitimate area for theoretical concern.

¹⁹ This is also true of certain American academics during the 70s. For example, Charles F Altman demonstrated a certain hostility in 1977 when he wrote: “What are we going to do about Frenchspeak? Should we learn this new jargon-laden language, which is slowly infiltrating the American scene...?” (257).

studies and film theory more generally take. Even the most vociferous critics of political modernism accord it this degree of credit (see, for example, Bordwell, 'Contemporary Film Studies' 3-5). One only needs to look at any one of the countless anthologies of film theory to see how this era of investigation has been unequivocally canonised.²⁰ Moreover, as Rodowick writes, "The questions posed by political modernism do not simply define a local, transient problem in film theory; rather, they have determined the institutional foundations of that theory in its currently reigning forms" (272).

On the other hand, there is a sense of shame or bemusement provoked by the restrictive emphasis on form and effusive political declarations characteristic of this period of film studies (for example, film historian Richard Maltby's description of its "obscurantist terminology" ['Taking Hollywood Seriously']). As discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, theorists of the bodily engagement of the spectator in cinema similarly have scathing words to offer the film theory of the 60s and 70s. For example, Steven Shaviro denounces the dominant theories of psychoanalysis and Marxism in 60s and 70s film studies as representing an "utterly bankrupt...religious cult" (ix). In Chapter Five I will attempt to show how such a bankrupt cult was able to 'finance', in part, Shaviro's theoretical venture.

Paradoxically, the emphasis on form characteristic of political modernism (an emphasis which, perhaps, is partly responsible for the "obscurantist terminology" of the field) was both the impetus for important developments and debates in the study of film and ideology, and the source of the impasse that has brought the era into some

²⁰ See, for example, Bill Nichols' *Movies and Methods*, Philip Rosen's *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, and Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen's *Film Theory and Criticism*.

disrepute. The task here is to trace the various lines of inquiry that contributed to this emphasis on form. Along the way, we will see how one of the recurrently provocative and central themes of the era was the broadening of considerations of film and ideology to emphasise the role of ideology in the construction of subjectivity and the implications this has for theorising the viewing subject.

Cinéthique: lifting the veil from the apparatus.

The events of May 1968 in France brought about major changes to French film criticism, represented most notably by the change in editorial guidelines of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. This resulted in a series of seminal articles devoted to questions of cinema, ideology and politics, drawing on contemporaneous French structuralist thought in semiotics, psychoanalysis and literary criticism within an overtly Marxist context. This period also saw the establishment of the French film journal *Cinéthique* which worked within a similar theoretical framework but was in many ways opposed to the position of *Cahiers*: in general terms, where *Cahiers* was concerned with questions of theory, more radical in tone, *Cinéthique* occupied itself with questions of practice, advocating a ‘parallel cinema’ that would be the vehicle for and result of overthrowing the existing networks of production, distribution and exhibition. With the journal *La Nouvelle Critique*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* were the ground of vigorous debate about the technologies used in film production and their potential function as ideological and counter-ideological interventions. The ideas from these journals were subsequently translated, published, and elaborated upon, in the pages of

English-language journals *New Left Review*, *Screen*, *October*, *Wide Angle*, *Jump Cut*, and *Camera Obscura*.

Film historiographer Francesco Casetti asserts that the debate surrounding film and ideology during the late 60s and early 70s was incited by an interview published in the Marxist-Leninist film journal *Cinéthique* in 1969 (186). The idea of pinpointing this as ‘the moment where things went wrong’ in terms of a restrictive definition of the Real and occlusion of content in studies of film and ideology seems dubious. However, it is a worthwhile place to start for our purposes, given that it was at this time that ideas about the relationship between film and ideology began to crystallise.

In 1969 *Cinéthique* published the aforementioned interview with Jean Thibeaudeau and Marcelin Pleynet, then editors of literary journal *Tel Quel*, under the title ‘économique, idéologique, formel’. From the title alone, we can see that the particular rhetorical move for *Cinéthique* at this time was towards a consideration of film whereby economy determined ideology, and ideology determined form. This approach is faithful to the dialectic materialism of Marxism described earlier in this chapter, according to which material conditions determine the compensatory illusions of a given social group (McLellan 11). Indeed, it is significant that the interviewees were the editors of *Tel Quel*, this journal being a key avenue for the development of a literary modernism whereby reading gave way to *écriture* and the role of the reader as active participant was promoted and celebrated. Indeed, the rhetorical emphasis on form characteristic of debates of film and ideology during the 60s and 70s owes much to the literary modernism established in the pages of *Tel Quel*.²¹

²¹ See Chapter One in Rodowick for a detailed account of literary modernism as it appeared in *Tel Quel* and how this inflected film theory and criticism that followed.

To the opening question, “Among the films you have seen, which are those that seem ‘political’?” (*Cinéthique*, ‘économique, idéologique, formel’ 7, my translation²²), Pleynet responds by questioning the very assumption that a film can ever *not* be political: Pleynet claims “all films are political in so far as they are, more or less consciously...determined by the dominant ideology.” (7). Pleynet suggests that the determination of all films by the dominant ideology occurs at the level of the cinematic apparatus: the camera, echoing the contention of Marx and Engels that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,” (64). Pleynet questions the very neutrality of the cinematic apparatus:

Have you noticed that all the discussions about film, about cinema (and there have been so many) start from the *a priori* of the unremarkable existence of an apparatus for producing images that can be used for this or for that, to the left or to the right, indifferently? Doesn't it occur to you that before questioning their own ‘militant function’ that filmmakers should be interested in asking themselves about the ideology that produced the apparatus (the camera) that determines cinema? The cinematic apparatus is properly an ideological apparatus, it is an apparatus designed to spread bourgeois ideology before anything else. (10)

To what does Pleynet refer when he speaks of the “ideology that produced the apparatus (the camera) that determines cinema”? Pleynet traces the conventions of perspective deployed by cinema to those developed in the painterly tradition of the quattrocento, “to reproduce...the code of specular vision such as is defined by renaissance humanism” and by extension to reinforce the contemporaneous dominant ideologies and the concept of the coherent subject (10). Comparing cinema to theatre where the spectator sees all the scenes from the same fixed position, Pleynet argues that for the spectator to participate in film, he or she must submit him or herself to the

²² All quotations from the interview ‘économique, idéologique, formel’ are based on my translation.

fiction of the Absolute Subject, “determined by the sovereign instance of the director” (11). Here, Pleynet’s implicit conclusion is that the only way film can aspire to progressive ends is through a radical reorganisation of formal and economic processes.²³

Arguably the most cogent attempt to elaborate the position sketched out by Pleynet is Jean-Louis Baudry’s ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’ appearing in *Cinéthique* the following year. Baudry’s essay is exemplary as it is a model for understanding how, during this period, critical debate over the relationship between cinema and ideology took a particular interest in the ideological role of cinema and its relationship to subject formation. Due largely to the influence of Louis Althusser and his importation of psychoanalytic vocabulary into Marxist cultural critique, film theorists focused upon cinema as a location where structures of misrecognition were reinforced, perpetuated, and potentially challenged, by virtue of the fundamental role it plays in the creation of certain kinds of subjectivities. Specifically, cinema was charged with reinforcing the Enlightenment subject: the coherent, unified, rational, transcendental subject, the locus of objective knowledge.²⁴ In particular, cinema was identified as one of the apparatuses through which the values of individuality, competition, upward mobility and patriarchy, which subtend and justify the way modern Western social and political systems operate, were considered to be disseminated. Cinema was theorised as one of the ideological

²³ To be accurate, this is the conclusion to which *Cinéthique* overtly wish to steer the interview. In fact, Pleynet and Thibeaudeau are critical of *Cinéthique*’s desire for a parallel cinema working ‘outside’ the system; Pleynet and Thibeaudeau suggest that the only way cinema or artistic practice in general can operate is within the system it seeks to challenge (*Cinéthique* 8).

²⁴ As Nick Mansfield observes, while fundamental “developments in Enlightenment thought...first posed the question of the subject as a free, autonomous, rational being (what we call the individual) we can also find there the seeds of radical attacks on this model” (13).

formations in which the incomplete and profoundly fractured ego mistakenly and imaginarily recognised itself as complete.

In this article, Baudry's argument moves between the analysis of three levels of corresponding and mutually reinforcing illusion: the illusion generated by human perception, the illusion created by formal conventions of cinema, and, most importantly for his argument, the illusion of mastery propagated by the cinematographic apparatus. I will briefly examine each of these parallel paths of enquiry in order to highlight certain challenges presented to Baudry's influential framework by the Edge of the Construct films.

Baudry's essay begins with a statement of terms of debate similar to those established by Heath with reference to literary realism. The model of perspective adopted by cinema, he writes, "seems to prolong the tradition of Western science, whose birth coincides exactly with the development of the optical apparatus..." (40).²⁵ To unpack Baudry's conception, the art of motion pictures is traditionally understood as the inscription of movement onto celluloid. Technically, of course, this is not true. It is well documented that since its inception the cinematic apparatus has

²⁵ Hubert Damisch offers both an explanation and critique of the equation of the humanist enlightenment with ocular vision:

A curious polemical debate took shape in these fields in Paris in the 1970s, fallout from which can still be observed today. Basing their arguments...on the fact that the photographic box, and the camera which is its technical extension, function optically in a way wholly consistent with so-called one-point perspective...some maintained that photography and film disseminate spontaneously, and so to speak mechanically, bourgeois ideology (because perspective, having appeared at the dawn of the capitalist era, must of necessity be essentially 'bourgeois'), while others (sometimes the same individuals) celebrated the pallid attempts of would-be experimental cinema to free itself from the 'tyranny' of the single point of view and from the general constraints of perspective. Against which still others protested vigorously, citing perspective's scientific status as a means of defending it against accusations of its being an ideological tool. (xv-xiv)

functioned in association with certain idiosyncrasies of human perception and optical illusion to produce – or, to *seem* to produce – moving images. As a result, the link between cinema and illusion and delusion is long established.

While the precise nature of said idiosyncrasies continues to be subject to debate, historically the simulation of movement in cinema has been ascribed to processes peculiar to the human perception of motion under stroboscopic conditions.²⁶ Despite the imprecision of scientific accounts for the psychophysiological processes causing the human mind to perceive contiguous still frames as seamless motion, it is undeniable that no motion actually exists on the cinema screen. The motion perceived is the result of a misapprehension made by the human visual system. Therefore, in its ontological essence, the very material function of cinema is illusory. The symmetry of this fact with theories of the way in which ideology operates through cinema is not lost on apparatus theorists. Indeed, Baudry invokes this field of investigation when he refers (somewhat spuriously) to the dependence of cinematic continuity on “persistence of vision” (42). The notion that the cinematic illusion “reassures [the spectator] in that delusion is in conformity with the norm of visual perception,”(Comolli 124) extends to analyses of ideology in the following way: even for the most cynical of subjects, subscribing to the dominant ideology offers all the seductions of conformity.

²⁶ More recent research demonstrates that neither the ‘persistence of vision’ nor the ‘phi phenomenon’ hypotheses historically accepted as the reason correctly account for the perception of movement in film. For a detailed, if somewhat dated, historical account of scientific theories associated with the perception of successive frames as a continuously moving image, see Joseph Anderson and Barbara Anderson’s ‘Motion Perception in Motion Pictures’, and Bill Nichols and Susan J Lederman’s ‘Flicker and Motion in Film’.

Baudry's second thread of argument contends that it is not only the human psychophysiological processes involved in interpreting cinema that can be described in terms of illusion and distortion. As the most enduring form of the film industry, narrative cinema too locates spectators in a position of misapprehension. In this way, therefore, it is not only the human perceptual procedures that are at issue but also the formal structure and narrative content of films. To summarise, what is now recognised as classical Hollywood narrative creates and perpetuates illusion in two ways. Firstly, its form and conventions function to create an illusion of verisimilitude and secondly, in its content it creates and reinforces a world view specific to a particular social group.

In its form, classical narrative strives to impart a sense of reality in which the work of the cinema's technical devices is made inconspicuous, thus subordinating form to narrative.²⁷ In classical narrative, process and technique are devoted to coherence and perspectival positioning; the spectator is positioned in a role of illusory mastery, looking into a believable diegetic world, that it supposedly a reflection of the spectator's own world. It is this potential for narrative cinema to manufacture realism that leads Bazin to conclude that cinema is the discipline among the plastic arts with the greatest potential to represent reality, even though he concedes it is never the *equivalent* to reality.

Baudry questions the idealist claim that cinema potentially provides a more faithful representation of reality than the other plastic arts. He argues to the contrary, asserting that primary processes involved in the perception of narrative cinema lead to

²⁷ See, for example, my earlier discussion of MacCabe on the classic realist text, Heath on realism, and Dayan (28).

the conclusion that “film...lives in the denial of difference: the difference is necessary for it to live, but it lives on its negation” (42). In other words, Baudry objects to the way in which mainstream cinema fundamentally relies upon artifice and illusion but must simultaneously conceal this dependence. Dayan similarly articulates this: “Specifically, the cinematographic system for producing ideology must be hidden and the relation of the filmic message to this system must be hidden” (28) and Christian Metz concurs: “the traditional film...obliterates all traces of the enunciation” (*Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* 91). The degree to which this underestimates the audience should be noted, as retheorised under subsequent models of an active spectator.

Here we have arrived at Baudry’s third line of exploration. Baudry presents the notion that the positioning of the spectator by popular narrative film is itself a process of illusory (or, delusory) mastery. In order to understand this assertion, the influence of Althusser and Lacan needs to be taken into account.

A closer consideration of the status of the spectator in the production of meaning in narrative film adds another important dimension to Baudry’s analysis of the relationship between film and ideology. The power to create meaning, (or to perpetuate illusion), resides in the mind of the viewer. Metz rearticulates this notion: one of popular film’s chief attractions is the way in which it situates the viewer in an omnipotent, omnipresent position. He describes it as the impression (however illusory) that meaning could not be made from film were it not for audiences to make sense of what appears before them. Metz summarises this impression thus:

By watching the film I help it to be born, I help it live, since only in me will it live, and since it has been made for that purpose: to be watched, in other words to be brought into being by nothing other than the look. (*Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* 93)

Baudry rearticulates the notion that the spectator apparently creates meaning in narrative film, advancing his argument with reference to the humanist project whereby the role of human ocular vision achieved hegemony over the other senses:

This system, a recentering or at least a displacement of the center (which settles itself in the eye), will assure the setting up of the 'subject' as the active center and origin of meaning. (40)

Thus, Baudry questions the assumed benign role of the cinematic machinery in creating meaning. Indeed, Baudry's purpose is to interrogate the supposed scientific neutrality of cinematic instruments and techniques, arguing that the cinematic apparatus is not neutral, but has ideological effects determined by and serving to perpetuate the dominant ideology. For Baudry, then, the cinematic apparatus is not an impassive instrument, but rather "an ideological machine" in the service of the dominant ideology (44). Here we can see how Baudry's analysis accommodates the historical materialist thrust of *Cinéthique*: both a film's conditions of *production*, and its conditions of *exhibition* perpetuate dominant ideologies. Moreover, Baudry's conclusion is that the ideological effect obtained by cinematic instruments is not merely a coincidence. His contention is that the ideological effect created by the apparatus is "necessary to the dominant ideology" (46, emphasis added). This idea of 'necessity' doubtlessly derives from Baudry's Marxist position that film as an

ideological apparatus plays a role in legitimating and securing the dominant ideology.²⁸

Appealing explicitly to Althusserian theory, Baudry seeks to expose the labour involved in making sense of narrative film and cinema's role in perpetuating dominant ideologies (40-41). Where Bazin calls for a cinema where the labour is subtler and more skilfully concealed, Baudry endeavours to expose the processes that mainstream film production and exhibition techniques serve to obfuscate. Moreover, through an analysis of its conveyed conception of centred space and the equally centred viewing subject it necessitates, Baudry concludes that the cinematic apparatus reinforces the illusion of the unified and transcendent subject of the humanist tradition (41-42).

In this way, Baudry reiterates the materialist relationship between ideology and material practice proposed by Louis Althusser. In 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser elaborates the materialist position, suggesting that ideological apparatuses determine rituals through which certain practices are inscribed, and which ultimately give rise to individuals' beliefs (40-41). Following this proposal, cinema occupies an interesting position as both an industry that has flourished under the rise of mature capitalism and as an apparatus of the ideologies of capitalism and consumerism.

²⁸cf. Louis Althusser ('Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' 17-33). Here Althusser explicitly identifies cinema as an Ideological State Apparatus. As such, cinema becomes responsible for "cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc.,". It is Althusser's contention that the Ideological State Apparatuses are united by "...the Ideology of the current ruling class which integrates...the great themes of the Humanism of the Great Forefathers," and that the Ideological State Apparatuses contribute to the same end, "the reproduction of the relations of productions, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation." (28).

Further embedding his work in an Althusserian context of cultural analysis, Baudry proceeds to argue that cinema's role as an ideological apparatus is manifold. For Baudry, cinema both fills the minds of spectators with ideas and representations (content) which reinforce the dominant ideology, and, in its reliance upon monocularity, reinforces the individualised humanist subject. The most important ideological function performed by cinema for Baudry is its replication of the process of subject formation and how this serves the dominant ideology (46). In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' it is Althusser's central thesis that an individual is transformed into a subject by an ideology, and that this transformation is eternally and incessantly reinforced by Ideological State Apparatuses and the material ritual practices they entail ('Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' 44-47). Importing the vocabulary and concepts of psychoanalysis, Althusser elaborates his proposition in the following way:

...ideology 'acts' or functions in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation...called *interpellation* or hailing. ('Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' 48)

After illustrating his theory of ideology using the example of Christian Religious ideology, Althusser observes

...that the structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is *speculary*, i.e. a mirror-structure, and *doubly* specular: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning. Which means that all ideology is *centred*, that the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Centre, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion such that it *subjects* the subjects to the Subject, while giving them in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image (present and future) the

guarantee that this really concerns them and Him. ('Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' 54)

Althusser's discussion of subject formation relies heavily on Jacques Lacan's influential psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity. The specular and decisive moment of subject formation for Lacan occurs during the child's passage from the real to the imaginary and begins with the mirror stage. Lacan describes a scenario where the child, still unable to physically support itself, catches a glimpse of itself in a mirror. At this moment, the child momentarily stands, and thus is able to perceive itself as a masterful and complete object, however mistakenly ('Mirror Stage' 1-2; 'Some Reflections' 14-15). As such, the child enters an ambivalent system of both recognition and misrecognition: recognition in the sense that it really is its own image with which it identifies; misrecognition in the sense that the image is a fiction: it anticipates a unity and physical mastery that the child at this stage still lacks.

At this juncture, the correspondence between Lacan's mirror-stage and Althusser's definition of ideology should be explicated. For Althusser, "ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (36). In this sense, Althusser's individual is also caught in an ambivalent situation: it really is the individual's material conditions of existence that the individual perceives, but the individual misrecognises these conditions as they appear distorted by ideology.

In gaining himself as an image, Lacan's child (and Althusser's subject) simultaneously loses himself as an object, an other. This other becomes the constitutive base upon which the child's identity is formed (Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 41). This conception of subject formation is radically different from the received

notion of Cartesian subjectivity: where the 'Cogito' conceives of itself as fixed, unified and ultimately capable of knowing objective truths, Lacan would argue that it does this only through the denial of the internalised constitutive schism between self and other. Any confidence the subject feels in its self-knowledge is not an assurance of truth, but instead is a result of the investment the ego has in maintaining certain (fictitious) images that it finds reassuring.

In his analysis and critique of the capacity of the cinematic apparatus to reinforce particular modes of subject formation and ideologies, Baudry mobilises several corresponding analogies. The cinema, he argues, locates the spectator in a position like that of the prisoner in Plato's cave, and, as already outlined, like that of the subject in Lacan's mirror-stage. Vision, or more importantly, the way in which vision can be illusory, is a key element in both of these analogies. Baudry further remarks on the physical similarities that can be observed between these analogies and the experience of watching a film at the cinema:

...no doubt the darkened room and the screen bordered with black... already present privileged conditions of effectiveness – no exchange, no circulation, no communication with any outside. Projection and reflection take place in a closed space and those who remain there, whether they know it or not (but they do not), find themselves chained, captured, or captivated... The arrangement of the different elements – projector, darkened hall, screen – in addition from reproducing in a striking way the *mise-en-scène* of Plato's cave (prototypical set for all transcendence and topological model of idealism) reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the 'mirror stage' discovered by Lacan. (44-45)

Therefore Baudry makes explicit his thesis that the experience of viewing cinematographic projection re-enacts the primordial scene of subject formation for psychoanalytic theory.

Using terms very similar to those of Metz, Baudry asserts that it is of essential ideological significance that the ritualised way in which commercial cinema is seen reinforces the notion that “the world will not only be constituted by this eye but for it” (43). This is of ideological significance in that it reinforces the fiction of a transcendent, unified subject who is capable of producing knowledge. Furthermore, this turn of phrase recalls Althusser’s theory that “*the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects*” (‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ 45). Both posit a reciprocal model of the relationship between subject formation and ideology: a perpetual loop of reassurance.

In Baudry, therefore, we see a flirting of sorts with Lacan, via Althusser, with the idea of subject formation. However, on the subject of the Real Baudry remains resolutely Marxist. The Real in cinema, according to his argument, is reduced to the apparatus generating the illusion, perpetuating the fantasy of a masterful and coherent subject. However, the Real according to this materialist perspective can equally be considered to be the material, economic conditions of a social group which in turn give rise to the ideas of that group, as reflected in popular cinema.

To summarise Baudry’s model of spectatorship, the spectator watches a film, the content of which reassures and reflects the spectator’s own illusory image of her relationship to her conditions of existence. According to Baudry, the individual spectator (mis)recognises him or herself in the film’s content (via secondary identification) and is thus, in Althusser’s lexicon, “interpellated” by the ideological

content of the film. The film the spectator watches in its form and content 'ventriloquises' the dominant ideology, reassuring that the way the world is is right and natural, and free of antagonism. The question which confronts me in this thesis is: what are the implications for this process when the narrative content of the film explicitly interrogates the illusory representations of an individual's relationship to their 'real' conditions of existence, as occurs in the Edge of the Construct films?

While Baudry provides a detailed argument for the way in which the cinematic apparatus, the continuity of film movement, and the continuity of film form produces and reproduces the transcendent, individualised model of the subject so befitting the dominant ideology (43), the possibility that a film's narrative content may dispute the validity of the dominant ideology is beyond the scope of Baudry's project. He dismisses narrative content in the following way: "Ultimately, the forms of narrative adopted, the 'contents' of the image, are of little importance so long as an identification remains possible" (46). According to Baudry, it is through the identification with a position of omniscient, centred perspective that the film serves the dominant ideology.

This thesis seeks to examine the implications of adding yet another layer of the analogy outlined as occurring in three ways in Baudry's argument. To be explicit, my project is to consider the effect of those narrative films depicting protagonists in a similar position of delusion and discovery to that which, according to *Cinéthique* (as exemplified here by Baudry) and Metz, the spectator and indeed the entire population of late capitalist societies potentially occupy.

Rodowick's contention that "political modernism is still with us in many ways" (viii) needs to be returned to here. Rodowick gestures towards the idea that the questions posed by political modernism have not been decisively resolved and indeed that in many ways, postmodern thought takes up various concerns of political modernism, including the subversion of the notion of the coherent subject (Rodowick xxiv). In the Edge of the Construct films the stable, complete, coherent subject is undermined as ideology is ostensibly cast aside. In this way, these films engage with post-Enlightenment theories of the subject.

The absence of a consideration of narrative content in the work of Baudry and his contemporaries has led to what Rodowick describes as one of the many 'intransigent blindspots' of political modernism. The assumption that all commercial, narrative films are 'illusionistic' in their obfuscation of the material conditions of their production and that, consequently, ideologically correct film is necessarily anti-illusionist is one that the contemporary Hollywood films under consideration here put into question. Furthermore, films such as *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Dark City* and *Fight Club* cast doubt upon the assumption that the avant-garde is the only arena for the exploration of filmic ontology, materialism, anti-illusionism and reflexivity. These films question these assumptions in two different ways: firstly, there are elements of these commercial films which employ techniques formerly associated with the avant-garde, and secondly, these films pose the problem of containing narrative content that ostensibly promotes a critical awareness in the spectator.

The Edge of the Construct films display various formal devices which serve to foreground rather than conceal processes involved in the production and consumption of film. Or, to borrow from Baudry, these films incorporate

disturbing cinematic elements – similar, precisely, to those elements indicating the return of the repressed – [that] signify without fail the arrival of the instrument “in flesh and blood,” ...[so that] [b]oth specular tranquillity and the assurance of one’s own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism, that is of the inscription of the film work. (46)

For example, the narrator often breaks to address the camera and audience in *Fight Club*, spatial and temporal discontinuity abounds in *The Matrix*, foregrounding of lenses, cameras, lights and microphones in *The Truman Show*, and according to David Bordwell, *Dark City* has the lowest average shot length of any Hollywood film (‘Intensified Continuity’ 17).

As Chapter Four will consider, the increasing presence of elements of self-reflexivity in Hollywood cinema – elements where the film displays (rather than conceals) evidence that it is a fiction made to be watched, not a hermetically sealed ‘reality’ – can be attributed to a more general change in what is referred to as Classical Hollywood Cinema. It is widely accepted that a certain degree of self-consciousness and intertextuality are part of post-classical, or contemporary Hollywood.²⁹

²⁹ While there is some debate as to whether a post-classical Hollywood even exists, this is not a debate I wish to enter into in this thesis. For more detailed discussions of the characteristics of post-classical Hollywood, see Kristin Thompson’s *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* and Angela Ndaliansis’ *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*. While Thompson suggests that “very little” has changed in Hollywood filmmaking since 1970 (2), contemporary cinema can be distinguished from classical cinema in its reflection of what Ndaliansis would refer to as “neo-baroque” as a result of technological, industrial, and economic changes (5). Geoff King points to the material conditions of New Hollywood as another important consideration for those seeking to analyse the stylistic changes which distinguish New Hollywood from classical Hollywood film style: King points out that “space

The relation between cinema and ideology in this context is discussed by Žižek in *The Plague of Fantasies* in the following way: ideology is analogous to a narrative; we fantasise that reality is a complete, logical whole, as we perceive of a filmic or literary narrative as a seamless whole (10). Antagonism (understood as senseless ruptures to the film or literary narrative) Žižek tells us, is repressed in order to maintain the fantasy that the world is one of wholeness where logic prevails. Analogously, ideology occludes antagonism or eruptions of the Real into reality in order to maintain socially functioning subjects (*Plague of Fantasies* 10). Via Lacan, Žižek concludes that narrative as a seamless whole exists to “bear witness to some repressed antagonism” (*Plague of Fantasies* 10).

The continuities between Žižek’s psychoanalytic argument and Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner’s discussion of Hollywood and ideology is remarkable: locating their work in a context that is more Marxist than psychoanalytic, they write:

...one could say that the very necessity of ideology testifies to something amiss within society, since a society that was not threatened would not need ideological defences. By attempting to pacify, channel, and neutralise the forces that would invert the social system of inequality were they not controlled, ideology testifies to the power of these forces, of the very thing it seeks to deny. Even conservative films, therefore, can yield socially critical insights, for what they designate in a sort of inverse negative is the presence of forces that make conservative reactions necessary. By reacting against the structural tensions and potentially disruptive forces of an inegalitarian society in a way that attempts to render them invisible, film ideology must also put them on display...It is for this reason that we see ideology itself as being a testament to the presence of forces in American society which have the potential for becoming sources of progressive change. (14)

for the departures of the Hollywood Renaissance was to some extent created by the advent of a more fragmented production system” (*New Hollywood Cinema*, 6).

Their argument attests to the persistence of the analogy between the *structure* of film narrative and ideology. In this context, the address to camera in *Fight Club* and the low average shot length of *Dark City* become particularly interesting. As Chapters Four and Five will consider, these self-conscious elements amount to a rupturing of the Real into symbolically circumscribed reality, here being formed by the diegetic world of the film.

The Edge of the Construct films challenge the notion imparted by *Cinéthique* that the avant-garde is the only arena for the exploration of filmic ontology, materialism, anti-illusionism and reflexivity. This cycle of films poses the problem of containing narrative content that potentially promotes a critical awareness in the spectator. In its radical focus on film exhibition, form and the deconstruction of dominant ways of representation and spectatorship, the implications of apparatus theory are that narrative content is to be relegated as a secondary and hence irrelevant category. This has resulted in the praising of avant-garde counter-cinema as the only way to oppose the ‘illusionism’ of Hollywood product, and, by extension, the dominant ideology it serves to produce and reproduce. Moreover, it is my contention that while their formal and material qualities are many and noteworthy, that the ideological significance of the Edge of the Construct films evolves *from* their content *to* their form, rather than the other way around, as has previously been the dominant paradigm in film studies. It is my argument that these films, in their reflexive meditations on the illusion-making of Hollywood, prompt a reconsideration of theoretical considerations of Hollywood.

The argument provoked by Pleyne and fleshed out by Baudry has since been subject to much valid criticism. For example, Damisch describes this rhetorical turn in film criticism as founded on “imprecise definitions...[and] crude oversimplifications, not to mention...outright errors and misunderstandings” (xiv). Referring explicitly to film studies, he contends, “[i]t is one thing to regard it, its mechanics, as an ideological contrivance. It is quite another to claim that it is such because it is regulated by the perspectival ‘code’ and, through this, by an acquired ideology” (xv). Despite this impatience with apparatus theory in film studies, Damisch admits that the “fallout” of this debate “can still be observed today” (xiv) and that while the debate is old, “it has left copious traces behind it” (xv).³⁰ Given its position in the formative stages of debates about the relation of film and ideology, the way in which the theorisation of film by Baudry and Pleyne occluded the Real as a central Lacanian category and the subject matter of film is clear and significant.

The director of *Cinéthique*, Gerard Leblanc, published the essay ‘Direction’ two issues after the publication of Baudry’s seminal essay. Redirecting the terms of debate to include subject matter, Leblanc arrives at almost the same conclusion as Pleyne: in assessing a group of films that ostensibly examine social injustice and consumer culture in their narrative content, Leblanc argues that the films are doing the same as Hollywood illusionist cinema, by virtue of their adherence to conventional formal strategies (13). In short, for Leblanc, the conventional form of this set of films belies their supposedly progressive political content.

³⁰ From a feminist perspective, see Jacqueline Rose’s ‘The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory’ and Doane’s ‘Remembering Women: Psychological and Historical Constructions in Film Theory’. This will be returned to in Chapter Three.

Making explicit the materialism subtending analyses of film and ideology for

Cinéthique, Leblanc praises those films which

do not offer the audience any pseudo-satisfactions; instead they take the entirely new step of *inviting them to stand on the same footing as the makers of the film and take a conscious part in the work that produced* (and through them, continues to produce) *the images and sounds*. In these films, images and sounds at last no longer deny the process by which they came to be imprinted on the film stock. The work embodied in the film becomes scientific in the measure to which it puts on view the ideologies struggling to penetrate the signs (bodies, faces) and abstract them from the economy of the film. *This break is materialism. One of its effects is to permit a new critical understanding of idealist films.* (16, emphases added)

In the above passage we see two characteristics of political modernist discourse made explicit: the desire to develop a materialist film in which the spectator plays an active role, coexisting with the desire to offer a critique of the illusionism of mainstream film. Both of these characteristics tacitly overlook the subject matter of film in their respective emphasis on the formal and material qualities of film. In doing so, the real is reinforced as something that can be accessed, as the material traces of a film's production, rather than considered as something that is eternally beyond our reach.

Echoing the terms of debate established by Pleynet, and foreshadowing the concerns articulated by the structural-materialist critics and practitioners, Leblanc argues that illusionism in film will continue “until forms are produced which say everything about themselves: their economy and their means of production...” (18).³¹

The explicit assumption of this line of thought is that if the balance of this dialectic were reversed to see the foregrounding of form, this would result in imparting a

³¹ Cf Peter Gidal's opening remarks in 'Theory & Definition of Structural/Materialist Film': "Structural/materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist. The process of the film's making deals with devices that result in the demystification or attempted demystification of the film process" (189).

critical knowledge to the viewer, a critical knowledge of the work of narrative that paradoxically reveals the antagonisms narrative serves to obscure and repress. To put this another way, according to this logic, the viewer would see the production, not the product, the labour, not the commodity. Therefore ‘the real’ concealed by ideology is labour and production, the material conditions of cinema. This particular conception of the real as lying in material objects and relations is derived in this instance from Marxism, and is not entirely compatible with a psychoanalytic version of the same situation, as further chapters of this thesis will show. The conclusion promoted in *Cinéthique* that the Real could be located in tangible objects no doubt contributed to Žižek’s perception that political modernism was in fact devoid of theorists who effectively identified themselves as Lacanian (despite claims to the contrary).

Jean-Paul Fargier’s ‘Parenthesis or Indirect Route: an Attempt at Theoretical Definition of the Relationship Between Cinema and Politics’ appeared in the same issue of *Cinéthique* as Leblanc’s ‘Direction’. Fargier’s article complements Leblanc’s essay, using explicitly Althusserian terminology to explore the potential political merit of cinema in terms of *Cinéthique*’s commitment to the “establish[ment] of a few of the theoretical elements necessary for a cinema practice that will effectively serve the proletarian cause” (23). Beginning from an analysis of cinema’s function in the capitalist economy as entertainment³², Fargier identifies entertainment as the generally dominant criterion for judging the merit of film (25). He proceeds, however, to parenthesise entertainment as a factor when considering the political

³² Fargier gives no rigorous definition of ‘entertainment’, but in this context it is understood to refer to those films that amuse the audience and serve to divert them from their material conditions of existence. It is also understood that Fargier’s use of ‘entertainment’ alludes to a film’s popularity. The implication of this is that a popular, mainstream Hollywood film can serve only to ‘entertain’.

value of film, arguing that, for *Cinéthique*, the most important criterion is materialism, that is “what is it physically, in audio-visual terms, as a collection of sounds and images projected on a screen; and what it does SOCIALLY: its function in this or that branch of social practice” (25). In short, Fargier dismisses entertainment, parenthesising its potential, relegating it to a place of no consequence. Surely ‘entertainment’ is central to cinema’s social function? In this way Fargier further consolidates the view that critical theory can be done *to* entertainment, to ‘illusionist’ film, but is something that is necessarily separate from it; it can never be done *by* a film that aims, to varying degrees, to entertain. Or, the entertaining film may be the object of critical theory and deconstruction, but never its vehicle. Part of the broader project of this thesis is to critique this dismissal of ‘entertainment’, and to see how entertaining films can function as theoretical interventions, and, moreover, that theoretical reflexivity is central to contemporary films’ success as entertaining. The potential repercussions of this are interesting, given that for Fargier cinema plays a privileged role in the ideological process, as opposed to other plastic arts, in that its ‘differential specificity’ is in creating the illusion of reality (28).

Fargier rearticulates the dichotomy proposed by Leblanc: on one hand there is film that perpetuates illusion, despite its potential political content, by virtue of adhering to conventional narrational devices and techniques. On the other hand, there is materialist film, film that

...PRODUCES SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE about itself. It can show the material facts of its physical and social existence. It can draw away the veil which normally covers a film’s ideological, political and economic function, and by doing so denounce the ideology inherent in the cinema’s ‘impression of reality’. Through this action, it becomes theoretical. (32)

This is a cinema which will reveal “obscurantist ideology which inculcates in the exploited workers the idea that their situation as alienated producers is normal and natural” (27). Only in this overtly materialist way can a film produce knowledge, as opposed to perpetuate idealist illusion, according to Fargier. Furthermore, the ‘truth’ of this knowledge produced is characteristic of the Marxist (not psychoanalytic) base of the argument: this is not a cinema which faces questions of the Real in its horrific void. Echoing the argument of Pleyne, Baudry and Leblanc, this is a cinema, Fargier writes, “that will effectively serve the proletarian cause” (23).

***Cahiers du Cinéma* and Screen: the ‘disquieting unintelligibility’ of the Real.**

To this point, the historiographic examination of predominantly French film theory has revealed two things: firstly, that while psychoanalysis was a point of reference, for apparatus theory above all, no theorist explicitly aligned him or herself with Lacan as a primary orientation of their project. As discussed, *Cinéthique*’s materialist theorisations precluded a consideration of the Real beyond ‘material conditions of existence’, beyond the processes of production, labour, and exhibition. This is, of course, itself representative of an ideological position. The work published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* represents a qualification of Marxist proclamations with reference to psychoanalysis, but does not necessarily represent an overt or in any way explicit consideration of Lacan in film studies. If the emphatic recourse to materialist Marxism in *Cinéthique* is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the emphasis on considerations of form in diagnosing a film’s ideological stance, psychoanalysis as an approach may have had the potential to be more conducive to considerations of

content. This is not, however, how psychoanalysis was applied to film in *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

Jean Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's 'Cinéma/idéologie/critique' published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* is both a critical response to *Cinéthique*'s position that cinema is divided into two binarily opposed categories (illusionist versus materialist) and an endeavour to redefine the editorial position of *Cahiers* in a politically activist context. In some quarters this text is considered to be the most widely influential call for politically-oriented film criticism, expressing a preference for formal experimentation over the overt content of a film (Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* 531-532).

In an attempt to avoid the strict dichotomy offered by *Cinéthique*'s polemic, Comolli and Narboni argue for a taxonomy of film that allows for more subtleties and complexity than permitted by the illusionist/materialist binary. In all they delineate seven different ways film can interact with ideology. Here I will be focusing largely on the fifth and sixth of these categories; however, an overview of the preceding categories is in order.

The first two categories they describe reveal that, in principle, they agree with *Cinéthique*: there are those films that "are imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact" (25). At the other end of the scale, there are those films that "attack their ideological assimilation" on the level of the signified (narrative content) and the level of the signifier (narrational strategy) (26). Suggesting that form and content are of equal ideological significance, Comolli and Narboni write "[w]e would stress that only action on both fronts, 'signified' and 'signifiers'

has any hope of operating against the prevailing ideology” (26).³³ Here the similarities to *Cinéthique* end. In addition to making some concessions to subject matter, Comolli and Narboni contend that no film can ever be produced and distributed ‘outside’ the capitalist system (23).³⁴ It is from these premises that their additional five categories of film stem.

Proceeding from the second category, where films operate radically on the levels of both form and content to criticise the dominant ideology, are those films that do not necessarily contain political content, but become political by virtue of their form. Comolli and Narboni state that the second and third categories “constitute the essential in the cinema, and should be the chief subject of the magazine” (26). Here we can see that while Comolli and Narboni leave an opening for considerations of subject matter, it is already relegated to a secondary place, stress being placed on the way in which a film’s material and formal qualities may recuperate its political merit, despite seemingly innocuous content (Comolli and Narboni cite *The Bellboy* as exemplary of this [26]).

Comolli and Narboni’s most interesting, provocative and original comments relate to categories five and six. Here can be discerned room for popular, entertaining cinema as having the potential disrupt coherent ideological reproduction and to be a vehicle for critical interventions. Category five delineates those

³³ In a footnote, Comolli and Narboni acknowledge that they realise it is overly simplistic to demarcate clearly between ‘signified’ and ‘signifier’: “This is particularly so in the case of cinema, where the signified is more often than not a product of the permutations of the signifiers, and the sign has dominance over the meaning” (30n6).

³⁴ See ‘économique, idéologique, formel’ in *Cinéthique* for a clear statement of the journal’s position – Pleynet and Thibeaudeau in this instance agree with *Cahiers*’ position that no film can ever be produced and distributed outside the capitalist system, whereas Leblanc (the interviewer) argues to the contrary.

films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner. For though they start from a nonprogressive standpoint, ranging from the frankly reactionary through the conciliatory to the mildly critical, they have been worked upon, and work, in such a real way that there is a noticeable gap, a dislocation, between the starting point and the finished product. (27)

Regarding this gap or dislocation, Comolli and Narboni contend that

[t]he cinematic framework lets us see it, but also shows it up and denounces it...An internal criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at the seams. *If one reads the film obliquely*, looking for symptoms; if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks: it is splitting under an internal tension which is simply not there in an ideologically innocuous film. (27, emphasis added)

Here, it is with some apprehension that I note the specification that one must ‘read the text obliquely’, implying that one must be equipped with a special technique in order to discern the gaps and fissures that undermine the dominant ideology within the text. This again invokes the idea that critical theory can be done to texts but not done by texts; or, that if critical theory can exist in a text, it is only visible to those who are already looking for it. In this context, the film critic becomes a specially qualified diagnostician of the vicissitudes of ideology. Neither psychoanalysis in general nor Lacan in particular is cited in the article, yet the approach described above by Comolli and Narboni of reading a film obliquely corresponds with Žižek’s idea of looking ‘awry’, borrowed from Lacan. It is through looking awry, or obliquely, according to Lacan, that we can apprehend the Real.

Of the blurry figure in the foreground of Holbein’s 1533 work *The Ambassadors*, Lacan writes: “the secret of this picture is given at the moment when, moving slightly away, little by little, to the left, then turning around, we see what the

magical floating object signifies. It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 92). While Comolli and Narboni are reticent regarding the degree to which "the cracks" in film reveal a horrifying void³⁵, it is nevertheless a remarkably similar process of complicated, careful looking as outlined by Lacan in his discussion of *The Ambassadors*.

While it is difficult to ascertain exactly how an 'oblique' analysis of film would proceed, the editors of *Cahiers'* essay on John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939) is a significant example of this type of criticism and stands as exemplary of the many important analyses of mainstream Hollywood films that were carried out in the pages of *Cahiers* and elsewhere.³⁶ The analysis of *Young Mr Lincoln* is a close reading of this film, which belongs to the category that is in many ways the most difficult to endorse: films that remain within bourgeois ideology, but reveal its ambiguities and fissures (when subjected to a highly specialised mode of reading).³⁷

The reading by the Editors of *Cahiers* uses principles of Marxism, semiology and credits Marxist and Freudian discourses (8), and includes fleeting references to Jean-Pierre Oudart, Althusser, Roland Barthes and Serge Daney, and Lacan (15). However, there is no sustained explanation as to precisely which principles drawn from these discourses they will deploy. While Peter Wollen, in his Afterword to the translation of the analysis of *Young Mr Lincoln* in *Screen*, declares that the text "owes its concepts to Jacques Lacan" (44), this text would seem to be exemplary of

³⁵ See, for example 'Cinéma/idéologie/critique' 24-25 where historical materialist questions remain at the forefront.

³⁶ It must be noted that *Cahiers'* *Mr Lincoln* was "in Britain, the first published work of film analysis that used the concepts of Lacan's re-reading of Freudian theory" (Ellis, xi). Indeed, Ellis credits this analysis with proposing the new problematic of narrative, defined as "the organisation of the productivity of the sound/image relations of film into a regime of sense" (xii).

³⁷ Ellis notes that the interpretation of *The Young Mr Lincoln* offered by *Cahiers* is based explicitly on Barthes' seminars leading to the publication of *S/Z* (xi).

Žižek's contention that a sustained and explicit consideration of Lacan was in fact missing from 60s and 70s film theory.

At first glance, therefore, the *Young Mr Lincoln* article might seem to exemplify a move towards Lacanian psychoanalysis. Furthermore, upon first glance, it appears to be a step towards a consideration of narrative content. As such, it might seem to undermine a contention of this thesis: that the content of popular film was systematically precluded by considerations of film and ideology during the 60s and 70s. In this article, the Editorial Collective treat the text of the film in many ways like a work of literature, analysing it sequence by sequence, with scarcely a mention of its materiality. It could be argued that here is an example of textual analysis that confounds the assertion that subject matter was neglected in favour of form and materiality in analyses of film and ideology. While an extensive examination of the content of *Young Mr Lincoln*, or *signifié*, to use the Editors' turn of phrase, appears to consume the bulk of this article, it must be noted that it is the film's *form* which is ostensibly the impetus for the discussion of its *content*.

While the content is stated as the subject of this analysis, the Editors admit that theirs is a particularly imposing mode of reading: "we do not hesitate to force the text, even to rewrite it, insofar as the film only constitutes itself as a text by integration of the reader's knowledge" (37).³⁸ I agree that film as an object is constructed to accommodate multiple acts of interpretation and will thus always be overdetermined as a textual object. However, in this example the Editors are

³⁸ The debt this approach owes to *Tel Quel's* work in the field of literary semiotics is noted, above all in terms of the process of *écriture* where writing and reading become reciprocal moments of the same process. This is summarised best by Roland Barthes' maxim that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (145).

explicitly looking for what is *not* there, as opposed to some differential positive quality displayed in the text.

Young Mr Lincoln is not an Edge of the Construct film: the breaching of the boundary between the Real and ideology does not occur in its subject matter. Rather, as the *Cahiers* Editors attempt to demonstrate, it is on the level of “style” and the “inflexible logic of [Ford’s] fiction” (43) that the omissions and silences interrupting the patterning of the motifs of choice, Law, and Mother can be detected. Hayden White’s consideration of narrative shares much in common with this:

...every narrative, however seemingly “full,” is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*; and this is as true of imaginary as it is of realistic narratives. This consideration permits us to ask what kind of notion of reality authorizes construction of a narrative account of reality in which continuity rather than discontinuity governs the articulation of the discourse. (‘Value of Narrativity’ 14)

Further complicating the usefulness of this approach for understanding the Edge of the Construct films is that the substance revealed by these cracks is not the horrifying void of the Real articulated by Lacan and discussed above with reference to Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, but elements of Lincoln’s life excluded by the narrative. In this sense the Real is interpreted as alternative narrative content (understood here as historical ‘fact’), a definition of the Real as a symbolic entity, rather than the chimerical, unrepresentable impossibility of the Lacanian Real.

Resonating with the notion of narrative being analogous to ideology, in the sense that both attempt to symbolically contain the unruliness of the Real of existence, the Editorial Collective makes clear that repression is central to the appearance of narrative linearity and chronology (14). In doing so, it becomes clear that rather than analyse the narrative content itself, their project is to participate in the

quasi-scientific analysis of the text's formal elements such as its narrational strategy.³⁹

By foregrounding these structuring absences, referred to variously as 'repressions', 'concealments', 'omissions', 'silences' and 'suppressions', the *Cahiers*' Editorial Collective claims to "reveal what is already there, but silent...what, while intending to leave unsaid, it [narrative] is nevertheless obliged to say" (8). Thus their focus is not on what is positively there; rather, the Editors' emphasis is on what is not there, on what is present in its absence. Mary Ann Doane identifies the limitations of a similar tendency within psychoanalytic approaches to cinema: within the problematic proposed by the Editors,

resistance can only be conceptualised through the idea of 'reading against the grain,' as leakage or excess – something which emerges between the cracks as the by-product of another process. Such a definition of resistance is merely another acknowledgement of the totalising aspect of the apparatus. (Doane, 'Remembering Women' 48)

Through a systematic analysis of the narrational logic of *Young Mr Lincoln*, the Editors arrive at the conclusion that this ostensibly 'classic' film (6) is in fact "a text of disquieting unintelligibility" (40). The Editors of *Cahiers*' analysis of *Young Mr Lincoln* illustrates how the problem of form came to dominate analyses of cinema. Furthermore, their analysis illustrates a turn towards the fleeting exposure of the Real as the unintelligible. In this context, the Real could be traced through the rupturing of a classic, patriarchal narrative code and its conventions of analogical representation and linear narrative (6). Therefore, the *Cahiers* Editorial Collective's interpretation of

³⁹ However, here it must be noted that in this analysis the division between form and content becomes blurred. For example, what sense would it make to discuss binary oppositions in the absence of content (in this case Law and violence, innocence and eroticism...). The problem of the boundary between form and content will form the basis of Chapter Two of this thesis.

The Young Mr Lincoln seems, at first, to illustrate an application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the content of narrative film. However, a close reading of the analysis shows that a consideration of Lacan's Real, in its full sense, was yet to come in film studies.

The heated debate between *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* was translated and taken up in the pages of British journal *Screen*. After 1971, *Screen* played a central part in the development and criticism of theoretical approaches to interrogate and complement its own role as part of the BFI educational establishment, and in defining the field of film studies more generally (*Screen* 5). It is interesting to note that *Screen* devoted two separate issues to Marxism and psychoanalysis: issue 15.4 (1974) was devoted to semiology and its relationship to historical materialism, and issue 16.2 (1975) was devoted to psychoanalysis. The translation of these theories into English did not resolve the implicit tension and apparent irreconcilability between psychoanalysis and Marxism when applied to the relationship between cinema and ideology. The need to treat psychoanalysis and Marxism as separate issues proves this.

In the pages of *Screen* during the early 70s two clear lines of investigation carried over from *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* warrant specific attention here. The first of these is *Screen's* desire to engage in the formation of a structuralist, quasi-scientific theory of cinematographic signification. The second line of investigation comes from the first: implicit in this new direction was the idea that where realism prescribed a passive subject and encouraged identification and

sublimation, modernism prescribed an active subject through the disruption of the realist techniques fostering identification.

Parts I and II of Stephen Heath's 'Film and System, Terms of Analysis' exhibit the same motivation as the *Cahiers* analysis of Ford's *Mr Lincoln*. In these articles, Heath attempts to identify and elaborate a psychoanalytically-underpinned theory for an underlying code or structure for all narrative film, and to use this structure in turn to deconstruct films as textual systems. Heath's work also represents a slightly more detailed version of the attempt made by the *Cahiers* editors to deploy psychoanalysis as a tool for critiquing cinema's ideological role.

Unlike Baudry and other subsequent apparatus theorists, whose focus is on how the technical ensemble of the cinematographic apparatus potentially inflected subjectivity, Heath offers a different model of investigation, focusing instead upon the trends and themes repeatedly introduced by a film's content. Here I should make explicit, however, that Heath's focus is (like that of the Editorial collective of *Cahiers*) on the pattern in which these themes are expressed, rather than the themes themselves.

An emphasis on the role of the reader's engagement with the text is also evident in Heath's 'Film and System'. Also evident is an insistence on the centrality of questions pertaining to the construction and perpetuation of particular modes of subjectivity, questions central to the era of political modernism. Heath states his hypothesis as being

That ideology depends crucially on the establishment of a range of 'machines' (of institutions) which move...the subject ('sender' and 'receiver') in a ceaseless appropriation of the symbolic into the imaginary, production into fiction. In film, it is

narrative that has served as the mode of that appropriation, the very mirror of the instance of the subject in its reconstitution. ('Film and System Part I', 8)

Heath elaborates, to define the 'cinematic institution' as

the double machine of cinema as industry and ideological apparatus to the extent to which the former depends on the effect of the latter, on, that is, the metapsychological realisation of a placing of subjectivity that determines – renews – the circulation of capital, cinema being nothing less than a massive investment in the subject. ('Film and System Part I' 10)

While Heath acknowledges that the “*énoncé*” is equally as important as the “*énonciation*” he ultimately concedes that “the point is not to wage a war of interpretations; rather, it is a matter of showing the *design* of the film in its system” ('Film and System Part I' 8-9). Thus, while content is important to Heath, it is less important than the narrative system in which it is arranged. Once again, narrative content is made secondary to form, and the Real that the narrative system conceals is given less emphasis than the narrative's forms of address to the subject.

'Film and System, Terms of Analysis' is a rigid application of Metz's *grande syntagmatique* forced in a self-confessed “draconian” fashion onto the first twenty five minutes of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* ('Film and System Part I' 51). Metz's semiotic categories of description, narrative, character, partitions, exchange, repercussions, light, music, and author are the 'terms of analysis' referred to in the paper's title. As such, through the descriptor of 'narrative', it is implied that the thematic content of the film will form part of his analysis.

Part I of Heath's 'Film and System' project involves a painstaking descriptive catalogue of first three minutes of footage (52-64) and then the analysis of these first sequences in relation to the film in its entirety. In 'Film and System, Terms of

Analysis, Part II' Heath's use of psychoanalytic vocabulary and concepts to analyse the narrative framework of *Touch of Evil* is more explicit than that of the *Cahiers* Editors (see, for example, *Film and System Part II' 2*). Ultimately, his project is to suggest the ways in which the "sub-codes" of the narrative system create a particular subject position from which the otherwise fragmentary "festival of affects" becomes intelligible (*Film and System Part II' 98, 100*). Similar to the *Cahiers* Editors' analysis of *Mr Lincoln*, Heath does indeed discuss the narrative content of *Touch of Evil*; however, the focus of Heath's project, as that of *Cahiers*, is less on the ideas expressed and more on the way in which these ideas are expressed.

The concerns of *Cahiers'* project are also echoed in Heath's 'Narrative Space' (1986). This article can be viewed as another incremental step towards a theoretical framework that is appropriate for considering the Edge of the Construct films. Again, in 'Narrative Space' the emphasis is on discontinuities inherent in the space within and between shots, attracting the spectator's attention to the work of film form and its construction of norms of realism, coherence, and continuity. By implication, if a film emphasises rather than suppresses these interstices, new experiences of a discontinuous subjectivity become possible. This thesis seeks to examine what happens when the 'interstices' in reality are represented in the narrative structure of the films, as in the Edge of the Construct films.

Suture: concealing the disquieting unintelligibility of the Real.

While suture is most commonly associated in the English-speaking world with Heath, and is understood to have become a major concept in film studies as a result of the elaboration it received in *Screen*, the genealogy of suture can be traced back to French psychoanalytic theory. The concept of suture is one of the most compelling accounts offered by the discourse of political modernism for the way in which narrative fictional film imparts an illusory sense of reality. Žižek suggests that suture “condenses everything Theory was about in cinema studies, and is, consequently, the main target of the Post-Theoreticist criticism” (*Fright of Real Tears* 31). The concept of suture is of principal interest here as a theory of how the Real is systematically alluded to and expelled from narrative. Suture represents a crystallisation of 60s and 70s film theory, elaborating a critical theory for examining the relation between forms of spectatorship and film form. Specifically, suture is a theory developed to consider ways in which subject positions and point of view are established and perpetuated through film. The concept of suture was advanced as a mechanism by which mainstream cinema promotes the ‘reality effect’ through the identification of the spectator with the narrative (both with characters and the camera), the implication being that through the formal manipulation of this mechanism, identification could potentially be broken. In this way a more active mode of spectatorship and subjectivity could be promoted.

As recounted by Žižek, suture emerged in psychoanalytic discourse as a “casual word that occurs once in Lacan” (*The Fright of Real Tears* 31). Jacques-Alain Miller identifies suture as an omnipresent, although never explicitly named concept in

Lacan, and elaborated a theory of suture accordingly in 1965 (Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears* 31). For JA Miller,

Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse[...] it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in. For, while there lacking, it is not purely and simply absent. Suture, by extension – the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element, inasmuch as it implies the position of a taking-the-place-of . (sic) ('Suture' 25-26)

To summarise, suture designated the process by which the subject is effected by the signifier, and by which the signifier is the representative of the subject ('Suture' 34). The chain of signification opens up a place for the subject, subsuming the subject; the chain of signification creates a place from which the subject can speak as 'I', and where lack is obliterated by plenitude.

Cahiers du Cinéma editor Jean-Pierre Oudart applied suture explicitly to film theory in 1969.⁴⁰ For Oudart,

Suture represents the closure of the cinematic *énoncé* in line with its relationship with its subject (the filmic subject or rather the cinematic subject), which is recognised, and then put in its place as the spectator. (35)

Oudart posits that suture forms part of the process of 'reading' a film. The spectator initially "experiences with vertiginous delight the unreal space...; he is himself fluid, elastic, and expanding: he is at the cinema" (41). From this moment when "space was still a pure expanse of *jouissance*,...suddenly...prohibition is there in the guise of the screen; its presence first puts an end to the spectator's fascination" (41-42). In this way narrative cinema extends itself beyond the "fourth side" that should enclose it (42), into a hypothetical field of Absence that the audience never perceives but from

⁴⁰ See Rodowick's commentary on how the translation of suture from psychoanalytic concept to film theory was in many ways unsound in Chapter Seven of *The Crisis of Political Modernism*.

which the scene on the screen is perceived. Similarly, Metz alludes to suture in the following way: “the narrative plenitude and transparency of [Hollywood] film is based on a refusal to admit that anything is lacking, or that anything has to be sought for; it shows us only the other side of the lack and the search, an image of satiety and fulfilment...” (*Psychoanalysis and Cinema* 91-92).

It is not the spectator but their Imaginary image that is located in this field of Absence (Oudart 38). Oudart refers to the spectator’s Imaginary image that occupies the missing field as the “Absent One” (36, 42). Therefore, Oudart posits, the filmic image becomes the signifier of this Absence and of this Absent, its presence reminding the audience of what is not there (37, 42). The representation provided by film effects the image’s rebirth as a “signifying Sum, the uniting of its semantic traits which are in a way summoned to signify something together, a signifying Sum always echoed by a lack (absence) that threatens to annul it by reducing it to being nothing but its signifier” (42).

While Oudart refers to the shot reverse-shot as the privileged example of suture, it is important to note that his thesis is equally applicable to every instance that the shots of a film are organised as if they comprised an actual, real, coherent world. When two shots apparently face each other, initially, during the first shot (let’s call it Shot A) an invisible area, an absence, emerges. This is the area of off-screen space where the character directs his or her attention. During the second shot (Shot B), a visible object is introduced in the place of this absence, thus abolishing it. To summarise, the shot reverse-shot serves to create an absence, an anticipation, and then offers an object to fill it. In this way the shots continually gesture toward an object

that is there. The suture is this very process of substituting an implied absence with an object. Denying the signifier of a lack, it offers instead a portion of a coherent world. The filmic discourse creates a space for an Absent one, and then subsumes this Absence under an object (signifier) that ensures the coherence of the world presented. This suturing of the chain of images 'effects' the spectator as the imaginary, masterful subject who is the centre of the diegetic world; in other words, the spectator becomes a mirror for the coherence of the fictional world, where the Real is excluded.

Oudart's and JA Miller's articles were translated and elaborated upon in *Screen* in 1977, whence it became a principal concept in film theory and was subjected to further rigorous discussion. Suture is at the basis of Heath's concept of negativity outlined in 'Narrative Space'. For Heath, negativity is the pleasurable and omnipresent awareness that narrative continuity may be contradicted at any moment.

For Heath, the shot reverse-shot functioned to position the subject via the suture in the following way:

Space comes in place through procedures such as look and point-of-view structures, and the spectator with it as subject in its realisation. A reverse shot folds over the shot it joins and is joined in turn by the reverse it positions; a shot of a person looking is succeeded by a shot of the object looked at which is succeeded in turn by a shot of the person looking to confirm the object seen; and so on, in a number of multiple imbrications. *Fields* are made, *moving* fields, and the process includes not just the completions but the definitions of absence for completion. The suturing operation is in the process, the give and take of absence and presence, the play of negativity and negation, flow and bind. ('Narrative Space' 404)

The Edge of the Construct films exploit precisely this pleasure. They overtly thematise concepts like those elaborated in the discussion of suture. These films each depict a subject who has been ejected from the pleasure of symbolic articulation; in

this sense, the protagonists of the Edge of the Construct films are absences. These films depict subjects who perceive the symbolic world as a fiction, and who face the lack or void it conceals.

Suture, then, rightly or wrongly, is a definitive concept of the period of Grand Theory (Žižek, *Fright of Real Tears* 31). Suture is a concept that may have its origins in Lacan, but which evolved in *Cahiers* and *Screen* independently. The theorists who contributed to its elaboration focused on *how* it worked as a dynamic of the narrative system they theorised, rather than *what* it worked to conceal. This is, of course, the ‘disquieting unintelligibility’ of the Real.

Cinéthique and *Cahiers* were both motivated by the question ‘what is cinema?’ as the answer to the more specific questions ‘what is the political worth of cinema?’ and ‘how does cinema relate to ideology, dominant or otherwise?’ Both agreed that cinema’s differential specificity lay in its ability to present a compelling illusion of reality. However, with respect to the central question of this thesis, namely, “what is the Real?”, and “how has it been historically conceived with specific reference to the cinema?”, *Cinéthique* presented a Marxist-Leninist argument whereby ‘the real’ was understood as a film’s material conditions of existence. According to this argument, the only way for cinema to generate knowledge was to shatter this illusion and to reveal all about its conditions of production. While *Cahiers* did not dispute this as one among a range of relationships between cinema and the Real, it chose instead to focus on those films working within the system that appeared to have some subversive potential, mostly by virtue of their form rather than their

content. The Real in *Cahiers'* and *Screen's* formulation became something that could be discerned in the cracks, fissures, and gaps in a film's formal structure, the nature of which was defined imprecisely, or conceived of vaguely as alternative narrative content. To return to the figure of the border, for political modernism mainstream cinema was perceived either as a barrier between the viewer and their material conditions of existence, or between the viewer and the overwhelming totality of existence, which might be revealed in a film's interstices.

A conception of cinema as contributing to a symbolic, ideological barrier between viewers and the otherwise incomprehensible entirety of existence brings us close to the Lacanian idea of the Real, but development stalled before reaching this goal. As outlined by Rodowick, and Bordwell and Carroll, the psychoanalytically subtended theory of the 60s and 70s in which *Cahiers*, *Cinéthique* and *Screen* participated began to 'wane' in the 1980s, before an articulation of the Real in a sustained and explicitly Lacanian sense could be made. As Chapter Three of this thesis will show, the work of Žižek is in many ways a resumption of this aborted project, providing a definition of the Real appropriate to its exploration in film in general and the Edge of the Construct films in particular.

The next chapter will consider the idea of the Real as something that disturbs the sanctity of form, and apply this disturbance to the conceptual terms 'form', 'content' and 'matter' ubiquitous in and holding rhetorical weight within film theory. To recall Žižek's evocation of the Real discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the Real as "the rock upon which every attempt at symbolisation stumbles, the hard core..."(*Sublime Object* 169) can be seen to block the symbolic certainty of the very

concepts used to discuss and analyse cinema. The next chapter will also meditate on the resonance between this idea of the Real as a stumbling block, an obstacle to symbolic certainty. This will be considered in conjunction with the poststructuralist conviction that a state of disorderly fluidity belies all claims to neat semantic fixity. In this process, consideration will also be given to the symmetry between the breaching of the border or the *edge* represented by the Edge of the Construct films, and the breaching of the assumed boundaries between the concepts form, content and matter.

Chapter Two

Matter, Form and Content.

“...deprived of its shell, the body is an almost formless spongy entity...Is this squishy body not the perfect figure of the Real?” (Žižek, ‘Rhetorics of Power’ 99).

Three points can be gleaned from this quote that are of fundamental interest to this chapter in particular, and to this thesis in general. First is the notion of the Real as a compellingly “almost formless” entity. Second is the evocation of a border delineating inside from outside, where the “shell” (or exterior material form) is this border, and “almost formless spongy entity” denotes interior material content. Third is the metaphorical association of the Real with the worryingly elastic body (the importance of which will be elaborated in Chapter Five).

Serious consideration needs to be given to the concepts ‘matter’, ‘form’ and ‘content’ in a thesis that examines the relationship between cinema, ideology and the Real, the precise nature of that Real, and Žižek’s contribution to this field. As the previous chapter demonstrates, in film studies these terms are used frequently, and carry great weight, in an intense debate about the relationship between film and ideology; however, the meaning of these terms tends to be assumed rather than defined.

This chapter occupies itself with two questions. The first question asks how form, content and matter are deployed within film studies and to what these words supposedly refer within film studies and aesthetics more generally. Accordingly, I will consider the uses of these terms in aesthetics, and extend upon the uses of form,

content and matter in political modernist film theory considered in Chapter One, and the ways in which these terms linger in more contemporary film studies.

Returning to the concept of the Real, the second question considers how and why the neat delineation of form, content and matter is stymied. To explain it another way, the second question is concerned with the way in which the Real contaminates all symbolic systems, including those of aesthetics and film studies. To complicate (and, more positively, enrich) things further, at the same time that matter, form and content were key terms of debate in politically modernist film theory, poststructuralist theory emerged to challenge conventional understandings of such categories.

Poststructuralism necessitated a step away from the structural impulse to impose order as a point from which to proceed with analysis, instead arguing that all such orders, for example that delineating matter, form and content, are inherently problematic. Poststructuralism also entailed a perception of the structuralist project as precisely that – a project – rather than an immutably scientific or objective process. As this chapter will illustrate, however, the argument is not that poststructuralism ‘invented’ a new way of looking at matter, form and content, but that it provides a way of accounting for the historically evident difficulty in defining these categories.

In the course of addressing these two questions, it would appear as though I am setting out to interrogate an insoluble problem. Trying to delineate between matter, form and content proves to be a futile task. However, this is, in terms of the Real, precisely the point. My interrogation of the matter, form and content riddle is carried out in order to establish terms by which the Edge of the Construct films can be understood. These films confront the taken-for-grantedness of matter, form and

content, and the relations between the three terms. It is therefore important that this thesis *not* take these categories for granted. The blurring of these three terms, and the way they interact in film, is another way the Real insists itself.

Proceeding from Jacques Derrida's notion⁴¹ of 'differance', in this chapter I will view the concepts form, content and matter not as in opposition to one another, but as 'accomplices'. The very notion of delineation is interrogated, and, drawing on the insights of the deconstructive method of Derrida, towards the end of this chapter I consider the way in which the delineating contour – the limit – serves at once to frame and supplement its object. Consequently, this chapter draws from the metaphysical and Enlightenment philosophers Plato, Kant, and Hegel, who are seen as exemplary of the desire to categorise, know, and thereby master experience. The structural impulse to demarcate stable and ordered distinctions between matter, form and content is the prime target of the poststructuralist conviction that a state of infinite differential flux belies any claim to neat semantic categorisation. This examination tracing the movement between order and disorder, using matter, form and content as examples, will be guided by Derrida's deconstructive reading of the Platonic tradition and the logocentrism that the dominant reading of this tradition takes for granted.

⁴¹ Derrida emphasises that 'differance' is neither a word nor a concept ('Differance' 130).

Matter, form and content in aesthetics and film studies.

As Monroe Beardsley observes,

To talk about the form of an aesthetic object is at least to imply a distinction between its form and its other aspects. And it is this distinction that raises puzzling problems for aesthetics. Out of it come some of the most debated questions. Can form be separated from content? Is the form of an aesthetic object more, or less, important than its content, or its meaning? (165)

The prevailing problematic of the aesthetic categories of matter, form and content has a long history in Western thought. The tendency has been to emphasise one category as more important or as the determinant of the others for specific ideological stakes, as demonstrated by the examination of the era of political modernism in the previous chapter. Historically, the preference has never been to emphasise consistently one category as more important or determining than the others. While attention will be paid to the thought of the German Idealists (in particular, GWF Hegel and Immanuel Kant) who emphasised content over form, the Idealists were not the first philosophers to be confounded by the desired yet impossible distinction between form and content. We need to examine the Platonic tradition in order to establish a framework from which we can proceed with analysis of the period of political modernism in film studies and of the specific films in question.

The work of Kant, Hegel and Plato is doubly important here given that poststructuralist critique returns most frequently to Platonism and Enlightenment thought as two of the most enduring philosophical traditions in western European thought. Platonic metaphysics and Enlightenment thought are responsible for the urge to rationalise and reason with what is, for poststructuralist arguments, inherently

irrational and unreasonable: the world, existence, and knowledge. Indeed, as we will see, the more closely one examines the categories matter, form and content, the more these categories belonging to a superficial, transparent order actually reveal an essential constitutional disorder underpinning and undermining all existence and our attempts to know that existence and the Real.

The distinction between matter, form and content exists in the field of aesthetics to abstractly delineate between the physical, tangible stuff from which the object is wrought, the form this content takes in the aesthetic object, and the conceptual content expressed by an aesthetic object, respectively. To put it simply, in definitions derived from Plato content is the ‘*what* is expressed?’; form is the answer to the question ‘*how* is it expressed?’⁴²; and matter is the ‘*with what* is it expressed?’, or ‘how does the matter give rise to thought?’ (*Timaeus* 31). In other words, theoretically, “...meaning [content] is a ‘substance’ pre-existing its ‘formation’ in an expression” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 38). However, as this chapter will attempt to illustrate, the issue is not that simple, and the definitions of and relations between matter, form and content reveal themselves to be immensely complex and confounding. The previous chapter examined how political modernism perpetuates this riddle, with specific reference to film and ideology. In Chapters Four and Five of this thesis I will consider how the Edge of the Construct films I am examining

⁴² In the aforementioned section of *The Republic* where Plato recounts Socrates’ opposition of form and content with reference to his discussion of the social and political effects of literature (iii 386-392), where content is the theme, the subject matter, the “*what* is to be said” of poetry, form is “the style of presentation...*how* it is to be said” (iii 392c). Thus the distinction between narrative (content) and narration (form) is made. It should also here be noted that ‘Form’ in Plato has two slightly different meanings. On one hand, there is the conventional notion of form that roughly corresponds to ‘shape’ or ‘figure’. On the other, of course, there is the specifically Platonic use of the term ‘form’ with reference to the world of Platonic Forms, the ‘real’ world, according to Plato, where things exist ‘in themselves’. The focus of my work here will be primarily on the former, the idea of form as the shape or organisation of a particular object.

explore, exploit, and respond to this confusion. In this chapter I will consider what the confusion over form, content and matter can tell us about the Real.

In this consideration of matter, form and content in aesthetics and film studies, I will illustrate that the moment one tries to approach a definition of matter, rather than isolate an ever clearer definition, it splinters into multiple co-defining categories. A similar difficulty is encountered in trying to define form: the more closely one tries to get to defining form, the more one is also compelled to consider content, and *vice versa*. Indeed, the categories of form, content and matter provide some of the most compelling evidence for the poststructural argument that it is illusory to believe that the world is founded on a tidy system of categories that each have an independent identity.

The slipperiness of the distinction between form and content is curiously illustrated in the index to Beardsley's canonical *Aesthetics*: under the entry for 'content', the text directs the reader to 'form'. This re-direction seems anomalous given that in the history of aesthetics form and content have proven to be far from interchangeable terms. While it is a fallacy to assume that the form is an empty vessel to be filled by the content, or inversely that the content takes shape thanks only to the form, it is equally problematic to posit their interchangeability.

The following discussion will serve to illustrate the way in which thinkers across a range of disciplines, but above all in film theory, demonstrate the desire to acknowledge the impossibility of the neat distinction between matter, form and content, and yet must necessarily and strategically proceed as though the distinction between these terms does exist as a way of structuring analyses of works. If matter,

form and content are really so intractably bound up in one another, what do the words signify? Why have two separate words if the concepts they are meant to signify so readily collapse one into the other? What does it mean to say the Edge of the Construct film cycle thematises the Real through narrative content if form and content are not discrete terms?

Matter.

As explored in Chapter One, politically modernist film theory influenced by Marxism – or dialectical materialism – asserted that the Real was a person’s material, economic conditions of existence. As such, the Real is considered a substantial, positive, *material* object. Accordingly, some further interrogation of the concept of matter is warranted. The task of defining matter seems, at first, to pose less of a conceptual problem than that of form and content. Conventional discussions of matter conform to the following definitions: “The substance, or the substances collectively, out of which a physical object is made or out of which it consists”; or, “Physical or corporeal substance in general...contradistinguished from immaterial or incorporeal substance (spirit, soul, mind) and from qualities, actions, or conditions” (‘Matter’ 480-481). However, from this deceptively simple definition, already a problem arises: rather than an independent definition of matter, an explanatory identity that can stand alone, we are instead provided with a description of two kinds of substance: a physical one, in contrast to an “immaterial or incorporeal” one.

Problematically, it seems that in order to define matter, we need to understand its opposite, which is also, perplexingly, a sort of matter, and *vice versa*. Rather than

furnish us with a neat identity, the quest for a definition of matter instead demonstrates how matter splits apart into multiple differential ideas. We will see a similar trend occur throughout the historical accounts of form and content as well as matter considered in this chapter.

For Plato, defining matter begins as a superficially straightforward proposition: matter or material is comprised of the basic elements. In *Timaeus* in particular, the material of the creator is specified as earth, air, fire and water (31). Matter refers to the tangible or at least sensible stuff of existence, the physical substance wrought by the divine creator to make the universe. However, in a typically Platonic move, Plato specifies that the matter we perceive in the world is merely a copy of the pure matter that exists in the real world, the world of Being, the world of forms (50).⁴³ Once again, we are presented with an account of two kinds of matter: in this case matter is involved in a process of self-repetition between an inferior ‘real’ one that can be perceived by the senses, and a better, *more real* one that we can only imagine.

Hegel’s definition of matter qualifies that set down by Plato, matter becoming for Hegel a philosophical classification including all that exists independently of thought. This is exemplified in Hegel’s famous description of a dialectic where spirit (thought) and substance (matter) are integrated in an attempt to rationalise and account for human consciousness. By implication, for Hegel matter is the world of objects presumed to exist in isolation from reflective thought:

⁴³ According to Plato, “...the things which pass in and out of [*khôra*] are copies of the eternal realities, whose form they take in a wonderful way that is hard to describe” (*Timaeus* 50).

...it is assumed that the material world of knowing is present on its own account as a ready-made world apart from thought...the object is regarded as something complete and finished on its own account, something which can entirely dispense with thought for its actuality...this, as a thing-in-itself, remains a sheer beyond of thought. (Introduction 44-45)

Hegel praises the Platonic tradition for according privilege to the world of ideas over the material world (Introduction 45). However, paradoxically, according to Hegel matter relies on reflective thought in order to define itself. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel gives several examples of how, when considering law, one shifts methodically from a universal idea (thought/concept/spirit) of Right to particular concrete applications of law (matter), since the notion of Right is empty and abstract without concrete embodiment in specific laws.⁴⁴ Conversely, it is implied, the concrete particular laws lack meaning if they do not refer to a universally applicable principle (concept) of Right. By extension, the two are mutually presupposing, forming a dialectic of reciprocal constitution. Everything, for Hegel, exists in relation to something else, is mediated by something else:

All universal ideas and all particular things are intertwined and exist together, combining ideality or spirituality with materiality or worldliness... Hegel saw dialectical philosophy as a way of ... seeing spirit in matter, and of accounting for how spirit (by which he also meant universal ideas that needed to exist outside particular, worldly determinate sites in order to be universal) might enter matter as the legitimating authority within or behind concrete laws...It helped for Hegel that the German word “*Geist*” means both spirit and mind. The rational mind, he thought, is capable of attaining universality by elevating itself above matter. This is the celebrated *Aufhebung* or simultaneous annulment and transcendence of matter or of a particular

⁴⁴ In *Philosophy of Right* Hegel writes: “The universal is, in fact, the basis, which is, however, as yet only internal, and therefore exists in the particular only formally, and in it is manifested externally” (184).

thing and its preservation in spiritualised form that is purely conceptual and purely universal. (Rivkin and Ryan, 'Starting With Zero' 234-235)

As explored in the previous chapter, Marx and Engels inverted the prevailing notion among German idealist philosophers that the lives of people were shaped by a pre-existing, transcendent consciousness. Instead, Marx and Engels argued that it is the material needs and activities of people that shaped their consciousness. This is dialectical materialism – the view that the outside world, the material world, defines the ideas people have. Marx and Engels' materialist view of history can be summarised by the statement in *The German Ideology* that “[l]ife is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (47). This materialist position explains the conclusion of the *Cinéthique* authors examined in the previous chapter, that through manipulation of the material realm could dialectical change be realised.

Plato and Hegel, therefore, share the view that matter is in theory the concrete substance that constitutes the objective world, while contrasting it with another substanceless substance, referred to as 'spirit' by Hegel. To apply the abstract definition of matter as concrete substance to my discussion of film in this thesis, we could say that matter in film can essentially be reduced to celluloid, light, soundtrack and soundwaves. However, as outlined above, in defining matter both Hegel and Plato seek recourse to a dual concept of matter: one that exists (only abstractly) in-itself, and another one that depends variously on the spirit, ideas, or the world of forms for its conception. The fact that both thinkers resort to a duplication of categories in attempting to isolate the category of matter suggests (and Derrida would no doubt concur) that the kernel of deconstruction has existed and persisted since the advent of Western philosophy.

Form and Content.

So far it has been established that, in the work of Plato and that of Hegel, it is impossible to locate a definition for matter that does not depend on another entity or a duality. Attempting to isolate definitions of form and content is also complicated. Indeed, form and content present a particularly complex problem for philosophy. Where matter is related to second versions of matter, to concepts of spirit or ideas for greater understanding, form and content are intractably bound to one another. As I will explore here, form and content can be shown to be equally interdependent; form leaves its mark on content as content does to form. To define form one needs to refer to content and *vice versa*. As considered in the previous chapter, the modernist problematic of the aesthetic categories of form and content which profoundly influenced the course of film studies can be viewed as operating in opposition to the Hegelian understanding of these categories and its subsequent influence on the Romantic tradition. This is not surprising, given the intellectual ancestry of political modernism in Marxism. A brief overview of those positions is therefore warranted here.

From the outset it is important to note that the dominant Romantic interpretation of Hegel arrived at the conclusion that form and content are not precisely mutually defining. For Romantic interpretations of Hegel, content is the determining factor of form. Content is identified as having primacy for Hegel, most clearly expressed in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, where he argues that the form “is determined...by the inner essence of the content” (517).

“Inner essence” for Hegel refers to that which lies behind the appearance of things and is discernable only through the activity of reflection (Hegel, *Logic* 178-179). Essence in this sense comes close to the definition of the content of an object as the Hegelian abstract “thing-in-itself”, as independent. This is opposed to its form which is defined as inessential and dependent (Hegel, *Logic* 209). Hegel accounted for the changing forms of different artistic media, by referring to changes in artistic aspirations, ideas, or content. However, further consideration reveals that the situation is not that simple.

While the form of an object is subject to change, according to Hegel this does not suggest that the form is arbitrary. Rather, form can be more or less true to the content (Hegel, *Logic* 209). Here we return to the idea that the inner conceptual content of an object is the determinant by which its form will be judged as ‘right’ or ‘true’. Moreover, it is important to recognise that for the Romantic imagination to which Hegel refers, the dominant theory was one “of artistic production emphasising original genius and the idealising imagination” whereby the artist-as-genius expressed their inner profundity through the aesthetic object (Wood 7).

In Hegel’s *Logic*, form and content are philosophical concepts concerned with the opposition of the appearance of a thing and its essence, appearance being the result, the synthesis, of form and content:

The essential point to keep in view about the opposition of Form and Content is that the content is not formless, but has the form in its own self, quite as much as the form is external to it. There is a double sort of form. At one time it is reflected into itself. That form is identical with the content. At another time it is not reflected in itself. (*Logic* 208-209)

Therefore, according to Hegel, while form and content exist in opposition, it is a complicated opposition. For Hegel there are two types of form: the form of the form, and the form of the content. The form, when the 'true' form of the given content,

...is the external existence, which does not at all affect the content. We are here in the presence, properly speaking, of the absolute relation or proportion between content and form: according to which the one lapses into another, so that content is nothing but the revulsion of form into content, and form nothing but the revulsion of content into form. This mutual revulsion is one of the most important laws of thought. (*Logic* 208-209)

The above passage encapsulates the basis of the form-content dilemma as it stands today: while often deployed as essential polarities, deeper examination reveals form and content to be, in fact, two complementary elements of the same whole. While Hegel's position advocates that the content of an object is the determinant of its form, it equally advocates that the content indissolubly bears the mark of the form, and we seem to have returned to the situation of form and content as mutually defining. It is important to glean from this brief examination of form and content in Hegel that Hegel's analysis requires a process of doubling: there are two kinds of form and two kinds of content. This necessity of doubling is indicative of Hegel's difficulty in neatly delineating form from content; instead, Hegel's solution is to split them into a potentially infinite composite of reflective categories.

Historiographer and literary critic Hayden White echoes Hegel's contention that content has its own unique form and that form conversely has its own unique content: "narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualisation of it in speech or writing" (*Content of the Form* xi).

Narrative as a particular form has defined the dominant mode of film production, so White's comments are applicable to narrative film. As narrative bestows upon events a particular linearity of space and time, and cause-effect relationships, content is inflected in a certain way by the 'content of the form' of narrative. In being so shaped by the narrative form, arguably two types of content are produced: the content of the content, and the content of the narrative form. By extension, it becomes evident how the form leaves its trace irrevocably on the content. This would seem to imply that content is therefore subordinated to the form, rather than content acting independently. Throughout White, once again, although the boundaries between form and content are acknowledged as blurry and complicated, there is a persistence of the favouring of the value of form over the value of content.

It is also possible to here clarify the reasons why form and content were opposed in various and specific ways, particularly in 70s film theory. To relate this discussion more clearly to the 70s film theories explored in the previous chapter, we can contend that questions of form and content have persisted with the advent of structural semiotics, with the emphasis being on how 'form' and 'content' function, rather than to what they actually refer. Where Romanticism used the opposition of form and content to arrive, as did Hegel, at their fundamental indissolubility, modernism transfers the emphasis from this duality to the process of meaning-making in a given text. In this sense, the text is seen as existing in a dynamic process of the production of meaning, rather than containing predetermined content. As discussed in the previous chapter with reference to the process of *écriture*, the author's intentions so central to Romantic thought become displaced by infinite other factors. However,

as John Ellis observes, “the opposition form/content does not disappear just like that: it lingers in some uses of the terms signifier and signified” (ix).

The ‘lingering’ of the form/content dichotomy in cine-semiotics to which Ellis refers, and the way in which the terms (inexactly) map onto the linguistic categories of signifier/signified, is best illustrated by the influential work of structural film theorist Christian Metz. Metz identifies how the cinematic elaboration of linguistic models has resulted in the common usage of ‘form’ to “designate the film *signifier* and the term ‘content’ its *signified*” (‘Methodological Propositions’ 89). This interchangeability of terms (form-signifier and content-signified) is illustrated in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, where Metz outlines the way in which linguistics is transposed onto film studies, such that the “significate” or signified is the “content” where the signifier is the “expression” or form of that content (62). It is important to note that Metz draws these links to illustrate that for film, more so than for verbal language, the distance between content and its expression (form) is “too short” for it to be understood simply as language. James Monaco refers to this phenomenon as the ‘short-circuit sign’. The short-circuit sign is that peculiarly cinematic sign in which the signifier (form/expression) is nearly identical to the signified (content) (Monaco 158-160). Unlike the arbitrariness of the written or verbal signifier, the cinematic signifier is more determined. For example, the word ‘cat’ can evoke infinite signifieds of felines, but a photographic image of a cat leaves less room for variability.

Despite acknowledging the proximity of signifier and signified in cinema, Metz argues that “It is of course true that at any given point in the analysis of any

given film, it is possible to isolate a signifying instance and a signified instance” (‘Methodological Propositions’ 89). This would seem to be in contradiction with Ferdinand de Saussure’s contention that the signifier (form) exists only through the signified (content) and *vice versa*: “whenever only one element is retained, the entity vanishes; instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction” (102-103). Furthermore, for Saussure, the bar between the signifier and the signified (s/S) functions to join the two rather than to divide them, thus producing a two-sided entity:

Language can ... be compared with a sheet of paper: thought [content] is the front and the sound [form] the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound [form] from thought [content] nor thought from sound; the division could only be accomplished abstractly... (Saussure 113)

Thus cine-semiotics alludes to the same categories often under different terms, and the problem with defining the relationship between form and content has been displaced and intensified rather than resolved.

Echoing Hegel’s logic, in ‘Methodological Propositions for the Analysis of Film’ Metz interrogates the validity of the long-standing split between form and content, arguing that the terms are never discrete. Metz argues that film form does have an essential substance (content) and, likewise, content always has a structural organisation (form) and thus the distinction is blurred and confusing. Nevertheless, Metz engages in a tacit process of disavowal, arguing for the theoretical possibility of isolating form from content in order proceed with his structural semiotic project.

The deployment of form and content as analytical categories has persisted in more contemporary approaches to film studies. In their influential *Film Art*, neo-formalist film critics and historians David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson firmly

declare that they reject the assumption that “‘form’ as a concept is the opposite of something called ‘content’” (40). They reject this formulation on the basis that “Under this assumption, form becomes less important than whatever it is presumed to contain” (41). Despite this claim, Bordwell and Thompson undergo a similar process of disavowal to that displayed by Metz: while rejecting that ‘form’ is *opposed* to ‘content’, it becomes clear that form is certainly understood to be *different* to content throughout their work. For Bordwell and Thompson the term ‘form’ is substituted with the word ‘narration’ while referring to the same semantic category (73-76), and ‘content’ is displaced by the term ‘narrative’ (60-61). To consider Bordwell and Thompson’s claims in light of the terms of debate established in the previous chapter, my thesis here is that the evolution of 70s film theory has placed the emphasis on mainstream film’s form, thereby making content less important than the form that supposedly contains it.

In their equally influential *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Bordwell and Thompson with film critic and historian Janet Staiger describe the form or style of the classical film as “‘escap[ing] observation by dint of being excessively obvious’” (11). They argue that the form of classical narrative is subordinate to content; style cannot draw attention to itself and must instead serve the causes of continuity and linearity of time and space (3-11). This argument, of course, is the same as that advanced by MacCabe in ‘Realism and the Cinema’, explored in Chapter One.⁴⁵ However, it is important to recognise that mainstream cinema today is not necessarily the same thing

⁴⁵ For more primary articles belonging to the tradition of film theory that aligns classical Hollywood with a form of narration that does not draw attention to itself as a construction, and the pleasures this affords the viewer, see MacCabe’s ‘Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure’, Heath’s ‘On Screen, in Frame: Film and Ideology’, and Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’.

as the classical Hollywood cinema examined by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson. Post-Classical cinema interrogates the securities that classical Hollywood aimed to establish. Where classical Hollywood served to efface form, Post-Classical Hollywood works to foreground its status as a construction. The Edge of the Construct films participate in this.

Film historian Susan Hayward agrees with Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, arguing that in the pursuit of verisimilitude the form of mainstream narrative film must remain as unobtrusive as possible (66). Film theorist Dayan links this notion that film form must remain unobtrusive to ideology, writing that ideology “must hide its operations, ‘naturalising’ its functioning and its messages in some way. Specifically, the cinematographic system for producing ideology must be hidden and the relation of the filmic message to this system must be hidden” (28).

Dayan’s ‘The Tutor Code’ is exemplary of the way in which film theory has adapted different structural linguistic strategies in an attempt to confront the form-content problematic, and to deploy these strategies in a consideration of the relationship between film, ideology, and subjectivity. Dayan’s overview demonstrates the influence of structural semiotics in the privileging of form over content in contemporaneous aesthetic debates. Where Metz bears the influence of Saussure, Dayan reflects the influence of structural linguist Emile Benveniste, whose work was adapted and applied to film theory in the 60s. Dayan describes how “Semiology deals with film in two ways. On the one hand it studies the level of fiction, that is, the *organisation* of film content [form]. On the other hand, it studies the problem of ‘film language,’ the level of enunciation” (22, emphasis added). This “level of enunciation”

identified by Dayan is explicitly derived from Benveniste and requires further attention here.

Benveniste adapts Saussure's model of linguistics which consists of *langue* (language/system/paradigm) and *parole* (discourse/individual act of using system/syntagm) by placing particular emphasis on the role of the subject: "Language is marked so deeply by the expression of subjectivity that one might ask if it could still function and be called language if it were constructed otherwise" (Benveniste 225). It is this emphasis on the self-expressing subject that underpins the notion of "enunciation".

Film theorist Kaja Silverman offers an overview of the cinematic elaboration of Benveniste's distinction between fiction and enunciation that clarifies the allusion made by Dayan:

The level of enunciation is in effect that of production – of camera movement, editing, composition, sound-recording, sound-mix, script, etc. The level of fiction designates the narrative within which the spectator of the finished film is encouraged to "find" him or herself, and the characters with whom he or she is encouraged to identify. (46-47)

It is difficult to relate this back to the form-content-matter problematic, as there is no simple process of transposition: enunciation described for cinema as "camera movement, editing, composition, sound-recording, sound-mix, script, etc" seems to share much in common with matter and form as a combination of the tangible stuff from which the aesthetic object is wrought, and the organisation imposed on it. Fiction involves a blurring of form and content, because, while fiction is explicitly likened to "the narrative" (which implies 'story' or 'content'), implicitly the narrative, as explored already with reference to Hegel and White, is indistinguishable

from its organisation, its form. An examination of a different example of a critical deployment of Benveniste's model in film studies may help to clarify.

In 'Hitchcock, The Enunciator', Raymond Bellour demonstrates a practical application of Benveniste's linguistics to the cinema, focusing on the level of enunciation and taking Hitchcock to be the enunciator or speaking subject. Bellour provides several shot-by-shot close readings of particular scenes of *Marnie*, leading us to the conclusion that it is the formal, organisational aspect of this film that occupies him, rather than idealist notions of narrative as a pure mental concept, or the presence of thought about the storylines of Hitchcock's films. While Bellour does incorporate discussion of content (i.e. what happens in various Hitchcock films, for example, the major themes of identity, theft, sexual aggression, or, "what is pleasure?" [80, 85]) this is secondary to his analysis of how the organisational, *formal* patterning of the film text, which is complicated and enriched by Hitchcock's trademark appearances in his films, directs the audience to identify with the characters and the camera. In this sense it shares much in common with Baudry and Metz's notions of how mainstream narrative film fixes particular subject positions for the viewer, and the theory of suture applied to cinema, as explored in the previous chapter.

Following Bellour's application of Benveniste's linguistic model to cinema, we can see how the level of enunciation is remarkably similar to Bordwell and Thompson's category labelled the 'stylistic system' (including the "patterned and significant use of techniques" such as *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing and sound) where the level of fiction shares the same referent as Bordwell and

Thompson's 'narrative system' (referring to the organisation of plot and plot devices), both of which, for Bordwell and Thompson, comprise 'film form' (327). While Bellour's conclusion extends to the themes of pleasure and woman as object of desire as they recur historically (86), the body of his analysis and its insistence on the structural segmentation of the film text are symptomatic of the tendency of 70s film theory to privilege the signifier (*how* is the story told?) over the signified (what happens?). Once again, the analysis of film's relationship to ideology devolves *from* form *to* content, and not the other way around.

While superficially different, therefore, the politically modernist film theory of the 1970s shares many characteristics with the neo-formalism of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson. However, the fundamental difference between the two lies in the level of political and ideological weight given to the category of form. Indeed, as examined in the previous chapter, in the late 60s to mid-70s when politically modernist film theory was intensely formulated, there was a tendency to base radical political evaluations on the formal traits of filmmaking. The risk of this is that the political worth of formal devices could be rhetorically invested with value over the content of a given film. This is demonstrated by *Cinéthique*, which only considered those films that inscribed their constructedness into their text to be 'progressive', or 'revolutionary'.

This section has interrogated the security of the terms matter, form and content, ubiquitous to aesthetics and film studies. While a safe delineation between these categories is shown to be desirable, it is problematic and ultimately impossible.

The role of the Real in making any attempt at neat definition forms the second consideration for this chapter.

The role of the Real in the indeterminacy of form, content and matter.

If, as my above discussion indicates, ‘form’ and ‘content’ are really so intractably bound up in one another, what do the words signify? Why have two separate words if the concepts they are meant to signify so readily collapse one into the other? A useful approach to this second question is provided by the deconstructive position advocated by Derrida, who writes: “when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other, whose irruption the name announces” (*Khôra* 89). Thus when we speak of form, Derrida’s logic implies, we necessarily speak of its other – the word may point to its referent, but it is not the same thing, it is arbitrary and different; “The sign marks a place of difference” (Spivak xvi). Derrida’s work articulates the central idea of poststructuralism, that the ‘origin’ of Western metaphysics commonly understood to begin with Plato, read deconstructively, is in fact a ‘second’ ‘origin’, and that there is a preceding, pre-ontological realm, prior to the cleavage of word from referent. It is the imposition of reason that leads to the cut between word and thing, and that creates oppositions (Spivak xxviii). The aim of poststructuralism is to uncover the falsity of rational oppositions, and to expose what is excluded by the process of imposing structure. For Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, this remainder that is excluded by the process of imposing structure *allows* that structure, and also haunts it, as a “murmur” (120). It is interesting for this thesis which is concerned with borders and limits that

Foucault describes this murmur as existing beyond an edge, or a “ring”, which surrounds language:

If language exists, it is because below the level of identities and differences, there is the foundation provided by continuities, resemblances, repetitions, and natural criss-crossings. Resemblance, excluded from knowledge since the early seventeenth century, still constitutes the outer edge of language: the ring surrounding the domain of that which can be analysed, reduced to order, and known. Discourse dissipates the murmur, but without it it could not speak. (120)

In the above quote, a certain temporality can be discerned, with the seventeenth century clearly identified as a stage in philosophical thought where a different approach to language and phenomenology began, cutting the world of discourse from the more primordial world of objects it refers to.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari similarly describe a primordial substance from which the world is forged as the ‘body without organs’ in their *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Claire Colebrook writes that “The body without organs is the undifferentiated that we imagine underlies the differentiated or organised bodies of life” (xxi). Deleuze and Guattari write

Every coupling of machines, every production of a machine, every sound of a machine running, becomes unbearable to the body without organs. Beneath its organs it senses there are larvae and loathsome worms, and a God at work messing it all up or strangling it by organizing it...In order to resist organ-machines, the body without organs presents its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface as a barrier. In order to resist linked, connected, and interrupted flows, it sets up a counter flow of amorphous, undifferentiated fluid. In order to resist using words composed of articulated phonetic units, it utters only gasps and cries that are sheer unarticulated blocks of sound. (8-9)

It is important to note here that Derrida would not necessarily subscribe to the idea of the temporal precedence of disorder asserted by Foucault. Derrida repeatedly relies upon the future perfect tense (future anterior). For example, the first line of *Dissemination* reads “This (therefore) will not have been a book” (3). In insisting upon this conjugation, Derrida emphasises a disorientating arrangement of anamnesis, where the future is conceived as “a past present due to return” (*Dissemination* 190). Rather than describe Derrida’s sketching out of another order that precedes logocentrism as *pre*-ontological, *anti*- or *a*- might be better prefixes.

The notion of there being a shadowy prior or radically other realm to language and the order it attempts to exude corresponds with the Lacanian proposal that there is an unrepresentable Real beneath the symbolic order and its linguistic attempts to fix the world. While there are many points on which poststructuralism and psychoanalysis profoundly disagree, the centrality of the idea of a realm of “pure plenitude” (Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 34), a realm that persistently haunts the everyday and which shares in the ‘undifferentiated’ quality of the ‘body without organs’, suggests that in this case there is a remarkable resonance between the Lacanian approach taken by Žižek and the poststructural approach being explored here (I shall return to this point in greater detail later in this chapter and in Chapter Three).

Before I can extend an examination of particular instances of poststructural criticism and the alternative perspective it can provide on the form-content problem, some preliminary remarks need to be made to further relate the significance of poststructural thought, as exemplified above by Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, to the key aims of this thesis. It is important to recognise that the group of

thinkers identified as ‘poststructuralist’ consider signification to be a key way by which repressive systems of knowledge and meaning are established. Derrida’s project of deconstruction can be seen as a critique of Western metaphysics, “by which he means not only the Western philosophical tradition, but ‘everyday’ thought and language as well” (Johnson, Translator’s Introduction viii). Film historian Richard Maltby is more specific in his assessment of the rise of poststructuralism and its aims:

The aftermath of World War II and the postwar process of decolonisation occasioned a period of profound uncertainty and self-doubt among European intellectuals, leading them to question the master narratives of social, scientific, and cultural progress that had justified European imperialism in the name of civilisation. (*Hollywood Cinema* 529)

Such a politicisation of the poststructural project can be seen, for example, in Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In this text Kristeva imports psychoanalytic concepts and vocabulary to a discussion of semiology in which she aligns the conscious with repression and dominant ideology, and the unconscious with *jouissance* and liberation. Importantly, she links this liberation to unconscious processes of language. An important part of poststructural critique is the insistence that through the deconstruction of such dominant practices of signification, a change in social and political consciousness can be brought about (Roudiez 3). Structuralism ties language to structure and meaning, and is therefore implicitly linked to the success of rational capitalism in maintaining a repressive social regime which depends on a particular signification (construction) of reality (Roudiez 8)⁴⁶; in its interrogation of this, poststructuralism “seems to offer a way out of the closure of

⁴⁶ Recall the discussion in the previous chapter of Heath’s and MacCabe’s identification of ties between realism and rational capitalist world-view.

knowledge” (Spivak 1xxvii) by focussing on what is marginalised by the primacy of the signified, using the signifier as the tool of choice (Spivak 1xxvii).⁴⁷

In this context, a deconstructive approach could be taken to considering the Edge of the Construct films. From this perspective, the films can be seen to be interacting with the Real in multiple and sophisticated ways: while the figure of the border between reality and the supposed Real is explicitly foregrounded in key narrative moments of these films, this theme is also mirrored in the films’ formal articulations. To put it another way, these films, in both their narrative content and their form, take us to the periphery of the symbolic, the ‘ring’ of language referred to by Foucault, and confront the protagonists and viewers alike with something excessive that is murmuring beyond our abilities to articulate. To say that these films approach something on the periphery of signification *via their form and content* is obviously at odds with the poststructuralist approach. To mobilise the opposition of form and content in order to question the limits of signification seems paradoxical. On this very paradox, Derrida describes deconstruction as “a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself” (cited in Spivak xviii). To return to poststructuralism’s emphasis on the signifier, or form, poststructuralism shares a point of commonality with political modernist film theory.

If we trace the deconstructive emphasis on the potential of the signifier, we should note journal *Tel Quel* as providing a place for many of the essays that profoundly shaped literary and cultural debate in the 1960s and 1970s. *Tel Quel*

⁴⁷ Wollen observes that the notion that “once the signifier was freed from the bondage of the signified, it was certain to celebrate by doing away with its old master altogether in a fit of ultra-leftism” was both utopian and “not so far wrong” (‘The Two Avant-Gardes’ 173).

included some of the earliest pioneering work by poststructuralist thinkers and those who might not be identified as poststructuralist but who shaped and took part in the debate nevertheless. These thinkers include Derrida, Bataille, Kristeva, Barthes, Foucault and Deleuze.⁴⁸ In *Tel Quel* the poststructuralists had an arena in which to wage their war on rational capitalism using the signifier as weapon of choice. The main point of interest for this thesis is that their debate was one about a politics of the signifier, of surfaces and forms, rather than of the signified, of meaning and content. Once again, this needs to be viewed as a reaction against both the privileging of ideas over their appearances in the Platonic and Hegelian traditions, and the way in which the dominant system of signification perpetuated the capitalist system and its exploitative social conditions via a perceived naturalisation of mainstream realism in film, literature, and representation in general. Moreover, however, it was not simply a reversal of the fortunes of signifier and signified, but a fundamental questioning of the idea of idealist meaning. A new type of meaning could be found, paradoxically, in the absence of depth, in the superficiality and artifice of representational forms.⁴⁹ The repercussions of this approach for the then also emerging cinematic political modernism are not to be underestimated. The struggle against the dominant ideology of capitalist rationality was to take place not in the concept generated by the popular, mainstream narrative text, but in the superficial figuration of the marginalised, avant-garde aesthetic object. While deconstruction was in many ways about effacing

⁴⁸ See Rodowick and Harvey's *May '68 and Film Culture* for more detailed accounts of *Tel Quel* and its influence on film theory. See also French and Lack's *Tel Quel Reader* for a more general overview of the main aims of this journal and its publishing team.

⁴⁹ See Wollen's 'The Two Avant-Gardes' for an overview of the way in which this "disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified" is part of the modernist program (173).

oppositions between signifier and signified, it paradoxically used these tools in order to enact its project.

Returning to the fundamental poststructural program of asserting a former realm existing before the separation of the world in neat categories, or a profoundly a-ontological realm, the essential question of deconstruction was to interrogate the impulse toward truth, stability, and mastery. The result of “Humankind’s common desire for a stable center, and for the assurance of mastery – through knowing” results in binary oppositions that necessarily exclude that which does not comply (Spivak xi). As Rivkin and Ryan observe, this implies a decisive act of division

between what is intelligible and what is sensible or material or physical or graphical? Isn’t the ground of truth, which should have no further ground, itself derived, an effect of something more primordial? And if that is the case, what is that more primordial thing? (‘Class of 1968’ 339)

These questions resonate with the epigraph to this chapter: the “more primordial thing” is precisely the Real, the almost formless entity that lurks beneath the outer shell of conformity and discreteness. This confirms the suspicion that the Real of psychoanalysis shares much in common with the essential poststructuralist notion of a realm that is primordially preceding, or coexisting on the margins of reason.

Seizing on the words of Saussure, “the precursor of modern structuralism” (Benveniste 79), that “there are no self-identical terms in language that stand on their own; language consists of differences, not identities” (120), deconstructive theorists argue that the system of order presumed to exist in the world was not in fact self-sufficient and complete, able to stand on its own, but rather that it is subtended by a fundamental instability and deficiency that it must subdue and bury (Spivak 1viii).

The following section of this chapter will consider at greater length the precise nature

of this ‘fundamental deficiency’, and the characteristics it shares with the Lacanian Real.

Plato’s *Khôra* read deconstructively by Derrida.⁵⁰

When we think of Plato, and of the canon of Western philosophy proceeding from his body of work, we think of an epistemology and ontology grounded in neat oppositions: intelligible and sensible, being and becoming, sameness and difference, mind and body, appearance and essence, form and content, and so on (Caputo 84).

Unlike Hegel, who would seek to find a third category that reveals the ultimate truth of these opposites (Caputo 84), Derrida goes back to Plato’s *Timaeus* and finds there, in the seat of Western philosophy (indeed, in the first known Western account of the world as created by a divinity), an anomalous category that throws the very notion of a world comprised of easily navigable and tidy opposites into question. There, in Plato’s mythical account of the origin of the universe, Derrida spies a confounding, arguably nameless, radically other order of existence that resists categorisation according to the dominant view of the tradition of Western philosophy: *khôra*.

Khôra, according to Derrida, is proof of “an impure philosophical discourse” that is necessarily repressed to enable the production of the dominant reading of Plato (*‘Khôra’* 126). Derrida was not the only poststructuralist to find in Plato’s figure of

⁵⁰ I will use the italicised ‘*khôra*’ here (unless quoting) instead of the translation offered by Desmond Lee as variously ‘receptacle’ and ‘space’, following Derrida’s argument that there is no ‘mot juste’ for this concept; by definition it defies signification (*‘Khôra’* 93). This is tellingly similar to the quandary encountered when typographically representing Lacan’s Real, and noted in the Introduction to this thesis.

khôra a deep resonance with the poststructural conviction of there being an other realm of profound disorder over which order is artificially and inexactly imposed.

Kristeva declares:

We borrow the term *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus* to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition, and gives rise to a geometry. Although our theoretical description of *chora* is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the *chora*, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse – all discourse, moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the *chora* can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form...Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularisation...The *chora* is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between the real and symbolic. (*Revolution* 25-26)

Khôra for Kristeva correlates with that drive-ridden and insurmountable unconscious that always threatens to reveal the inadequacies of the repressive, symbolic conscious. The similarity between this and the discussion in the preceding chapter of the Real's omnipresence beyond the superficial completion of the ideologically constructed symbolic should be clear.

Similarly, Derrida describes *khôra* as a place “which disturbs and undermines the whole Platonic system, all the couples of opposition which constitute the Platonic system” (Derrida cited in Caputo, 18). *Khôra* thus marks “a certain auto-deconstructing tendency built right into things, [which is] as old as the hills, as ancient as Plato..., as modern and enlightened as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel”

(Caputo 74). This ‘auto-deconstructing tendency’ is arguably the very definition of deconstruction, presuming it can be given a definition. The impossibility of arriving at categorical purity in defining form and content signals the impossible kernel at the centre of the symbolic. The unrepresentable, impossible thing that lies beyond ideology haunts every word, and can be illustrated in a consideration of the words form, content and matter so often used in film studies.

As already evident, the relations between matter, form and content are extremely knotty, contradictory and shifting. The idea that this relation is troubled is not new; indeed, Derrida’s insight is that the relationship between the orders of Being and Becoming for Plato (for whom the neat demarcation of categories and easy formulation of their relation is generally assumed) is problematic.⁵¹ An understanding of this problem alluded to by Plato will lead us to the core of the problem of the difficulty in isolating form, content and matter as discrete categories.

The imprint of the world of Being, the origin of the world as we know it, is made in *khôra*, this place that draws Derrida’s attention. *Khôra* designates the space or place where Being is used as a model to create Becoming (*Timaeus* 49), and by extension, where essence is transformed into appearance. With respect to these two orders of existence, *khôra* is a third “subdivision” of the universe (*Timaeus* 48). In positing this third order of existence, Socrates’ interlocutor Timaeus acknowledges that “the argument compels us to try to describe in words a form that is difficult and

⁵¹ Plato treats the world of Becoming, in which we exist and which we perceive, with scorn as it is not fully Real. The world we perceive is “that which is always becoming but never is” (*Timaeus* 27). He opposes it to the Real world, the world of Being, which is formularised as “that which always is and never becomes” (*Timaeus* 27). The world of Becoming, as created by the divine creator, is modelled on the world of Being. The world of Being is “intelligible and unchanging” whereas the world of Becoming is the “visible and changing copy of it” (*Timaeus* 48-49).

obscure” (*Timaeus* 49). Upon reflection, however, it becomes clear that *khôra* does not simply designate an alternative to the two orders of existence, nor a straightforward conduit from the one (Being/Essence) to the other (Becoming/Appearance). As Caputo argues, *khôra* is “not so much a third kind as a no kind” (94); it is “abysmally indifferent” (95).

Khôra is a form that “is difficult and obscure”, thus defying description (Plato, *Timaeus* 49). In an identical fashion, within the field of psychoanalysis it is notoriously difficult to define the Real, given that it is, by definition, “*unassimilable*” in representation (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 55), the “impossible” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 167; Sheridan x), or, more precisely, “the opposite of the possible” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 167); “[t]he real has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of ‘raw materials’” (Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 34). The Real is “the foreclosed element” of discourse “which may be approached but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic” (Sheridan, x). The Real is opaque, resisting and defying representation, and yet is paradoxically the very entity that makes representation possible.

In its defiance of a clear definition, *khôra* has earned its reputation from commentators as an “aporetic, enigmatic, tongue-tying third thing... a great abyss (*abîme*) or void which is ‘filled’ by sensible things” (Caputo 84). *Khôra* is “non-essence, impropriety, and namelessness” (Caputo 97). *Khôra* “merits ‘not even the rank of syllable’” (Kristeva, ‘Desire in Language’ 102). Indeed, Plato’s own attempt to give an account of *khôra* is characterised by preambles and disclaimers that it is “hard to describe” and “very hard to grasp” (*Timaeus* 50, 51). For Plato, to

understand *khôra* is to employ “a sort of spurious reasoning” (*Timaeus* 52). The fact that it defies the *logos* and induces in us “a dream state” no doubt has much to do with this (*Timaeus* 52), and to some extent arguably accounts for the recurring difficulty experienced when trying to coherently formularise form, content and matter as distinct categories.

Plato begins by describing *khôra* in terms of all the things it is *not*, finally seizing on the description of it as “devoid of all character...formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility” (*Timaeus* 51). “The condition of all order,” Samuel Weber observes, “ $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$ [*khôra*] itself turns out to be quite disorderly” (‘Parallax View’, 88).

In the concluding remarks on the section devoted to *khôra*, Timaeus gestures towards certain consequences following from the difficulties involved in adequately comprehending *khôra*, this “eternal and indestructible” space “which provides a position for everything that comes to be”:

... because of this dream state we are not awake to the distinctions we have drawn and others akin to them, and fail to state the truth about the true and unsleeping reality: namely that whereas an image, the terms of whose existence are outside its control in that it is always a moving shadow of something else, needs to come into existence in something else if it is to claim some degree of reality, or else be nothing at all, an exact and true account of what is ultimately real supports the view that so long as two things are different neither will come to be on the other and so become at once both one and two. (*Timaeus* 52)

Khôra troubles the very same polarities it enables (Derrida, ‘*Khôra*’ 92).

Timaeus reasserts as a doxa of the real that “...so long as two things are different neither will come to be in the other and so become at once both one and two”

(*Timaeus* 52). The notion that not only can different entities “come to be in [one] another”, indeed that one always already is in the other, is a celebrated principle of deconstruction. Plato is a philosopher who is traditionally understood to view the world in strict oppositions, and this view is responsible for the dominant European Western philosophical tradition of binarisms. And yet even *Plato* negatively asserts the potential of the idea that form has an indestructible trace of its own unique content, and that, conversely, content has its own mode of form.

If *khôra* induces and necessitates a dream state, the conclusion of *Timaeus* strives to wake us up, to paper over the tongue-tying namelessness it seeks to invoke, to reinstate a sense of wakeful logic. However, ultimately unsuccessful, unable to adequately describe this nameless concept, and also, as Derrida’s analysis indicates, unable to quite compel us to forget this troubling elucidation. It thus serves as a remarkable model for the manner in which the distinction between those pairs of opposites at issue here – form and content, matter and spirit – is endlessly taken for granted and yet simultaneously impossible to prove.

Derrida offers the following: if *Timaeus* attempts to provide an exhaustive account of all knowledge via the consistent distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, the discourse on *khôra*

open[s], between the sensible and the intelligible, belonging neither to one nor to the other... an apparently empty space – even though it is no doubt not *emptiness*... Didn’t it name a gaping opening, an abyss or chasm? Isn’t it starting from this chasm, “in” it, that the cleavage between the sensible and the intelligible... can have place and take place? (*Khôra*’ 103)

The vocabulary of “cleavage”, “abyss”, “gaping opening” and “chasm” recalls the allusions made by the *Cahiers* editors and taken up by Heath to *something* exposing

itself in cinema via the “cracks”, “fissures” and “gaps” detectable in the ideologically complete narrative edifice. However, Derrida paradoxically names the nameless entity exposed by these gaps: *khôra*. I suggest that *khôra* is synonymous with the Real. I would also suggest that while the confrontation between the subject and the nameless thing that exists beyond discourse is the primary aim of the narrative of the Edge of the Construct films, the ineffable that is thereby evoked devolves to the films’ form.

To return to the specific question of the impossible yet necessary distinction between form and content, the most important idea to retain is that from the origins of Western philosophy persists the suggestion that the neat categories into which the world can be arranged and studied are so dangerously close as to threaten the distinction. Form and content as aesthetic categories originate as a necessary way of trying to establish knowledge of the world, and yet are impossible to locate with precision.⁵² Furthermore, in investigating the early interrogation of form and content in Western philosophy, we are drawn towards a compellingly formless void while simultaneously accepting the papering over of this void as knowledge. What began as an attempt to define the terms ‘form’, ‘matter’ and ‘content’ and how they operate in film studies with reference to film and ideology has revealed that it is this “almost formless entity” referred to variously as the Real and *khôra* which makes a distinction between form and content possible.

⁵² Recall Kristeva’s words: “Our discourse – all discourse – moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it” (*Revolution* 26).

Uncertain Silhouettes: Kant and the Unravelling of Form

Derrida's interrogation of Western philosophy extends to Immanuel Kant and his analysis (along with Samuel Weber's) of the deployment of form and content in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* reveals that the question of form (or the "shell" to invoke this chapter's epigraph) in Kant proves impossible to isolate, with important results for this thesis. While Kant is traditionally understood to define form as that part of an aesthetic object that is not its content or its purpose but rather its arrangement of parts, Weber offers a useful analysis of Kant's definition of form that reveals it to be in a similar quandary to that of Plato:

If form can be said to arise when a multiplicity of sensations are 'connected' to one another ["the agreement of the manifold with a unity"], thus resulting in a perceptual, but not conceptual, unity, such a *perceptum* can not be attributed to the object itself but rather only to how that object *appears at a certain time and place*. (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 19)

Thus, Weber contends, Kant's use of the term 'form' "is incessantly in the process of *deforming* and *transforming* itself into something quite different from what the term traditionally implies" (*Mass Mediauras* 19). Weber insists that form, for Kant, does not designate 'figure', nor is it based on "the material structure of the object" (*Mass Mediauras* 20). Rather,

what form amounts to is something like a *silhouette*, that is, the minimal trait required to individualise a perception and to distinguish it from its surroundings. If one subtracts matter and concept from the object of aesthetic judgment⁵³, what is

⁵³ Matter we subtract upon Weber's insistence, citing his own translation, that this is Kant's intent; concept, because this would appeal to a level of interest with respect to the quality of goodness which is proscribed by Kant as a measure of beauty (see Kant: "The Formal [element] in the representation of a thing, that is, the agreement of the manifold with a unity (it being undetermined what this ought to be), gives to cognition no objective purposiveness whatever" 78.).

left is that minimal spatial-temporal unity required to distinguish a *Gestalt* from an *Ungestalt*, a figure from a monstrous aggregate of elements. The essence of form thus appears to be the *delineating contour*. (*Mass Mediauras* 20)

Kant's formulation, via Weber, shares remarkable similarities with the epigraph to this chapter: the form is a "shell", a barely-perceptible husk, which serves to impose the illusion of completeness upon a "monstrous aggregate of elements" or an "almost formless spongy entity" (Žižek, 'Rhetorics of Power' 99).

Thus, following Weber, we seem to have arrived at a definition of form as 'the *delineating contour*'. However, as Weber proceeds, things are not this straightforward. Following Kant's insistence upon the singularity of the occasion of aesthetic judgment⁵⁴, Weber describes how the contour that constitutes form is "*de-lineate[d]*", undone. "Such undoing is prescribed by the *aconceptual and singular universality* that, according to Kant, defines aesthetic judgment" (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 20). Form is thus defined precariously as "contour", a contour that is ever in danger of becoming a "scrawl" as Kant attempts to elaborate it (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 21).

In the first moment of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* he argues that aesthetic judgments are 'disinterested', meaning that aesthetic judgment is free from sensations of the pleasant and concepts of the good. By extension, Kant asserts that aesthetic judgment must occupy itself with the form of the object presented⁵⁵ as opposed to

⁵⁴ "In respect of logical quantity all judgments of taste are *singular* judgments. For because I must refer the object immediately to my feeling of pleasure and pain, and that not by means of concepts, they cannot have the quantity of objective generally valid judgments" (Kant 61).

⁵⁵ Kant cites the example of the "free delineations, outlines intertwined with one another" of flowers (50, 81) and comparably the free beauty of "delineations *a la grecque*, foliage for borders or wallpapers..." certain birds and seashells as "represent[ing] nothing – no Object under a definite concept" as "free beauties" (81).

sensible content (smell, colour) that appeals to the pleasant, or indeed to any pre-existing concept of what the object should be, by which it can be judged as ‘good’ (50-51).

Kant’s attempts to cleanse form from traces of material or content, to produce some kind of glistening, pure notion of form, “tends at the same time to undercut the minimal unity required to distinguish form from mere projection” (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 22).⁵⁶ Paradoxically, the closer one tries to get to a pure, isolated definition of form, the closer one comes to destroying the idea of form, indeed, the closer one gets to its opposite, the monstrously formless. Weber’s final insistence is that

the essential function of *form* in Kant’s analysis resides in its power to demarcate the object of aesthetic judgment from its surroundings and thereby to define its internal unity in a manner that does not depend upon its conceptual content or its material substance. (*Mass Mediauras* 22)⁵⁷

This analysis of Kant’s attempt to mobilise a particular understanding of form leads Weber to Derrida’s analysis of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The frame delineates the work from the rest of the universe; the frame is, therefore, the “enabling limit of the work” (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 22). The frame, the enabler of the work, is not internal to the work, but something external to it “a *parergon*” (Weber, *Mass*

⁵⁶ Weber here refers to Kant’s own attempt to distinguish between subjective perspective and his own concept of form (*Mass Mediauras* 22): “Again, beautiful objects are to be distinguished from beautiful views of objects...the sight of the changing shapes of fire on the hearth or of a rippling brook; neither of these has beauty, but they bring with them a charm for the Imagination, because they entertain it in free play” (Kant 100).

⁵⁷Here, I feel compelled to question how Weber can use terms such as ‘conceptual content’ and ‘material substance’ after having gone to such great lengths to show how precarious the ‘fixity’ of these terms is.

Mediauras 22).⁵⁸ This, however, begs the question: is the frame to be considered part of the object of the aesthetic judgment, or something different? And, if so, does it not become a separate object, potentially subject to aesthetic judgments in isolation from the original object? Derrida too is confronted by these questions in ‘The Parergon’ (12, 20, 26). Weber attempts to resolve these questions, which Kant fails to dispel, by arguing for a degree of materiality to the frame “in order for the frame to function precisely as that *other* capable of telling us just where form stops, and hence also where it *starts*” (*Mass Mediauras* 23).

Does this not amount, therefore, to a definition of form as that which the frame delineates, a definition of form reliant upon the notion of the frame? This would surely be a meaningless tautology. For film, is the implication therefore that form denotes ‘everything that is in the frame’? Is this not the same as some definitions of ‘content’?⁵⁹ Here, however, a paradigmatic shift needs to be acknowledged, as these questions are perhaps too literal. The main problem for the frame of form, Weber argues, is that “it spreads itself *thick*, into the opacity of a materiality that does not ‘fit in’ with the essential immateriality of the aesthetic form it is called upon to delineate” (*Mass Mediauras* 24).

Referring to German definitions of the word Kant deploys to signify “the delineating contour”, ‘*Abriß*’, Weber contends that the *Abriß* “is not merely active at the outer edge of the figure but within it as well. Indeed, it can be said to *constitute*

⁵⁸ Derrida’s discussion of the hymen as a parergonic figure and its resonance with Lacan’s discussion of lamella as an index of the Real will be taken up in Chapter Five.

⁵⁹ Weber extols the urgency of these increasingly esoteric questions. Whether they know it or not, he argues, academic disciplines and the structure they adhere to “are and remain neo-Kantian”, and “those disciplines that are ...concerned with questions of aesthetic form” (disciplines to which this thesis intends to appeal) “owe much of their institutional legitimacy to the post-Kantian notion of a relatively autonomous ‘field’ of inquiry” (*Mass Mediauras* 24).

the innermost essence of any form that is defined independently of its ‘contents’” (*Mass Mediauras* 25). “This is,” Weber suggests, “why Kant in his argumentation is drawn to examples that tend to undercut the very notion of form he is trying to elaborate,” demonstrated by the already cited examples of those “free beauties” which “represent nothing” (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 25; Kant 81).

Furthering the resonance between psychoanalysis and the deconstructive approach which Weber deploys, the Real is understood ambivalently to be both a frame for and a constitutional *hole within* reality: “The field of reality rests upon the extraction of the object *a*, which nevertheless frames it” (Lacan, cited in Žižek, *Looking Awry* 94). Jacques-Alain Miller offers the following analysis:

We understand that the covert setting aside of the object as real conditions the stabilisation of reality, as a “bit of reality”. But if the object *a* is not there, how can it still frame reality?...It is precisely *because* the object *a* is extracted from the field of reality that it frames it. If I withdraw from the surface of this picture the piece I represented by a shaded square, I obtain what we can call a frame: a frame for a hole, but also a frame for the rest of the surface. Such a frame could be created by any window. Object *a* is such a surface fragment, and it is its subtraction from reality that frames it. (‘Montréal A Prémontre’ 28-29, my translation)

Similarly, of the parergon, Derrida explains that it is a detachment that is strangely difficult to detach: the parergon, as *object a*, conceals a lack within its object (‘Parergon’ 24). The lack in this context is “*produced by* and *production of* the frame” (‘Parergon’ 30). The parergon is thus a border that provokes an interrogation of delimitation itself, and of where the limits of framing lie.

In this context it is possible to see the parallel between Derrida’s and Weber’s assessments of the object analysed by Kant and the social and subjective reality of psychoanalysis. In this way, a series of metaphors results: the content of the Edge of

the Construct films thematises the border, or frame, between reality and the Real, while the films themselves as aesthetic objects have their own frame or border between one illusion of completion and a more unstable realm. Moreover, in their respective meditations upon the surety of the human form, the films interrogate the certainty of the complete embodied subject. This series of symmetries will be elaborated upon in Chapters Four and Five.

In his discussion of the limit or frame of the aesthetic object in Kant, Weber identifies the following problem: "...if a representation 'represents nothing', if it does not signify any object, how is it to be distinguished from a non-representation, from the very 'scrawled outline' that imposes itself on Kant, albeit as the negation of form?" (*Mass Mediauras* 25). Weber makes the connection between *Abriß* and the word's root – *riß* – meaning, curiously, 'rift/design'⁶⁰. Weber cites Heidegger's discussion of this term with reference to art, where he argues 'rift' in this context should be thought of not as a "'gaping hole' ...but as the trace of a struggle in which 'the conflicting parties' are inseparably bound up with one another" (*Mass Mediauras* 26). Following Heidegger's logic, Weber describes how the conflict within the rift results in a material outcome, that of 'earth' (*Mass Mediauras* 26).

Resonating with Plato's description of *khôra*, Heidegger describes the following activity occurring in the rift:

The strife that is brought into the rift and thus set back into the earth and thereby fixed in place is figure, shape, *Gestalt*. [...] What is here called figure, *Gestalt*, is always to be thought in relation to *that* placing...and emplacement...in

⁶⁰ Weber's discussion of the root of this word – '*riß*' – is pertinent here given that it means 'rift' or 'gaping hole'. It is remarkable how that which is supposed to delineate can also serve as a great abyss or void operating on the edge of the figure.

which the work consists..., insofar as it sets itself up and forth. (cited in Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 27)

To relate this to Plato's account of the *khôra*, therefore, we could say that *khôra* is the same as, or remarkably similar to, this rift where chaotic disorder is wrought into some semblance of order. The trace of disorder, however, persists. For Weber, Heidegger's notion of the rift heralds the persistence of Kant's conception of form as figure, "but this time as the repository of the trait that is no longer defined as the outer edge but as that which allows the figure qua art work to *take place*" (*Mass Mediauras* 27).

Weber traces, via Heidegger, Kant's 'aesthetic idea', understood as

A representation of the Imagination belonging to its presentation, but which occasions in itself more thought than can ever be comprehended in a definite concept, and which consequently aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded fashion...; *i.e.* by a representation more thought (which indeed belongs to the concepts of the object) is occasioned than can be grasped or made clear. (Kant 199)

Aesthetic ideas, remarks Weber, are "the effect of form in the process of becoming unhinged" (29). Once again, the simultaneous presence of both excess and lack that defies the constraints of conventional signification evoked by Plato's attempt to conceptualise *khôra* echoes throughout Weber's dissection of form in Kant. In Derrida's assessment, Kant's analytic of the beautiful "warps, constantly undoing the work of the frame" ('Parergon' 35).

As outlined above with reference to JA Miller, the simultaneous and ambivalent presence of excess and lack characterise the psychoanalytic Real and its role in allowing and undermining symbolic realities and subjectivity. What has this to do with a deconstructive reading of form in Kant? I return to the epigraph of this

chapter: "...deprived of its shell, the body is an almost formless spongy entity...Is this squishy body not the perfect figure of the Real?" (Žižek, 'Rhetorics of Power' 99). The Edge of the Construct films, in both their narrative content and their form, take us to the limit, the periphery of the symbolic. As Chapters Four and Five of this thesis explore, these films do this in many ways, but above all through the breaching of the limit of the human form – the epidermis – as evoked by Žižek. A deconstructive approach to Kant's evaluation of the aesthetic object indicates that the kernel of this idea has persisted in dominant Western metaphysics.

Form and Content – Matter and Spirit: a way to proceed

This chapter has explored the way in which philosophical attempts to define matter take recourse to another entity or a duality in the work of Plato and that of Hegel, understood variously as the substanceless ideal world of forms or spirit. Where matter is related to second versions of matter, to concepts of spirit or ideas for greater understanding, this chapter has explored how form and content are intractably bound to one another. In acknowledgement of the inextricable links existing between form and content on the one hand and matter and spirit on the other, we will proceed here from the following proposition: content can never refer to purely abstract ideas, can never be the formless conceptual matter expressed by an aesthetic object, because for an object to *express* anything necessitates form. Or, to quote from Heath, "no one has yet seen a signified without a signifier" ('Narrative Space' 397). Similarly, As Benveniste observes, "The mind does not contain empty forms, concepts without names" (45). Or even, as Hegel usefully illustrates,

A book without content is, as everyone knows, not a book with empty leaves, but one of which the content is as good as none. We shall find as the last result on closer analysis, that by content an educated mind means nothing but the presence of thought. Hence it follows that thoughts are not empty forms without affinity to their content, and that in other spheres than that of art, the truth and thoroughness of the content essentially depend on the content showing itself identical with the form. (*Logic* 210)

Thus we can say that while content can be minimally defined as ‘the presence of thought’ it is only apparent as such because of form, and only successful as such through its identity with, and through, that form.

A useful example for the argument being made in this thesis is that *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* both present the idea (in subtly different ways) that what individuals perceive as reality is in fact a constructed illusion. Or, in a particular scene in *The Truman Show*, the idea expressed is an exposition of the way in which film-based media (namely cinema and television) use editing to construct a false sense of reality. For these films to impart these ideas, or, (to borrow Hegel’s terminology) to present these thoughts, necessitates form to make these ideas apparent. Moreover, as my discussion of Hegel and White indicates, the form does not simply serve to make the content apparent, but leaves its indelible mark on the content. In the example of mainstream narrative film, the ‘indelible mark’ the form leaves on the content is arguably its organisation: linearity of space and time, and cause-effect relationships. But what of the inverse? The argument to which this thesis returns insistently is that while the mark left by the form and matter on the content has been vigorously analysed in ideological considerations of narrative film as mainstream entertainment and as art form, less consideration has been accorded to mainstream film content and how it reflects on film form and matter.

Here I seem to have arrived at an insurmountable impasse: the lines between form and content on the one hand and matter and spirit on the other are shown to be so fraught that it is impossible to talk about them at all. And yet critics can and do. As outlined in the first section of this chapter, across a range of disciplines, and in film studies in particular, theorists and critics deny the difference between form and content only to deploy these categories, often under different terms. Indeed, in demonstrating just how complicated the relation between form and content is, Derrida, Kant, Hegel and Plato imply through deployment that ‘form’ and ‘content’ are not the same things at all but rather two inextricable sides of the same object. It is here that consideration of self-reflexivity may arrive as an answer.

Readers are reminded of the way in which politically modernist film theory celebrates self-reflexive films, with the ideal that these films would somehow have the result of inspiring self-reflection in audiences. If a film explores and reflects upon its own conditions of existence, the analogy suggests, so will its audience, and social change will be the inevitable result. If film texts deconstruct the dominant signifiatory system so conducive to the capitalist system, the argument goes, the suppressed drives and energies of the world in its all its chaotic but liberatory untidiness will be released. Further understanding of (self-) reflection is therefore required here.

Philosopher and literary theorist Rodolphe Gasché identifies reflection as a mode of thought “as old as philosophy itself” (16). Indeed, in *The Republic*, Plato distinguishes between two types of narrative discourse: one in which “the poet is speaking in his own person, and does not attempt to persuade us to think that the

speaker is anyone but himself” (iii 393). The other form of narrative discourse Plato identifies is that where the poet imitates that which he or she represents, thus reducing the difference between him or herself and the object they seek to represent. For example, a poet might attempt to replicate

the noises of thunder and wind and hail, and of axles and wheels, the notes of trumpets, pipes, flutes, and every possible instrument, the barking of dogs, the baaing of sheep, and twittering of birds. And so this style of expression will depend largely on representation by sound and gesture, and narrative will play but a small part. (iii 397)

Following this passage, Socrates informs Adeimantus that such mimetic narrative is to be excluded from the ideal society.⁶¹ The implication here is that the only ‘good’ narration (form) is a self-reflexive one, one that does not try to convince the audience that it is the same thing as its content, one that maintains the difference between itself and the object it seeks to represent. In short, a worthy narration is one that does not pretend to be other than it is, one that consistently reminds the audience that it is a mode of representation rather than a reality: a self-reflexive narrational mode.

The correspondence of this ‘ancient quarrel’ (Weber, *Mass Mediauras* 15) to the debate about illusionism in film in the 1960s and 1970s is remarkable. Plato surely would have applauded Leblanc and his contemporaries’ demands for a mode of films “which say everything about themselves” (18). As explored in the previous chapter, criticisms of the approach fostered in 1960s and 1970s film theory tended to highlight that film theory of this vintage did not function as self-aware: therefore, while it may have advocated a self-reflexive film practice, it neglected to reflect on

⁶¹ As Weber notes, this condemnation is not without contradiction, given that when reading *The Republic* it is easy to forget who is *really* speaking: “the very same arguments that proscribe mimetic discourse also practise it” (*Mass Mediauras* 15).

itself as a process of judgment and the potential impact it may have had on not only modes of filmmaking but modes of spectatorship.

As Derrida observes, the introductory conversation of *Timaeus* deploys *mise en abîme*, understood as that formal device where the text arranges itself around a potentially infinite set of reflections and replications of itself within itself ('*Khôra*' 104-111). *Timaeus* is characterised by multiple projections of itself within the body of the text; boundless echoes fold back on chains of reported speech in its attempt to present the unrepresentable: *khôra*. As Derrida observes, the *Timaeus* is therefore itself structured as a boundless receptacle, containing in turn many "narrative receptacles" ('*Khôra*' 117), a chain of reported myths and histories containing myths and histories: "the very structure of which (containing receptacles) mirrors *khôra* itself, which contains all" (Caputo 87).

...the *khôra* is an "abyss," a void of empty space; it is also an infinite play of reflections in which the paradigms produce their images, simply "reflecting" sensible things like a mirror that is not altered by the images it reflects. The discussion in the *Timaeus* of the bottomless abyss of the *khôra* is staged in the text by a reflection without limit, without bottom or ground, of "khoral" images, by a play of reflections that induces in us, the readers of Plato, a sense of dizziness and vertigo as before an abyss. (Caputo 86)

Thus the form of Plato's *Timaeus* corresponds to that which it attempts to describe: in this way Derrida argues that *Timaeus* is a self-reflexive work. The significance of this will be returned to presently.

Gasché identifies reflection as that mode of thought that gained central importance with Descartes (16). Tracing through Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and

Rousseau, toward Hegel, Gasché designates reflection as a key constitutive element of modern philosophy (17-18). Gasché defines reflection as significant of

...the turning away from any straightforward consideration of objects and from the immediacy of such an experience toward a consideration of the very experience in which objects are given. (13)

Furthermore,

with such a bending back upon the modalities of object perception, reflection shows itself to mean primarily self-reflection, self-relation, self-mirroring. By lifting the ego out of its immediate entanglement in the world by thematising the subject of thought itself, Descartes establishes the apodictic certainty of self as a result of the clarity and distinctness with which it perceives itself. Through self-reflection – the ego, the subject – is put on its own feet, set free from all unmediated relation to being. In giving priority to the human being's determination as a thinking being, self-reflection marks the human being's rise to the rank of a subject. It makes the human being a subjectivity that has its centre in itself, a self-consciousness certain of itself. This is the first epoch-making achievement of the concept of reflection, and it characterises modern metaphysics as a metaphysics of subjectivity. (13-14)

Echoing Hegel's 'Logic of Essence', Gasché outlines how, in thinking about itself, philosophy attempts to come to its own essence (15). A similar logic can be applied to a discussion of art. Used in conjunction with Plato's account of mimetic narration, we could also apply the same to other aesthetic objects. For example, a film that thinks about itself, its own processes, could be said to somehow attempt to approach its own 'essence'. Gasché seems to confirm this when he writes that "...all reflexive analyses are analyses of the essential nature of things themselves..." (15). Here we see the establishment of a parallel between self-reflexivity with respect to subjectivity, and the idea of self-reflexive aesthetic objects.

While Descartes may have inaugurated reflection as a founding attitude of modern philosophy, The German Idealists debated this mode of thinking (or, reflected on reflection) to qualify Descartes' early formulation. Where Kant proposed a model of reflection as a process of dualisms, as "...the act by which the ego, after having stripped away its natural immediacy and returned into itself, becomes conscious of its subjectivity in relation to counterposited objectivity, and distinguishes itself from it" (Gasché 25), Hegel suggested a dialectical model. Hegel argued against Kant that "this original synthetic unity must be conceived, not as produced out of opposites, but as a truly necessary, absolute, original identity of opposites" (Hegel cited in Gasché, 28). In this way, the theory of reflection comes to relate to the categories of form, content and matter: they are different, in many ways opposing, and yet the way in which they mutually define one another suggests some former and eventual unity.

However, Hegel did not have one strict way of conceiving of reflection. Gasché identifies three modes of reflection in Hegel: isolated reflection (35-36), philosophical reflection (36-38) and speculative or absolute reflection (38-50). Where isolated reflection posits opposites as irreconcilable, philosophical reflection implies a totality from which these opposites originate (Gasché 37). Remarkably, Gasché describes how this totality is "abyssal...that is to say, no concept at all" (38). Here we see the resonance between Plato's *khôra* as a stultifying no-place, Kant's form that teeters on the brink of an abyssal rift, the poststructural thesis of an originary lawlessness or radically other realm, the psychoanalytic realm of the Real, and Hegel's totality. Speculative or absolute reflection is where reflection self-destructs: "The highest maturity, the highest stage, which anything can attain is that in which its

downfall begins” (Hegel cited in Gasché, 38). In achieving Reason or absolute identity, all differences are effaced (Gasché 41). However, there is something decidedly utopian in this thinking.

As noted above, reflection formed the founding attitude of modern metaphysics. Accordingly, continuing his interrogation of Western metaphysics, Derrida conceives of reflection differently. Indeed, for Gasché, reflection and reflexivity do not ‘fit’ in Derrida’s work: “Derrida’s philosophy, rather than being a philosophy of reflection, is engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection’s scintillating play” (7). For Derrida, reflexivity does not guarantee greater clarity. On the topic of self-reflexivity, he asks

What happens when acts or performances (discourse or writing, analysis or description, etc.) are part of the objects they designate? When they can be given as examples of precisely that of which they speak or write? Certainly, one does not gain an auto-reflective transparency, on the contrary. (*The Post Card* 391)

In light of the discussion carried out in this chapter, knowing that *khôra* and the Real disturb the categories of form, content and matter does not solve the problem. I cannot proceed in writing this thesis with a renewed sense of order, clarity, and purpose, somehow closer to the ‘essence’ of the Edge of the Construct film cycle. As Derrida observes of Kant’s troubled use of the term ‘parergon’, there is a sense that in striving for the noncontradiction characteristic of Western metaphysics that a violence of sorts is committed: “a *logical* frame has been transposed and forced upon a *nonlogical* structure” (‘Parergon’ 30).

Accordingly, this thesis will proceed with, at least, an understanding of the shortcomings of confident categorisation. Consequently, this thesis will be better equipped to attend to the undoing of form, content and matter, and it is possible to examine the Edge of the Construct films from this perspective. Such a perspective is more appropriate to the films' thematising of the Real that lurks beyond the borders of symbolically circumscribed reality, a place where neat oppositions dissolve. Indeed, these films make protagonists and spectators alike confront the excessive remainder which results when an illogical world is squeezed into a frame of logic.

I return once more to the epigraph of this chapter, and its evocation of the Real as something unspeakable beneath the dermis, the shell, the frame of the human form. Conceived by Žižek as the pliant human substance bereft of its husk, the Real is 'almost formless'. This 'almost formless' matter is surely also the remainder that results when a constrictive frame of order is imposed upon a disorderly world. For Georges Bataille, the formless or *informe* is not so much a stable quality but an operation which performs "a declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder" (Bataille 'Formless' 51-5; Bois 18). The formless destabilises the old metaphysical opposition of form and content. As the deconstructive tradition reminds us, such a nameless disorder beleaguers all attempts to install order and structure, from Plato, to Hegel, to Kant, and our everyday utterances.

The Edge of the Construct films contemplate the periphery of the symbolic in a series of abîmes: the figure of the frame or the limit, and what lies beyond, can be seen infinitely reflected in the films. Firstly, as Chapter One explored, these films prompt a reconsideration of the dominant period of theorising about film and

ideology, and this period saw mainstream cinema as a limit that contributed to containing viewers in a particular ideology. Secondly, the content of the Edge of the Construct films thematise the border, or frame, between reality and the Real. Thirdly, the films themselves as aesthetic objects have their own frame or border between an illusion of completion and a more unstable realm. Lastly, the films signal the presence of the Real in their emphasis on the human form, and its disorder and incompleteness. The last three of these abîmes will be considered in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

Before attending to the Edge of the Construct films directly, in the next chapter I will consider the work of Žižek in order to better understand the significance of Lacan's Real in his project. This will be done with a view to qualifying his claim that Lacanians are missing from film theory, and to establish how, for Žižek, the Real may be signalled by mainstream narrative film. In the next chapter I will also pursue further the comparison I am drawing between psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, and will consider some of the debates that have existed between these two approaches.

Chapter Three

Žižek Interrogates the Real.

When Žižek claims that none of the film theorists of the 60s and 70s labelled as psychoanalytic film theorists by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll “effectively accepts Lacan as his or her ultimate background” (*Fright of Real Tears* 2), he is being slightly inaccurate. While it is true that the psychoanalytic film theory advanced in *Screen* was more Freudian than Lacanian, it would be incorrect to say that Lacan was effectively “missing” from 60s and 70s film theory.⁶² What Žižek is no doubt referring to is not the total absence of Lacan, but, rather, an absence of the version of Lacan to which he is drawn. To be clear, while the field of film theory of the 60s and 70s labelled as ‘psychoanalytic’ concentrated on the earlier Lacan, the Lacan of the signifier, Žižek seeks to emphasise the later Lacan, the Lacan of the Real. The Real is “the most under-represented of the Lacanian categories” in film studies (Wieczorek viii), and this is as much the result of Lacan’s own inability to clearly define the category (due to its inherent indefiniteness) as that of the work of film theorists who sought to adapt his work to the analysis of cinema (Wieczorek viii). As identified earlier in this thesis, the absence of an emphasis on the Lacanian order of the Real in 60s and 70s film theory may be accounted for by the fact that Lacan himself did not enter his second phase until the 60s.

⁶² Philip Rosen credits Colin MacCabe with “repeatedly introduc[ing] *Screen*’s version of Lacan to its readers” (*Screen and the Marxist Project* 284). However, in the same article Rosen says that in the triad of Marxism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, that Marxism is the basis for the other two approaches (*Screen and the Marxist Project* 273). He also notes that “there has been relatively little examination of Althusser’s theory of ideology...in film journals” (*Screen and the Marxist Project* 275), and that it is through Althusser that Lacan’s work is largely commended to historical materialism (*Screen and the Marxist Project* 279). *Screen* also translated and published sections of Metz’s Lacanian work.

The first chapter of this thesis traced two divergent trends within the politically modernist film theory of the 60s and 70s. While it is widely recognised that the film theory of the 70s and its complex of psychoanalytic, semiotic, Althusserian and structuralist influences reached an impasse, it was not simply one impasse that resulted, but many. A simultaneously reductive and excessive deployment of structuralist Marxist and psychoanalytic principles in film theory caused many to question the very validity of these positions in film studies, or at least to demand a reassessment of the principles that Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches seemed to take for granted. I argued tacitly in the first chapter that the Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches were never ultimately reconciled within political modernism.

On the one hand there was the zealous Marxist-Leninist position exemplified by *Cinéthique*, where the Real of cinema was conceived of in true dialectical materialist fashion as the material conditions of production. While many of the contributions to *Cinéthique* contained allusions to Althusser's mobilisation of psychoanalytic theory (for example Baudry's 'Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus'), Žižek claims that none of these examples explored psychoanalysis beyond allusion.

On the other hand, the position exemplified by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and certain contributions to *Screen* (particularly the work of Heath and MacCabe) illustrated a move away from the overtly Marxist terms of *Cinéthique*, while never couching itself in an in-depth consideration of Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to the position presented by *Cahiers* and *Screen*, the Real in cinema could be found in a

film's formal "gaps" and "fissures", but the nature of this Real was not explored in any sustained manner. While the dialectical materialist version of the Real misses the point of the Real as something beyond ideology, the Real located in films' "cracks" by the more psychoanalytically-inclined approach to film and ideology does not provide a substantial framework for considering what the Real is, and how it relates to film and ideology. It is from this more nebulous account of the Real in psychoanalytic film studies that I will proceed in this chapter.

Psychoanalytic approaches to cinema have been critiqued by David Bordwell and others in the anthology *Post-Theory*, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. However, criticism of the use of psychoanalysis in film studies also came from several of the board members of *Screen*. While acknowledging the immense contribution of psychoanalysis to film studies, several of the *Screen* editorial board members expressed their reservations about the use of psychoanalysis as one of the journal's informing principles. Specifically, Edward Buscombe, Christine Gledhill, Alan Lovell and Christopher Williams were concerned about three things:

the unproblematic acceptance of psychoanalysis implicit in the way it has been presented in *Screen*; the intelligibility of the various expositions and applications of it; and the validity of the attempts made to apply it directly to the cinema. (35)

Buscombe *et al* express apprehension at the way in which psychoanalysis is deployed as a methodology with no reflection or interrogation of the concepts it relies upon (42, 46). To this, following Žižek, I would add that the version of psychoanalysis deployed was not grounded in primary examinations of the full range of the Lacanian principles it utilised. Furthermore, Buscombe *et al* question the passive and decidedly

masculine model of the audience implied by psychoanalytically informed film theory (namely that elaborated by Metz and Mulvey) (43, 45).⁶³

In the 80s, the feminist strand of film theory also produced much fruitful criticism of the shortcomings of psychoanalytic film theory as deployed in the 70s. This feminist perspective acknowledged the productive elements of psychoanalytically-underpinned film theory and campaigned for possibilities of reconfiguration that would potentially lift the stalemate. Writing in this feminist context, Joan Copjec echoes the concerns of Buscombe *et al* as expressed above. Targeting the psychoanalytically subtended apparatus theory and its ‘tyranny of the visible’ (60) and the associated and “truly abhorrent” gaze theory, Copjec demands: “Doesn’t this theory of the cinematic institution provide an imprisonment, rather than a release”, a release it ostensibly works to bring about (61)? Copjec expresses the desire for a more distanced and critical of the use of psychoanalytic concepts in film theory. Rather than discuss the nature of the gaze, for example, Copjec suggests a better question would be “if there is a gaze” to begin with (61). In this context, Copjec implicitly calls for a return to the source of psychoanalytic approaches to film studies, erstwhile absent from the field of film studies labelled “psychoanalytic”.⁶⁴

Also writing about the implications of psychoanalytically-inflected apparatus theory for feminism, Doane criticises its “pessimism” and echoes Copjec’s attribution of the impasse in this theory to its “totalising nature” which “leaves little room for

⁶³ To be fair, Mulvey herself revisited and redressed her contribution to apparatus theory in ‘Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946)’.

⁶⁴ Significantly, Žižek identifies Copjec with himself (and some of his Slovene colleagues) as the only two cinema theorists he can name who overtly identify themselves as Lacanian (*Fright of Real Tears* 2).

resistance or for the elaboration of an alternative filmmaking practice which would not be defined only negatively, as a counter-cinema” (‘Remembering Women’ 47). However, Doane identifies a further problem with the use of psychoanalytic film theory in general, beyond its specific problems for feminism. Doane rearticulates and qualifies the earlier questioning of psychoanalysis articulated by Buscombe *et al*:

...before fully accepting the notion of a theoretical impasse, it might be helpful to interrogate the idea of theory itself. What is it that theory hopes to accomplish? What is its function? And, more specifically, what is the role of theory and its relation to its object in psychoanalysis? Apparatus theory rests on the assumption that what psychoanalysis lends to film theory is a kind of map, or even a cognitive machine. Psychoanalysis is the science of the unconscious; the cinema clearly appeals to the unconscious; therefore, psychoanalysis must be able to give us the laws of its discursive formulation. The map can be simply laid over the new terrain. The desire of the analyst, which would require the replacement of the notion of the cognitive machine by that of the encounter, is rarely taken into account.⁶⁵ Yet, psychoanalysis itself proposes the fragility of any theoretical construct, its affinity with paranoia and delirium, and hence the problematic status of knowledge and of he who purports to know. In other words, psychoanalysis must be contaminated by its own theorised and simultaneously untheorisable object – the unconscious. (‘Remembering Women’ 55-56)⁶⁶

The pertinence of Doane’s critique to this thesis is twofold: first, she identifies the reluctance of proponents of psychoanalytic film theory, who wrote from a presumed position of detachment and authority, to acknowledge their own subjective position. Second, and more important, she implies that such theory is not necessarily invalid, but could be more productive if its practitioners became more *self-reflective*, if they

⁶⁵ Although Metz meditates on this explicitly in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*.

⁶⁶ Of course, the use of psychoanalytic terms (“the unconscious”, “he who purports to know” etc.) to criticise the application of psychoanalysis only reinforces the totalising gesture of psychoanalytic theory.

reflected on their role as viewers and also the way in which their theorisation could potentially shape the viewing practices of others.

Rodowick similarly identifies an absence of self-reflexivity as a source of the impasse for political modernist film theory in general:

...in describing the relation between theory and ideology as a problem of form and identification, political modernism *failed to recognise itself as a discursive practice that was completely transforming how we think about and understand both Hollywood and alternative cinemas*. (xxvii, emphasis added)

In other words,

While attempting to theorise the subjective relation in its formal identity with the aesthetic text, the discourse of political modernism blinded itself to its power as a specific discursive formation. Even though it enabled a new conception of aesthetic practice, and transformed fundamentally the way films were discussed, analysed, understood, and taught, the discourse of political modernism was unable to assess adequately the power of its own critical theory, its role as an oppositional practice, and its transformations of the sphere of aesthetic consumption. (Rodowick 290)

While political modernism created new ways of conceptualising spectatorship and the functioning of ideology in film and inversely, the functioning of film in ideology, it also displayed an inability to acknowledge its own role in affecting viewing practices.

Further to this perceived lack of self-reflexivity, Doane contends that psychoanalytic film theory is “narcissistic”, striving to see the world in the model of its own principles (‘Remembering Women’ 56). Indeed, citing Samuel Weber, Doane argues that psychoanalytic theory “betrays” the principle of speculation in its denial of self-reflection:

...the incapacity to admit anything irreducibly alien, to leave any residue unexplained – all this indicates the struggle of the ego to

establish and to maintain an identity that is all the more precarious and vulnerable to the extent that it depends on what it must exclude. In short, speculative, systematic thinking draws its force from the effort of the ego to appropriate an exteriority of which, as Freud will later put it, it is the only “organised part” .(Weber cited in Doane, ‘Remembering Women’ 56)

Thus the failure of the theorist to see him or herself as in any way implicated in the object of theorisation becomes a central problem for the practice of psychoanalytic film theory. In short, the desire to assume an exteriority to the object of theory is perceived as problematic. Further implied by Doane’s criticism are the lurking dreams, fantasies and desires of film theory and film theorists themselves (‘Remembering Women’ 58). Thus Doane argues that theory be reconfigured to acknowledge that theory itself becomes destabilised by the object it seeks to analyse.

Elizabeth Cowie’s analysis of the clinical psychoanalytic concept of fantasy in *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1943) and *The Reckless Moment* (Max Ophuls, 1949) exemplifies a reconfiguration of psychoanalysis in film theory. Cowie implies the possibility of mature, self-conscious modes of film-going where earlier psychoanalytic film criticism emphasised a passive, half-asleep spectator (71-72). By extension, the possibility for a negotiating, knowing spectator is emphasised in place of a docile, impressionable viewer. Cowie’s work exemplifies a return to primary sources of psychoanalysis, in this case Freud’s concept of fantasy. While this is commendable, in the context of this thesis, Cowie’s work represents the way in which an analysis of Lacan’s Real as a concept in film studies was yet to come.

So far the absence of self-reflexivity and an unquestioning deployment of psychoanalytically inflected principles as analytical tools have been examined as reasons for the impasse reached by 70s film theory. Rodowick offers further,

different reasons this, contending that another key source of the impasse was its strict adherence to a rhetoric of binaries. Resonating with the earlier quote from Weber discussing the ‘narcissistic’ nature of psychoanalytic theory, Rodowick writes:

In creating two broad regimes of discourse (realism and modernism, ideological and theoretical practice) opposed to each other and thus complete in themselves, political modernism could not produce critical concepts sensitive to nuances of form or meaning. (xxvi)

Thus, as demonstrated by Rodowick, the logic of political modernism succumbed to the danger faced by all binaries, that is, of “exclud[ing] any alternative not accounted for by the dualism itself” (xxvii). This binary “seemed to foreclose any interest in popular cinema as irredeemably compromised by the “dominant ideology” in content and in form” (xxiii).

Finally, Rodowick cites “an undue emphasis on form and identification” as key reasons for the deadlock reached in 70s film theory, whereby content assumed a secondary or irrelevant role in the analysis of the relation between film and ideology (xviii). However, in addition to the undermining of narrative content, implicit in Rodowick’s quote is the fact that the category of the subject (via processes of identification) became the key to analysing a film’s ideological operations (Rosen, ‘*Screen and the Marxist Project*’ 281), rather than, for example, the Lacanian Real, which was largely left under-explored.

Rodowick traces the advent of postmodern theory to the 80s and 90s and cites it as a welcome change for its embrace of the popular “as an area of serious theoretical concern” (xxiv). However, as recounted earlier, Rodowick argues that postmodernism did not mark a complete epistemological shift from political

modernism, identifying the decentred subject as a shared concern of postmodernism and the politically modernist thought of the 70s.

Enter Slavoj Žižek. Žižek's work marks a response to the fundamental criticisms of psychoanalysis posed above: his work is characterised by its acknowledgement of the complexity and value of the content of the popular (as well as its form), in addition to and as a vehicle for explorations of psychoanalytically underpinned conceptions of subjectivity and ideology. Žižek claims not to be "interested in direct content analysis, but the kind of purely formal changes in how we relate to the physicality of the film and the shifts in notions of subjectivity" (Lovink). However, his later discussions of the content of *The Matrix* ('The Matrix'; 'Reloaded Revolutions'), *The Truman Show* (*Welcome*), and the films of Krzysztof Kieslowski (*Fright of Real Tears*), to name but a few, show that this representation of his work is not entirely accurate.

Moreover, Žižek's work habitually performs the self-reflection identified as being largely absent from 70s film theory. However, of most importance to this thesis, Žižek's work distinguishes itself in its clear and consistent desire to focus on the later Lacan, the Lacan of the Real, which is probably the reason why he claims there is an absence of rigorously Lacanian theory in film studies. As Elizabeth and Edmond Wright observe, it is through the centrality of Lacan's concept of the Real "that Žižek has brought psychoanalysis to bear on fields traditionally kept apart" (2). This fundamental aspect of Žižek's work is of paramount importance in this thesis, as it is Žižek's engagement with the Lacanian Real that represents the most cogent account of the Real in contemporary theory. I argue that it is the Lacanian Real that is

invoked by the Edge of the Construct films, a more detailed consideration of which will proceed in chapters Four and Five.

Žižek invokes the analysis of the relation between film and ideology in a psychoanalytically inflected Marxist context characteristic of political modernism. However, he synthesises the two in a move not successfully executed by political modernists, as Chapter One of this thesis explores. Furthermore, while his work is frequently described as dogmatically Lacanian⁶⁷, Žižek habitually and directly addresses the limitations of the received versions of the psychoanalytic tools he uses. Žižek's work proceeds in a self-conscious way, frequently testing and elaborating upon the assumptions of the basic theoretical tools he deploys. Moreover, he uses popular culture as a way of revaluing theory, arguing that such a juxtaposition of popular culture and theory "renders visible aspects that would otherwise remain unnoticed" (*Looking Awry* 3). Except for the Lacanian category of the Real, many of Žižek's key assumptions are common to the discourse of political modernism, namely the centrality of a conception of subject formation in elaborating a theory of ideology. As Bran Nicol observes,

where cultural studies tends to use the insights of theory to support its readings of contemporary culture...Žižek audaciously turns this relationship around, so that philosophy, psychoanalysis and political theory are interrogated by examples from art and culture. (141)⁶⁸

Given that subjectivity formed a central issue for 70s film theory, it is imperative to acknowledge that "Žižek's fundamental aim [is] to present an accurate version of the

⁶⁷ See, for example, Harpham 460-461.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Žižek's consideration of Disney's *The Land Before Time* as an example of his argument that Hollywood product contains more truth than most elaborate theories, "...at least Hollywood distills the actual ideological message out of the pseudo-sophisticated jargon" (*Welcome* 64-66, 66).

complex constitution of the (post) modern subject” (Nicol 141). Therefore it is crucial to illustrate the self-reflexive nature of Žižek’s work with an example that both interrogates and deploys the same theories of subject formation central to political modernism. Concluding *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Žižek provides the following reinterpretation of the received notion of a psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity in film theory:

The point of Freud’s “Copernican turn” is *not* to demonstrate that the subject is ultimately a puppet in the hands of unknown forces that escape his grasp (unconscious drives, etc.). It does not improve things to exchange this naïve, naturalist notion of the unconscious for a more sophisticated notion of the unconscious as “discourse of the great Other” that makes the subject the place where language itself speaks, i.e., an agency subjected to decentred signifying mechanisms. (169)

The implied critique of political modernism, where the subject is conceived of as little more than a function (or, “puppet”) of the internal formal dynamics of the text, should already be evident. As such, Žižek’s work can be viewed as a critical revision of and extension upon political modernism. Žižek continues:

Despite some Lacanian propositions that echo this structuralist notion, this sort of “decentring” does not capture the objective of Lacan’s “return to Freud.” According to Lacan, Freud is far from proposing an image of man as victim of “irrational” drives...; he assumes without restraint the fundamental gesture of the Enlightenment: a refusal of the external authority of tradition and a reduction of the subject to an empty, formal point of negative self-relation. The problem is that, by “circulating around itself,” as its own sun, this autonomous subject encounters in itself something “more than itself,” a strange body in its very centre. This is what Lacan’s neologism *extimité* aims at, the designation of a stranger in the midst of my intimacy. Precisely by “circulating only around itself,” the traumatic subject circulates around something that is “in itself more than itself,” the traumatic kernel of enjoyment that Lacan refers to by the German *das Ding*. The subject is perhaps nothing but a name for this circular movement, for this distance toward the Thing which

is “too hot” to be approached closely. It is because of this Thing that the subject resists universalisation, that it cannot be reduced to a place – even if it is an empty place – in the symbolic order. (*Looking Awry* 169)

Thus Žižek interrogates the political modernist conception of the subject as a construction of the formal qualities of the film text and the apparatus that make it visible; more generally, Žižek questions the postmodernist contention that the subject is no more than a by-product of language or of a particular structure.⁶⁹

Against these restrictive convictions regarding the nature of subjectivity, Žižek offers an alternative view of subjectivity for film theory. Evident in the above quote, for example, is the notion of a fragment of the Real forming “a strange body” at the core of the subject. According to Žižek,

we are witnessing, in postmodernity, a shift in the notion of subjectivity. This is most visible in cinema, which [Žižek] has described as his equivalent of Freud’s ‘royal road’ to the unconscious, for in ‘ordinary commercial films...you can detect what goes on at the profoundest, most radical level of our identities and how we experience ourselves’. (Nicol 142, internal citation from Žižek in Lovink)

Žižek’s project is therefore a critique of a particular interpretation of the postmodern theory of the subject which tends to dismiss the concept of a coherent, transcendent subject in favour of an empty subjectivity that consists only of superficial appropriations. This project is articulated most clearly when Žižek writes:

One of the commonplaces of today’s theory is that transcendental subjectivity is passé: if one is to assert again the notion of the subject, one has to displace it with regard to the standard Cartesian *cogito*; that is, the new subject has to be a

⁶⁹ The idea that Žižek stages a critique of postmodernism needs to be qualified with the reminder that Žižek refers to something very specific when he uses the term ‘postmodernism’. His concern does lie within the field of postmodernism, but it involves a more specific domain exemplified the work on contingent postmodern subjectivity exemplified by Judith Butler.

divided, finite subject, a subject ‘thrown’ into a non-transparent, contingent life-world. (‘Burning the Bridges’ viii)

Žižek interrogates the quandary of certain postmodern accounts of subjectivity whereby

The inherent obverse of [the injunction to] ‘Be your true self!’ is therefore the injunction to cultivate permanent refashioning, in accordance with the postmodern postulate of the subject’s indefinite plasticity...in short, extreme individualisation reverts to its opposite, leading to the ultimate identity crisis: subjects experience themselves as radically unsure, with no ‘proper face’, changing from one imposed mask to another, since what is behind that mask is ultimately *nothing*, a horrifying void they are frantically trying to fill in with their compulsive activity... Here we can see how extreme individualisation ...tends to overlap with its opposite, with the uncanny, anxiety-provoking feeling of the loss of one’s identity. (*Ticklish Subject* 373)

This quote relates directly to the uncertain subjectivities we are presented with in the Edge of the Construct films, and will be returned to in the final chapter of this thesis.

As an alternative to this received notion of the postmodern formulation of subjectivity, Žižek maintains that “the truly traumatic core of the modern subject”, a powerful extradiscursive force, forms and continues to motivate the subject (‘Burning the Bridges’ ix). Žižek’s project, therefore, among other things, consists of arguing that the notion of the subject’s “indefinite plasticity” is in fact “an illusion” (Nicol, 142). Furthermore, it is an illusion that “effectively plays into the hands of global capitalism and its rhetoric about our freedom to choose different identities and ways of life through consumption” (Nicol, 142).

In order to understand Žižek’s account of subjectivity, it is necessary to consider how, for Žižek, the concepts of Lacan’s Real and ideology relate to

subjectivity. It is difficult to demarcate Žižek's account of subjectivity from his account of ideology because, following Althusser, it is ideology that forms subjects, and, by implication, it is subjects who constitute ideology. For Žižek therefore, the concepts of subject formation and ideology are entangled to the extent that it would be impossible and obscuring to attempt to unpack and explore them independently. For this reason, an understanding of Žižek's preference for what is referred to as Lacan's 'second phase' or 'later Lacan', which occurred in the 1960s, is crucial. This 'second phase' of Lacan's work is identified as a change in focus for Lacan, as he began to place emphasis on questions of the relationship between the Real and both the imaginary and the symbolic, as opposed to questions concerning the relations between the symbolic and the imaginary (Reinhard, 159-161; Nicol, 142). As Edmond Wright observes,

The Real is one of Lacan's three 'Orders,' the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, a tripartite map of the relations existing among the body (and, indeed nature generally), the language that fashions a body into a socialised being, and the efforts of fantasy to assuage the structurally inescapable inadequacies of that fashioning. (5)

As the previous chapter examined, the Real shares much with the poststructuralist assertion of there being another realm that defies the fixity of language; accordingly, while poststructuralism and psychoanalysis traditionally distance themselves from one another, Žižek's emphasis on the Real signals that these two fields have something in common. Also implied by Wright is the centrality of the body as a site where the conflicting forces of the symbolic and the Real struggle. The significance of this has been signalled in Chapter Two, and will be taken up in Chapter Five

One of the key tenets of this thesis is that, through the Real, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis can be seen to examine the same core dynamic, and that through this they share much with the grotesque, the abject, and the uncanny. To avoid being reductive, it is worth acknowledging some of the basic disagreements Žižek has with deconstructionism, and aspects of Lacan that deconstructionists reject. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer an in-depth account of the contradictions between psychoanalysis and deconstruction; however, some of their variances are precisely around questions of truth which impinge upon the Real, or the crack between the object and its referent, and therefore warrant brief attention here.

Both Žižek's version of Lacan and Derrida's deconstruction proceed from the primary conviction that the act of naming – signification – opens a crack between the word and the thing to which it refers. Derrida tells us that “when a name comes, it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other, whose irruption the name announces” (*Khôra* 89). Thus the word may point to its referent, but it is not the same thing; the word is arbitrary and different to the thing, and ultimately inadequate. In Spivak's words, “The sign marks a place of difference” (xvi).

Žižek agrees with Derrida that there is a gap between the word and the thing, a failure of identity, and calls the space between the two the Real. In Žižek's view, however, this is one way in which the two discourses differ. He explains:

Perhaps therein resides the abyss that forever separates the Real of an antagonism from Derrida's *différence*: *difference* points towards the constant and constitutive deferral of impossible self-identify; whereas, in Lacan, what the movement of symbolic deferral-substitution forever fails to attain is not the identity but the Real of an antagonism. (*Eclipse of Meaning* 211)

However, with reference to Hegel, Žižek takes the point further. In Žižek's characterisation of Derrida,

...Derrida incessantly varies the motif of how full identity-with-itself is impossible; how it is always, constitutively, deferred, split... Yet what eludes him is the Hegelian inversion of *identity qua impossible* into *identity itself as the name for a certain radical impossibility*. The impossibility unearthed by Derrida through the hard work of deconstructive reading supposed to subvert identity constitutes the very definition of identity. (Žižek, *For They Know Not* 37)

In other words, where Žižek conceives of Derrida as critiquing Hegel's attempts to dialectically expunge the world of difference. While I am not convinced that this is a fair characterisation of Derrida's approach to Hegel, Žižek posits that Hegel was in fact a theorist of a constitutive cleavage in the world (*Tarrying with the Negative* 21). In this context, Žižek, as Lacan, argues for a commitment to a truth, although it is a truth that caters for contingency (Zaretsky 165). As Butler observes, such an adherence to truth is at odds with the deconstructive emphasis on the "infinite 'complexity'" of the truth (88).

The differences between Žižek and Derrida have their heritage in many ways in the differences between Lacan and Derrida. The variances between Lacan and Derrida are extremely complex, and I cannot pretend to deal with them adequately here. While no sustained comparative study has been carried out examining psychoanalysis and deconstruction, the most famous instance of debate occurred in Derrida's public critique of Lacan's Seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. Derrida's two main objections to Lacan's study can be summarised as concerning "the role of truth in language and the nature and function of the signifier"

(Muller and Richardson 171).⁷⁰ Derrida expresses scepticism towards Lacan's attempt to 'denude' or 'unveil' the truth in his 'Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*' ('Purveyor of Truth' 175). Where Lacan asserts his interpretation of the work of fiction as a circular, hermeneutic, finality, Derrida emphasises the 'disseminal', multiple paths of the so-called 'truth', viewed as 'the letter' in Poe's story ('Purveyor of Truth' 197). Derrida is critical of Lacan's focus on the *content* of Poe's story, rather than its intertextual status ('Purveyor of Truth' 179). Derrida also expresses reserve about Lacan's psychoanalytic emphasis on the spoken word over the written word, representative as it is of the phonocentric presence which Derrida works to deconstruct ('Purveyor of Truth' 196-197). As Muller and Richardson observe, Lacan considered the issue of the priority of writing over speech in his *Séminaire IX: L'identification*. Žižek's response to this is to claim that it is perhaps the difference in status attributed to gaze and voice that is the source of a "radical incommensurability" between psychoanalysis and deconstruction ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 9). A meaningful comparison of deconstruction and psychoanalysis would need to take this into consideration (and such a comparison would be a worthwhile path for future research) (171).

In her assessment of Derrida's critique of Lacan, Barbara Johnson suggests that Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction may not in fact be so opposing ('Frame of Reference' 218-291, 229). Johnson wonders whether Lacan and Derrida "are really saying the same thing or only enacting their own differences from themselves" ('Frame of Reference' 250). At this juncture, I wish to return to Žižek,

⁷⁰ While I can only briefly summarise the 'debate' here, Muller and Richardson's edited collection *The Purloined Poe* provides the key texts in question from Poe, Lacan, and Derrida, with additional commentary and information.

who very faithfully continues Lacan's project, and reassert one of their points of similarity. Wright's assessment of Žižek, cited earlier, considers the efforts of fantasy to "assuage the structurally inescapable inadequacies" of language's attempts to neatly fashion a coherent body (Wright 5). The "structurally inescapable inadequacies" are the result of the Real which at once generates and besets the fantasy of correspondence between language and thing. In this sense, the Lacanian Real corresponds with the distance Derrida sees between the word and the thing; in this way, in this regard, psychoanalysis and deconstruction agree that the superficial security of language conceals an abysmal disorder. I will now follow Žižek's insistence on the centrality of Lacan's concept of the Real underpinning the necessary existence of ideology and the subjectivities it constitutes, in order to elaborate the relevance and significance of his work to my concerns in this thesis.

To begin, it is necessary to consider precisely what Lacan is referring to when he designates the orders of the Real, imaginary and symbolic, and how Žižek understands and deploys these categories. While the Real, imaginary and symbolic are to some extent co-defining, they can also be described as in many ways "heterogeneous" (Sheridan, x). Therefore, a systematic approach to their elaboration is not only possible but indispensable for a clear appreciation of how they interrelate and underpin the categories of subjectivity and ideology for Žižek.

The Real

As outlined above, Lacan's interest in the order of the Real came after a more substantial elaboration of the categories of the imaginary and the symbolic. However, I will begin with it here, as in Lacan's tripartite system it is ontologically first, and it is this notion of the Real with which the Edge of the Construct films grapple. It is also the concept via which I contend that traditionally divergent fields such as psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and the literary theory of the grotesque, can be seen to contemplate a similar concern.

While the Real forms a central category for Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lacan himself found the Real difficult to articulate, which illustrates its resistance to logos: "...the little we know about the real shows its antinomy to all verisimilitude" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* ix). A further difficulty with understanding the Real is that Lacan's formulation of it was not static, and it was emphasised in different ways throughout his career. Accordingly, some of the more cogent definitions of Lacan's Real come from later commentators, even if they misrepresent the Real somewhat in their attempts to pin it down.⁷¹

Elizabeth Grosz identifies the Real as the order into which the child is born. Grosz evocatively describes the Real as "the order preceding the ego and the organisation of the drives. It is an anatomical, 'natural' order... *a pure plenitude or fullness*" (*Jacques Lacan* 34, emphasis added). Resonating with Grosz, Sean Homer

⁷¹ It may in fact be entirely appropriate to attempt to interpret Lacan's Real through other scholars, given that the Lacanian procedure of the *passe* requires the analyst in training to "pass on their findings to two uninitiated members of the general public, who in turn have to transmit them to the examining committee" (Butler 12-13).

writes that the Real “is a kind of ubiquitous undifferentiated mass from which we must distinguish ourselves, as subjects, through the process of symbolization” (83). It is important to observe that these descriptions operate in terms of “brute matter” (Homer 83). While the degree to which the Real was associated with biology varied throughout Lacan’s career, the connection between the Real and matter persisted for Lacan.

Interestingly, in contrast to understandings of the Real as a state of ubiquitous plenitude, Lacan implies that this sense of abundance is a mask for quite the opposite when he describes the Real as functioning as “that which is lacking in the symbolic order” (Sheridan x), implying that in addition to pure unadulterated plenitude, the Real can be conceived of as an absence, a lack. I acknowledge, therefore, that the Real, while theorised as a positive presence, actually functions and is described in more complexity as an excess or super-abundant presence that coexists with a fundamental lack and gaping absence.

As with *khôra*, it is difficult to clearly define the Real, given that it is, by definition, “*unassimilable*” in representation (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 55), the “impossible” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 167; Sheridan, x), or, more precisely, “the opposite of the possible” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 167): “[t]he real has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of ‘raw materials’” (Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 34). The Real is “the foreclosed element” of discourse “which may be approached but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic” (Sheridan x). Known as *das Ding*, a phrase borrowed from Freud and Heidegger, the Real is the alien Thing in-us-more-than-us. It is the Real as *das Ding*,

“the site of primordial horror and the secret source of our *jouissance* that always threaten[s] to emerge from within our most benign fantasies” to which Žižek draws special attention (Reinhard 159).

In Seminar VII, Lacan examines Freud’s related notions of the unconscious and repression. Lacan arrives at the conclusion that there is always an impenetrable kernel that is repressed, a piece of the Real that eschews symbolisation. This hard, resistant fragment of the Real is precisely *das Ding*, or the Thing. The Thing is that which exceeds signification. Lacan puts it this way: *das Ding* substitutes for “dumb reality” (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 55). It is a lost object that has, paradoxically, never been lost (Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 58). Homer observes that The Thing is replaced by *objet petit a* in Lacan’s work post-1964 (85), a concept I will examine directly after considering the orders of the imaginary and the symbolic.

For Lacan, *jouissance* accompanies the approach to the impossible-Real:

In psychoanalysis, knowledge [of the impossible-Real] is marked by a lethal dimension: the subject must pay the approach to it with its own being. In other words, to abolish the misrecognition [upon which the imaginary self is founded] means at the same time to abolish, to dissolve, the ‘substance’ which was supposed to hide itself behind the form-illusion of misrecognition. This ‘substance’ – the only one recognized in psychoanalysis – is, according to Lacan, enjoyment [*jouissance*]: access to knowledge is then paid with a loss of enjoyment – enjoyment, in its stupidity, is possible only on the basis of certain non-knowledge, ignorance. (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 68)

Jouissance evokes both pleasure and pain. Žižek’s above equivocation of *jouissance* with the annihilation of the subject illustrates this point well. *Jouissance* in this context is a moment when the material body eludes symbolic control. The

significance of this with reference to the Edge of the Construct films will be returned to later.

The Real is opaque, resisting and defying representation and yet, as I will demonstrate with the ensuing discussion of the imaginary and symbolic, is paradoxically the very entity that makes representation possible. In this regard Lacan writes that the “real supports the phantasy, and the phantasy protects the real” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 41). As briefly explored in Chapter Two of this thesis, it is the notion of a fundamental disorder that both subtends and undermines all ordered realities that Lacanian psychoanalysis and poststructuralism share.

Repeating the notion that the Real is unrepresentable, Wright explains that the Real is that which “remains uncaptured by language even when all parties profess themselves satisfied: objectivity [the real world] is but an aspect of the needful Idealisation of Reciprocity, our ‘faith’ ...” (10). Here we are presented with a formulation of how the Real is implicitly opposed to the real objective world in which we live (Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 34; Sheridan x). The real world is not, of course, really objective, but we need to convince ourselves that it is in order to live as social subjects. The real world is this ‘Idealisation of Reciprocity’ that Wright describes; the real world functions because social subjects share the fantasy that the word, the symbolic category, equates to the object, which, of course, it does not. The Real is the ‘truly traumatic core of the modern subject’ around which the symbolic can only circulate but which it never precisely represent (Nicol, 145). Reality or the real world functions as a plug or stopper for the Real, conceived of as “[t]he lack of a lack”

(Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* ix). Or, in other words, reality, for Žižek, is “an ideological fantasy that we ratify and extend without knowing it” (Harpham 461).

The Imaginary

Grosz writes that “The Real cannot be experienced as such: it is capable of representation or conceptualisation only through the reconstructive or inferential work of the imaginary and symbolic orders” (*Jacques Lacan* 34). In this way it becomes clear that it is difficult to discuss the imaginary and the symbolic without making reference to the Real as the thing that drives them.

The imaginary was the first of the three orders to be elaborated by Lacan (Sheridan ix). The imaginary is the mediating order between the Real and the symbolic. The imaginary is inaugurated by “[t]hat originary moment in which the ‘pre-linguistic imagination’ produced the fundamental fantasy that grounded the subject as a subject” (Wright 19). In other words, the mirror stage, in its fantasy⁷² of wholeness and coherence anticipates the symbolic, which offers language and its “project[ion of] a promise of final fulfilment at the impossible conclusion of [the subject’s] naming in the world.” (Wright 19).

For Lacan there are two processes through which an individual must pass in order to become a subject. The first is through the mirror phase and the formation of the ego, and the second is through language, where the subject is constituted. I will consider the first here, and return to the second in my discussion of the symbolic. As

⁷² The clinical category of ‘fantasy’ for psychoanalysis is closely linked to desire: “Fantasy is intimately linked to th[is] conception of the subject as desiring. In this schema, the aim of fantasy is not to enact the fulfilment of desire. Rather, fantasy’s primary aim is to *sustain* the subject’s desire by telling it *how* to desire” (Glynos 200). In other words, desire is not reducible to need or demand, but is rather “what emerges in the dissatisfaction when the demand is actually met” (Glynos 200).

explored in Chapter One of this thesis with reference to Baudry, the mirror stage is the beginning of a decisive period of subject formation for Lacan and occurs during the child's passage from the Real to the imaginary.

Lacan outlines a situation where the child, lacking sensory and motor coordination, catches sight of itself in a mirror. At this moment, the child momentarily stands, held up by a human or artificial support. The child is, in this moment, able to perceive itself as a stable and impressive object, however mistakenly ('Mirror Stage', 1-2; 'Some Reflections' 15). The child enters an ambivalent system of simultaneous recognition and misrecognition; the child recognises that it really is its own image with which it identifies, and yet the child misrecognises that the image is a fiction. In this way Lacan indicates that the ego emerges in response to its image, and that the ego is effected by the image.

In impelling the individual to participate in this fiction, the mirror stage ensures that "...each subject creates a fantasy...that acts to conceal [the] impossibility" of representing the Real and of adequately naming the subject (Wright 19). Furthermore, "The child's fascination with its mirror-image coincides with its recognition of lack" (Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* 37).

Elsewhere, Lacan writes that it is at the mirror-stage that

We see the ego, in its essential resistance to the elusive process of Becoming, to the variations of Desire. This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety. ('Some Reflections' 15)

As such, the ego is an imaginary function, which serves to preserve the image of wholeness and mastery. The most memorable moments of the Edge of the Construct films are those during which the protagonist hovers at a border between the known and symbolically arranged reality, and the anxiety-provoking unknown. Resonating with Lacan's words, at these moments the protagonists lose their heretofore known subjectivity, and risk "sliding back again into the chaos from which [they] started". In Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy's characterisation, a conflict is produced between the ego and its mastery, and the child's sense of fragmentation, of being a *corps morcelé*⁷³;

Thus...the infant is his own rival before being the rival of another, he is captured from very early on by the human form and conditioned by the other's look...The primary conflict between identification with, and primordial rivalry with, the other's image, begins a dialectical process that links the ego to more complex social situations. (58)

To exist one must be acknowledged *visually* by another, and accordingly the gaze becomes weighted with significance for psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity. The importance of the gaze will be examined in the following chapter of this thesis.

The imaginary forms for Lacan a pre-linguistic realm where the individual's identification with the image of his or her body in its coherence is at odds with the reality of his or her body as fragmented and unruly. As such, the body is of primary significance to this order. From the discordance between the imaginary unity of the body and its disorderly reality, a fundamental lack within the subject is generated.

⁷³ The significance of the Lacanian concept of the *corps morcelé* will be returned to in later chapters.

The importance of the concept of lack for psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity and ideology will be elaborated more fully in the following discussion of the symbolic.

The Symbolic

The symbolic is a key order in the context of this thesis, as it is the confrontation with the symbolic as a border, barrier, limit, or frame of reality that the Edge of the Construct films enact. In Žižek's words,

Symbolisation designates the subject's endeavour, always fragmented and ultimately doomed to fail, to bring to the light of day, by way of symbolic representative, the Real of bodily drives excluded by imaginary identification; it is therefore a kind of compromise formation by way of which the subject integrates fragments of the ostracized Real. (*Tarrying with the Negative* 178)

Where the imaginary is pre-linguistic, the symbolic is, therefore, the linguistic strategy upon which individuals unknowingly embark in order to attempt (always-already unsuccessfully) to grasp or substitute for the Real of existence. According to Lacan, the Real is by definition inaccessible to those in the symbolic order, because it is fundamentally structured by the loss of the fullness of the Real that the infant experiences before it becomes a subject.

In the previous chapter I examined how linguist Saussure conceived of the bar between the signified and the signifier (s/S) as in fact irrevocably linking the two. In a move complementary to that of the political modernists, Lacan inverts the equation. In this way, primacy is given to the signifier (S/s), and Lacan suggests that the bar does in fact separate the two, such that the signifier floats freely from the signified ('Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' 150-152). He takes this theme up again in

the ‘Seminar on *‘The Purloined Letter’*’, arguing that the subject is a signifier, situated in the system of signification through a process of repetition: “...this is the very effect of the unconscious in the precise sense we teach that the unconscious means that man is inhabited by the signifier” (*Purloined Letter* 48). In this sense, the subject does not exist exterior to the system of signifiers, but is effected by the system. The notion that the subject is a signifier is foregrounded in the Edge of the Construct films in their remarkable insistence upon naming. In *The Matrix* Neo’s shift from The Matrix to ‘the desert of the real’ is marked by his change in name from Thomas Anderson to Neo; in *Fight Club* the narrator is nameless; in *Dark City* John Murdoch originally cannot remember his name, but accepts the name John Murdoch in order to be able to participate in the symbolic world in which he finds himself.

Of crucial importance to this thesis, Lacan’s conception of the symbolic order “marks the limit of the human universe” (Homer 44). Individuals are born into a system of language through which others articulate their desires, and through which the individual, too, must articulate his or her desires, in order to become a subject:

...it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father, for example, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce...I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one cannot stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else. (Lacan, *Séminaire II* 112, my translation)

In this way, Lacan conceives of the totalising nature of the symbolic: it is an edifice of symbols that frames reality for subjects, without which subjects could not exist. It is inescapable. It is a system of symbols that only ‘aberrantly’ substitutes for the Real.

As already foreshadowed, the Edge of the Construct films are significant for presenting the viewer with a symbolically generated, inescapable world, and then taking the viewer with the protagonist to peer beyond the limits of the symbolic world into another, possibly more Real world. A consideration of Žižek's conception of cynical ideology is useful for understanding how the 'more real' worlds that are depicted beyond the limits of the original worlds in the films are also ultimately symbolically circumscribed.

Before, however, examining Žižek's conception of ideology, having explored the Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis and how it relates to the orders of the imaginary and the symbolic, I now wish to return to and extend upon the discussion of the similarities between the Real and *khôra* established in the previous chapter.

The Real and *Khôra*

To draw the threads of discussion together at this point, when the subject attempts to conceal the gap left by language and its failed attempts to represent the kernel of the Real residing inside the subject, the *objet petit a* or 'the sublime object of ideology' is generated within the subject. The translation from the Real to the symbolic is not exact, and this inexactness is conceived of in three ways: firstly, it is identified as the difference between the Real and the symbolic, and is described positively as a 'remainder'. Alternatively, it is viewed as the empty space between the Real and the symbolic, and is evoked accordingly as a negative void.

It is the kernel of the Real located within the subject to which Žižek refers in *Looking Awry* (169) that comprises the third formulation of the relationship between

the Real and the symbolic. The kernel is ‘the Thing’ the subject orbits around, never able to adequately grasp. Indeed,

...this is Žižek’s repeated insistence – the self...contains an alien core or ‘kernel’ that, though it constitutes the Real inside one, remains ever detached from the mutual definitions within which we have created our very subjecthood (through what Althusser has named its ‘interpellations’, the ‘calls’ that elicited the self from the undivided Real, which, being a part of the Symbolic, cannot just work one way...). (Wright 14-15)

Graphically, the idea of there being a kernel of the Real existing within the subject has been represented by JA Miller, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis (see fig.3 p 116). According this representation, the extraction of *a* results in both a hole and a frame, and an excessive surface fragment. As such, *objet petit a* represents an impossible simultaneity: it is both a void, and whatever momentarily comes in to fill the gaps, always-already doomed to fail.

Žižek writes in *The Fragile Absolute* that central to psychoanalysis is the notion that all discursive formations “are forever haunted by some ‘indivisible remainder’, by some traumatic spectral ‘rest’ that resists ‘confession’, that is, integration in the symbolic universe” (98). The ‘sublime object’ or *objet petit a* hides and simultaneously reveals or betrays this ‘indivisible remainder’. It is important to note once again the close relationship of the Real as a super-abundant, excessive presence with its conceptual opposite: a yawning chasm. In its formulation as an alien thing lurking within the subject, the Real or the thing-in-itself has a philosophical history which predates Lacan.

Terry Eagleton traces the recurring motif of the alien core in philosophical conceptions of subjectivity, beginning with Schopenhauer’s theory of a human

subject that carries an internal and “implacably alien” monster, “which was the stuff out of which we were made and yet was utterly indifferent to us” (‘Enjoy!’ 40).

Eagleton then turns to Freud’s account of desire and finds in it a continuation of Schopenhauer’s thesis, in that desire for Freud is understood as a “foreign body lodged inside us, which invades our flesh like a lethal virus and yet...is closer to us than we are to ourselves” (‘Enjoy!’ 40). Žižek suggests that Freud had a presentiment of this in his evocation of the unknowableness of ourselves as a “foreign kernel...in the very midst of our neighbour” (*For They Know Not* 200).

Eagleton turns finally to Lacan, whose name for this ineffable entity is, as we have discussed, the ‘Thing’, and describes how this ‘Thing’ “is otherwise known as the Real” (‘Enjoy!’ 40). What is more, it is “the Real which makes us what we are” and “is not only traumatic and impenetrable but cruel, obscene, meaningless and horrifically enjoyable” (Eagleton, ‘Enjoy!’ 40). The kernel of the Real in the subject is foreclosed in the symbolic, “paradoxically leaving a void as a positive condition of its [the Real’s] existence. Yet it is this very void that distinguishes the subject from the results of the historical determinations that have made it what it appears to be” (Wright and Wright 4). Hence the concepts ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ become conflated. It is in this way that Žižek refutes postmodern theories of subjectivity. Comparing his work to that of certain interpretations of postmodern theory, Žižek writes:

My gesture is the exact opposite. My work relies on the full acceptance of the notion of modern subjectivity elaborated by the great German Idealists from Kant to Hegel: for me, this tradition forms the unsurpassable horizon of our philosophical experience, and the core of my entire work is to endeavour to use Lacan as a privileged intellectual tool to reactualise German

Idealism. From my perspective, the celebrated postmodern ‘displacement’ of subjectivity rather exhibits the unreadiness to come to terms with the truly traumatic core of the modern subject. (‘Burning the Bridges’ ix)

Therefore, Žižek continues in the Enlightenment tradition in which the concept of subjectivity as “founded upon an element of excess” (Nicol 145) is central.

One of the crucial points Žižek gleans from Hegel is that

the problem is not how to attain the noumenal In-itself beyond phenomena [the Real]; the true problem is how and why does this In-itself split itself from itself at all, how does it acquire a distance towards itself and thus clear the space in which it can appear (to itself)? (*Indivisible Remainder* 14)

For Žižek “there is no subject without a ‘gap’ separating the object from its notion...” (Harpham 462). Indeed, the gap is the very constitutive enabler of the subject. This contention is reinforced but complicated when Žižek describes how a particular case of clinical hysteria

articulates the experience of a fissure, of an irreducible gap between the signifier that represents me (the symbolic mandate that determines my place in the social network) and the nonsymbolised surplus of my being-there. There is an abyss separating them. (*Looking Awry* 16)

In this description, the Real is not framed as positive presence but as negative: the ideas of ‘fissure’ and ‘irreducible gap’ have replaced the earlier concept of ‘excess’. Here the resonance with the psychoanalytic reading of cinema presented in *Cahiers du Cinéma* and by Heath’s contributions to *Screen* should be clear, in the vocabulary of ‘fissures’ and ‘gaps’ to describe strain on the symbolic edifice. However, where these earlier versions do not achieve a clear articulation of the precise nature of what these gaps reveal, Žižek presses on, examining what it is that is revealed by such “gaps”. For Žižek, it is the surplus of the Real that is exposed by the impediments to

and failures of symbolic efficiency. Moreover, the implication is that while the hysteric may articulate such a fissure, analogous fissures constitute all social subjects. The surplus created becomes “a spectral presence haunting intersubjective relations in the symbolic” (Nicol 150).

In this way, it becomes clear once again that Žižek, via Lacan, attempts to provide an account for the nameless entity that Plato and Derrida discuss as ‘*khôra*’. The inability to account for this sublime nothingness, on which all existence depends, indicates that these thinkers are preoccupied with the same nodal dynamic, despite differences they may have in approaching it. In all accounts, this paradoxically abyssal and excessive concept is characterised as being the entity that enables existence and yet defies representation in that existence. Further suggesting the way in which the Real may be in fact both presence and absence, Eagleton writes:

The Real is the ‘inruption’ of that non-sense into our signifying systems, and so much a crasser affair than language. But because it can never be signified, seen head-on, it is also a sort of nothing, detectable only through its effects... We know it only from the way it acts as a drag upon discourse. (‘Enjoy!’ 42)

The comparison between Eagleton’s description of the Real and my earlier discussion of Plato’s *khôra* should now be clear, in the sense that when we attempt to examine closely the symbolic method of naming that we take for granted (‘form’ or ‘content’, for example) it begins to unravel. Furthermore, the Real and *khôra* are both understood as things that makes discussing the symbolic or logos in detail difficult.

The similarities between *khôra* and the Real become even clearer in the following:

The Real is...the sign that means nothing but itself. Every signifying system, so Žižek claims, contains a kind of super-signifier whose function is just to point to the fact that the system can’t be totalised. It is that system’s point

of internal fracture marking the space where it doesn't quite gel. But this absence is what organises the whole system, and so is also a kind of presence within it. You can call this constitutive lack the human subject itself, which is necessary for any set of signs to work, yet which can never be fully encapsulated by them. But this, for Lacan, is also the function of the Real, whose very absence from consciousness is the cause of our carrying on trying to signify it there and always failing. If we failed to keep failing and trying again, if the repression was lifted and the Real burst to the surface, history would instantly cease. In this sense, the sheer impossibility of desire, the fact that we can only ever plug our lack with one poor fantasy object after another, is also what keeps us up and running. That fissure of hindrance in our being which is the Real is also what props up our identity. (Eagleton, 'Enjoy!' 42)

Accordingly, it is clear that the psychoanalytic category of the Real shares remarkable similarities with aspects of the deconstructive impulse: for just as the poststructuralist tradition as served to interrogate the presumed order and sanctity of language, "...the whole point of the Real is to give language the slip, block it from the inside, bend the signifier out of true" (Eagleton, 'Enjoy!' 44).

In examining psychoanalytic and poststructuralist considerations of founding acts, another point of resonance can be identified. Žižek's psychoanalytic interpretation of Schelling's '*Weltalter*' indicates that the problem with which he is fascinated and to which he compulsively returns is similar to, if not the same as, that explored by Plato in his attempts to describe *khôra*. As Butler observes, post-Kantian thinkers "from Hegel to Schelling to Derrida to Žižek" have aimed to think simultaneously the binary oppositions through which the founding act has long been thought (80). Derrida's reading of Plato's *khôra* examined in Chapter Two indicates that for Derrida, while Plato aimed to maintain a neat structure within which to theorise the origin of the universe, he was doomed to fail from the outset. Žižek

identifies *Weltalter* as one of many attempts to formulate the ‘beginning of the world’ or a founding act. Examining the work of Schelling in great detail, Žižek surmises that fundamentally Schelling endeavoured to articulate the passage from the pre-symbolic pulsation of the Real to the universe of logos (*Indivisible Remainder* 13). Remarkably similar to Derrida’s consideration of Plato, Žižek is here concerned to explore Schelling’s account of how order emerges out of disorder, indeed, how disorder is the enabling condition of order (*Indivisible Remainder* 3).

It is also through undermining the notion of a linear “beginning” from which order(ing) proceeds that both Žižek and Derrida can be seen to share a similar position. Derrida insists upon the temporal disorientation of future perfect conjugations such as in his disorientatingly anamnestic turns of phrase “In the beginning there will have been force” (‘Force of Law’ 10) and “At the beginning there will have been speed” (‘No Apocalypse’ 20). This is evoked by Žižek when he writes “*the true Beginning is not at the beginning*” (*Indivisible Remainder* 13).

Resonating with Plato’s description of *khôra*, Žižek invokes Pascal’s theory of the foundations of the law:

‘At the beginning’ of the law, there is a certain ‘outlaw’, a certain Real of violence which coincides with the act itself of the establishment of the reign of law: the ultimate truth about the reign of law is that of an usurpation, and all classical politico-philosophical thought rests on the disavowal of the violent act of foundation. (*For They Know Not* 204)

Here Žižek resonates with Derrida’s contention that the true beginning is not at the beginning as implied in his use of the future perfect tense in ‘Force of Law’ which similarly analyses Pascal. This feature of the unspeakable, ineffable presence that enables and undermines existence is a distinguishing feature that is common to

Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction. *Khôra* can be understood as the “certain ‘outlaw’, [this] certain Real...which coincides with the act itself of the establishment of the reign of the law” to which Žižek refers.

While psychoanalysis and deconstruction have their differences, it can be said that both Žižek’s psychoanalytic approach and Derrida’s deconstruction share the idea that disorder has and will always have haunted order. Contrary to prevailing notions of there being a “void of divine eternity” that precedes Being, Žižek describes how Schelling argues that “‘eternity’ is not a nondescript mass”. Instead, resonating with the Real, Schelling posits a “chaotic-psychotic universe of blind drives” (*Indivisible Remainder* 13). In repressing these drives, the universe effectively passes from the Real to the symbolic.

Throughout this chapter I have endeavoured to highlight the way in which the Real is ambivalently described as both presence and absence, as both horror and *jouissance*, as both Thing and void that evades naming, and even that which makes naming possible. However, it is important to make clear at this point that despite the trend in descriptive accounts of psychoanalytic categories to conflate notions of abundance and lack, ultimately for Žižek the positive concept of the kernel is not the same as the negative concept of the gap, ‘void’ or ‘lack’: the gap refers to the failure of the symbolic to adequately ‘cover’ or represent the kernel. In this way it should be clear that while they are not the same thing, the lack and the kernel are closely related: the kernel of the Real is the cause of the lack, just as *objet a* is “conceptually and genetically” descendant from the Thing, the Real (Reinhard 159). *Objet petit a*

therefore represents an impossible simultaneity: it is both the gap that the symbolic fails to close over, and whatever object momentarily, so we believe, fills this hole.

The concept of ideology enters in relation to this improbable void and the failure of objects to satiate it. Ideology is a fantasy we create, one of many possible fantasies, to which subjects cling “for their very subjecthood, [these fantasies] are endeavours to hide the failure of the Symbolic to define [the subject]” that failure being the ‘void’, ‘gap’ or ‘lack’ (Wright 16). “Fantasy is not the opposite of reality,” writes Eagleton,

it is what plugs the void in our being so that the set of fictions we call reality is able to emerge. The Real is rather like the primordial wound we incurred by our fall from the pre-Oedipal Eden, the gash in our being where we were torn loose from Nature, and from which desire flows unshakably. Though we repress this trauma, it persists within us as the hard core of the self. Something is missing inside us which makes us what we are, a muteness which resists being signified but which shows up negatively as the outer limit of our discourse, the point at which our representations crumble and fail. (‘Enjoy!’ 41)

I have already examined and demonstrated this tendency of the symbolic to ‘crumble and fail’ in the persistent designation of the categories of form and content.

Resonating with this, Eagleton writes: “The Real” (here understood as parallel to *khôra*) “is what cannot be included within any of our symbolic systems, but whose very absence skews them out of shape, as a kind of vortex around which they are bent out of true” (‘Enjoy!’ 41). The Real is “this kink or deviation at the heart of things without which they would not work” (Eagleton, ‘Enjoy!’ 48). The Real, according to Žižek, is a version of “the Kantian unknowable ‘Thing-in-itself’”⁷⁴, and what is

⁷⁴ Homer observes that in Lacan’s earliest conceptions the Real functioned as noumena, as ‘absolute being’ or ‘being-in-itself’ (82).

therefore unknowable “is ultimately Man himself” (*For They Know Not* 200). The essence of this idea is most succinctly expressed by Žižek in his insistence that

...there is a subject only in so far as there is some material stain/leftover that *resists* subjectivisation, a surplus in which, precisely, the subject *cannot* recognise itself. In other words, the paradox of the subject is that it exists only through its own radical impossibility, through a ‘bone in the throat’ that forever prevents it (the subject) from achieving its full ontological identity. (*Fragile Absolute* 28)

Wright summarises the way in which the kernel of the Real can be formulated as a location of cleavage in the self that enables and demands language as a means of grasping it, and yet is the one thing language will never be able to capture:

If what is at the core of our bodily being is a kernel of the Real – as ‘bare evidence’ – that forever escapes the publicly ‘shared’ language by which we seek to understand it, then to acknowledge that alien experience, ‘to recognise’ it, is inevitably to realise that we cannot wholly capture it in words, that is, ‘not to recognise it’. (Wright 16)

Here it needs to be made explicit that I have shifted the focus of discussion from the individual subject to the social law in which subjects exist. Michael Moriarty comments on the parallel between theories of subject formation and philosophical speculations on the formation of the world and the social orders or laws that exist within that world: “[i]n this sense, there is a gap and/or excess constitutive of every established order” that parallels the void and/or excess constitutive of every subject (129). This is precisely the analogy between the social subject and the established order that the Edge of the Construct films foreground.

As Jason Glynos writes, “‘the impossibility of closure’, a fundamental dislocation...[from a psychoanalytic point of view] is meant to characterise every social totality” (195). The point being asserted here is that an analogous

“fundamental dislocation” also characterises every social subject. “As regards the social subject, then, the properly ideological moment is defined as the illusion of closure” (Glynos 195). Or, in other words, “ideology is nothing less than the way we cope with the truth that subjectivity and social reality are each constructed around a traumatic void” (Nicol 147). Society and the social subject both lack “an ultimate signifier with which to make [them] complete” (Glynos, 196). Both society and the subject are therefore constitutively lacking:

The elimination of ideological misrecognition therefore involves not uncovering a true substance beneath a false substance, nor the progressive approximation to a true substance, but revealing the non-substance that marks all substance. In short, nothing positive can be said about the ‘truth’ of a society [or a subject] except that it is incomplete – in Lacanian terms, that there is a ‘lack in the symbolic Other’. Thus, society exists as a totality only insofar as the social subject *posits* its existence as such through the mediation of empty signifiers...any signifier that claims to close off this field will never be adequate to the task, and will play the role of an impostor. Ideology describes the situation in which the social subject misrecognises the lack in the symbolic Other by identifying a particular concrete content with what Laclau calls an empty signifier (in Lacanian terms, the master signifier). (Glynos 197-198)

At this point it is necessary to examine how Žižek conceives of ideology, in order to determine how it departs from the version of ideology deployed in political modernism, and to better understand how the Real works in establishing and undermining Symbolic orders.

Žižek and Ideology

In an age where there are those who hail ‘the end of ideology’ (Bell 1960)⁷⁵, what does it mean for the question of ideology to be acted out and explored in popular culture, as carried out by the Edge of the Construct films considered in this thesis?

Indeed, as Glynos notes,

there are those who are keen to reassert the pertinence of ideology often precisely *because* liberal capitalism’s ideals are becoming ever more naturalised and thus invisible. In this view, the fact that there is a widespread feeling that we have finally arrived at an end is itself usually counted as evidence indicating ideology’s presence and strength of hold. (193)

Žižek is clearly one of these latter thinkers, and his work repeatedly attempts to account for precisely how an ideology transfixes subjects. It will be useful to consider Žižek’s conception of ideology in relation to earlier understandings of ideology in order to appreciate how Žižek works with and against prevailing notions.

The classic Marxist view of ideology whereby a “*positively* defined essence of society exists, the truth of which is accessible through scientific investigation” (Glynos 196) derives from a reading of the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In this text we see Marx apply his theory of ideology directly to the capitalist system (which was not the case in *The German Ideology*). This *Preface* contains what is arguably the most precise articulation of Marx’s approach to ideology. With reference to his examination of the Hegelian study of law, Marx writes:

⁷⁵ See also Glynos 212 n2 for comprehensive account of contemporary revivals of the call that the end of ideology is nigh.

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.

Repeating the statement already made in *The German Ideology*, Marx continues

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or ... with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. (20-21)

For Marx, ideology formed part of a cultural superstructure that resulted from the economic base. Accordingly, socialism is also ideological, given that it consists of a group of ideas and beliefs with a practical application. However, as has already been discussed, Marx's definition of what made an idea ideological was notoriously ambiguous (McLellan 17). As a result, Marx never considered his own ideas to be ideological (McLellan 17). Once again, a parallel can be drawn between this Marxist approach to ideology that purported to know the non-ideological 'truth' and the position of *Cinématique*. As we will soon see, from Žižek's approach to ideology, a definition of ideology that excludes discourses like socialism, is not considered valid by later Marxist commentators.

An emphasis on the conception of ideology as something that conceals or distorts real material conditions has led to what is known as “the classic Marxist view” (Glynos 196). This is the view of ideology as ideas and beliefs by which people misrecognise the unjust nature of their material conditions and hence accept these conditions as justified. Engels’ conception of ideology as a ‘false consciousness’,⁷⁶ that masks the real conditions of existence of subordinate groups in a given society also assumes that these subordinate groups are somewhat irrational, and act in ways that are not in their own best interests. It would be misleading to claim that this was Marx’s conception of ideology. As the above extracts from the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy* demonstrate, Marx’s theory of ideology was more complex than this. Nevertheless, it is one way in which his earlier work can and has been interpreted, and deserves mention.⁷⁷

In contrast to the classic Marxist view whereby ideology is viewed as an illusory mask that needs to be removed to gain access to an objective truth, Louis Althusser presented a theory of ideology that combined earlier Marxist views and psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity to acknowledge the necessity of ideology for social functioning. Althusser’s approach to the question of ideology was

⁷⁶ It is important to note here that the expression ‘false consciousness’ was never used by Marx, but rather coined by Engels in a letter:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces. (cited in McLellan 18)

⁷⁷ This conception of ideology as something that masks an ‘actual’ life and distorts our perspective on that life is seen in a particularly transparent form in *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* depicts a world in which humans are the subordinate class. The consciousness of humans in this film is literally false: they are physically not aware of their actual, material environment. As the film’s hero Neo realises in a scene after this ‘unreality’ has been revealed to him, none of his memories from ‘reality’ ever really happened. *Fight Club* presents a more subtle yet complex discourse on ideology than does *The Matrix*, however, it is probably closer to Marx’s more evolved theory of ideology, rather than the simpler version of it as ‘false consciousness’.

fundamentally different to that of Marx in that, while theoretically maintaining the underlying thesis that through a scientific, materialist Marxist approach, one could gain access to the objective truth of reality, ultimately Althusser professed the impossibility of functioning independent of ideology. Althusser's theory of ideology has indelibly marked the prevailing notions of the operations of ideology and, most importantly, those definitions inflecting the theories upon which this thesis draws and those theories the films examined in this thesis invoke.

Althusserian accounts of ideology evolved over several key texts. In the 'Glossary' appended to *For Marx*, ideology is defined thus:

Ideology is the 'lived' relation between men and their world, or a reflected form of this unconscious relation, for instance a 'philosophy' (q.v.), etc. It is distinguished from a science not by its falsity, for it can be coherent and logical (for instance, theology), but by the fact that the practico-social predominates in it over the theoretical, over knowledge. Historically, it precedes the science that is produced by making an epistemological break (q.v.), with it, but it survives alongside science as an essential element of every social formation (q.v.), including a socialist and even a communist society. (Brewster 251)

Here we can detect the fundamental shift from the classic Marxist view of ideology as 'false' and needing to be overthrown: for Althusser, ideology is not false in any simplistic or straightforward way, but is "an essential element of every social formation".

In 'Marxism and Humanism', Althusser admits that "there can be no question of attempting a profound definition of ideology here," but adds that "[I]t will suffice to know very schematically that ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representation (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society" (231). The systems of

representation forming ideology are “perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects that act functionally on men via a process that escapes them” (Althusser, ‘Marxism and Humanism’ 233).

The definition of ideology offered by Althusser in the later, seminal work ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)’ is more concise: “ideology is a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (36). Following from my earlier discussion of the Lacanian order of the imaginary, here we can understand that for Althusser ideology represents the mistaken sense of completeness and mastery the subject experiences in this order.

From these Althusserian definitions of ideology, the important points to glean for my purposes here are firstly that ideology is explicitly conceived of as a system of *representation*: thus, for those interested in culture and its representational strategies, ideology becomes a key concept. Secondly, it is of vital importance that ideology is considered to be an essential element of every social formation: many adopters of Althusserian theory overlook this fundamental point, proposing instead the ‘overthrowing’ of ideology, failing to see that this position is itself ideological.⁷⁸ The position of *Cinéthique*, that film could ‘expose’ ideology and return to a non-ideological ‘truth’ bespeaks just such a failure.

It is, however, equally important to note Althusser’s conception of ideology as working on people ‘via a process that escapes them’. This is very much a rearticulation of the classic Marxist position on naïve ideology: ‘they do not know

⁷⁸ Compare Žižek’s words “*the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*” (‘Spectre of Ideology’ 6) to Althusser’s: “...ideology has no outside” (‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ 49).

what they are doing, and yet they are doing it' (cited in Žižek, *Sublime Object* 28). However, the appearance of cultural studies in the 1960s "had the effect of discrediting the typically negative connotations associated with ideology" (Glynos 195). In this way, while ideology was still theorised as duping people, it was seen as a necessary form of deception. This shift is summarised neatly by Harpham:

From some [Marx and Engels], we hear that others are trapped in ideology, but not us; from others [Althusser], we hear that we're all in it, but that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Žižek tells us that we are all in it because ideology...is in fact a direct expression of unconscious desire. And it is a bad thing because such desire, whose kernel is "filthy enjoyment," leads away from the truth and towards dreams of wholeness or integration. (472)

Žižek maintains the ideas of 'illusion' and 'misrecognition' espoused by Althusser, and concurs that they are necessary. However, there are several key differences between Althusser's and Žižek's formulations of ideology. Nicol outlines these differences in explicitly psychoanalytic terms:

Ideology was famously defined by Althusser as "the imaginary ways we represent to ourselves our real conditions of existence". While Žižek's apprehension of the illusory nature of everyday reality is strongly reminiscent of Althusser he differs by insisting that the illusions of the cultural world are motivated by what it cannot represent or account for, the real. Another way of putting this is to say that Žižek's work on ideology shows that Althusser's definition of ideology depends on only two of Lacan's three orders of existence: those *imaginary* ways we relate to *symbolic* reality. What of the *real*? ... Žižek's revision of Althusser ...might read: 'Ideology is the imaginary ways we represent to ourselves our symbolic conditions of existence thereby covering up the disturbing nature of the real'. (147)

In contrast to the Althusserian position of a naïve subject, this thesis will explore, in part, following Žižek and Peter Sloterdijk's analyses of cynical ideology, the extent to which the function of ideology has shifted today. The result of the shift has been that the maxim becomes, in Žižek's words,

they know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*. (*Sublime Object* 32)

The remaining chapters of this thesis will consider the way in which the films at issue here engage with the notion that subjects of ideology today know very well what is going on: ideology has become increasingly transparent, and yet subjects recognise, for various reasons, that they must operate within the space or reality circumscribed by the ideology in which they find themselves. Thus, Althusser's conception of ideology is transformed into one where ideology is inhabited by people 'via a process of which they are very aware'.

In contrast to Marx's "they do not know it, but they are doing it", Žižek posits a contemporary situation which renders this naïve procedure impossible:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would be: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it'. (*Sublime Object* 29)

The concept of the wilful insistence of subjects on a mask of illusion echoes throughout Žižek's work. For example, in an interview about the war in Iraq, Žižek accounts for the ignorance of American civilians about the link between the September 11 attacks and Iraq⁷⁹ in the following way:

The way ideology works today is much more mysterious – not more complex...People just do not want to know too much. There's an active refusal to know...The key factor here is not that people are duped – there's an active will not to know...my

⁷⁹ "A large portion of the American population believes that Saddam was behind September 11. Only about 17% of respondents to one poll could correctly say that there were no Iraqis among the hijackers on September 11" (Henwood 5).

basic position is drop the point that people want to know; people *don't* want to know. I'm not engaged in any conservative psychology of... "people prefer ignorance; it's only for us, the evolutionary or spiritual elite to lead them." I'm not saying this is an eternal fact. I'm just describing how specifically today's ideology works, through a direct appeal to the will of ignorance. (Žižek in interview with Doug Henwood 5)

The identification of a will to ignorance with specific reference to film spectatorship was made by Jean-Louis Comolli as early as 1980. Writing explicitly about the cinematic apparatus and the viewing subject it demands, Comolli differs from those proponents of apparatus theory discussed earlier in this thesis who presuppose a passive spectator. For Comolli, the spectator is engaged in a cynical process of disavowal that resonates with Žižek's description of an all-pervasive will to ignorance in the sense that there is a gap between the real and the illusory reality that is occupied by an ironic "yes-I-know/but-all-the-same" (Comolli 133). Comolli elaborates on his particular take on the willing suspension of disbelief:

However refined, analogy in the cinema is a deception, a lie, a fiction that must be straddled – in disavowing, knowing but not wanting to know – by the *will to believe* of the spectator, the spectator who expects to be fooled and wants to be fooled, thus becoming the first agent of his or her own fooling... There is no spectator other than one *aware* of the spectacle, even if (provisionally) allowing him or herself to be taken in by the fictioning machine, deluded by the simulacrum: it is precisely *for that* that he or she came... The 'yes, I know' calls irresistibly for the 'but all the same'... We know, but we want something else: to believe. We want the one and the other, to be both fooled and not fooled, to oscillate, to swing from knowledge to belief, from distance to adherence, from criticism to fascination. (139)⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Michele Aaron puts it this way: "I'll forget that you're fake, as long as you help" (213). Moving beyond the system of *suture* discussed earlier in this thesis, Aaron goes one step further, arguing that ...the cinematic spectacle, with all its appeals to authenticity, stands in for reality thereby reassuring the spectator that nothing is amiss. This fetishistic process fortifies the spectator's sense of self and, crucially, depends upon the spectator supporting the cover-up. The spectator willingly 'buys' this, this substitution of the spectacle for the real, thereby disavowing the absence of reality, and...his or her complicity in the cover-up. (214)

In this sense, therefore, in considering cynicism as a mode of ideology we need to examine not solely the characters within the films under examination here, those characters who illustrate the Žižekian position that "...a *genuine* faith can be consciously built on the *naïve* foundation" (Wright 14); the potentially cynical strategies of spectators need also to be considered. Further resonating with Comolli's elaboration of a cynical viewing strategy, a Žižekian approach does not necessarily condemn this cynicism but instead sees it as a potential way for social change:

...what is required is a lie that is really noble *because everyone takes part in it knowing [it] not to be true*. Where Pascal thought that all you had to do to be religious was to go through the motions and belief would follow, the proper approach is to go through the motions with *everyone* knowing that belief *will never follow*. (Wright 18)

In this way Žižek's contemporary approach to ideology shares a similar fundamental concern to the politically modernist theory of ideology: a commitment to social change through intervention in ideological processes. Furthermore, this illustrates how the Žižekian approach entails discovering that 'truth' involves the acceptance of illusion: "One can get to the truth, not by trying to think more clearly or to see the thing as it really is, but by embracing so fully the fantasies we inhabit that their fantasmatic nature becomes inescapable" (Harpham 464-465). For Lacan this procedure is known as "traversing the fantasy" (Žižek, *Welcome* 17) and it constitutes the concluding moment of psychoanalytic treatment.

In a critical overview of the concept of fantasy in the work of Žižek, Nicol observes that

Time and time again [Žižek] explains how our experience of social reality depends upon "a certain *as if*": 'we act *as if* we

believe in the almightiness of bureaucracy, *as if* the President incarnates the Will of the People, *as if* the Party expresses the objective interest of the working class”. But he also reminds us that if we *do not* act in this way “the very texture of the social field disintegrates” – and this is an outcome of quite a different order to political revolution. (Nicol 152, internal citations from Žižek)

In a sense, Žižek’s work is characterised by a compulsive uncovering of the mechanisms of ideology in Western culture, “*as if* we can overthrow them”, with the implication being that we, in fact, cannot. By this reasoning Žižek’s work is open to the charge that it is just as cynical as the ideological processes it critiques (Nicol 152). To interpret this in another way, we could say that Žižek’s project is one of self-reflection.⁸¹ It is not only self-reflexive in that it tests the assumptions of the tools it uses, but also in that its form reflects its content. In other words, in repeatedly illustrating the mechanisms of ideology ‘*as if*’ we could act against them, but arguing that this is ultimately impossible because ideology is valuable and without it chaos would reign, the form of Žižek’s work reflects the very cynical content he describes.

For Žižek ideology is a way of masking the truth that subjectivity and social reality are constructed around a traumatic void (Nicol 147). This means ideology becomes much more complex than Marxist critique has considered to this point. Žižek “...shifts the debate on ideology away from epistemological issues of how we can come to know the positively defined substantive ‘truth’ about society to ontological issues concerning mechanisms of closure – mechanisms by which the substanceless ‘lack in the symbolic Other’ is concealed” (Glynos 198). It is not about

⁸¹ Žižek’s advertising copy for all-American trendy youth fashion retailer Abercrombie and Fitch could be considered as participating in this project of self-reflection. See Joshua Glenn’s ‘The Examined Life: Enjoy Your Chinos!’ for a fuller account of this and Žižek’s reaction to the suggestion that there is something unseemly about a left-wing intellectual writing copy for a multi-national retailer.

wallowing in the impasse, but acknowledging the complexities.

Following Marxist-derived critiques, “it is no longer sufficient to denounce the “artificial” character of the ideological experience, to demonstrate the way the object experienced by ideology as “natural” and “given” is effectively a discursive construction, a result of the network of symbolic overdetermination” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 129). In this way, Žižek “complicates two key tenets of ideology critique, the notion that ideology is a particular kind of discourse, and the idea that there is an alternative ‘reality’ behind the false one maintained by ideology” (Nicol 147).⁸² Ideology’s function is to fill the void created by the Real (Nicol 147). For Žižek, the postmodern form of ideology is one that is more self-reflexive than other forms, “continually flaunting its own ideological operations” (Nicol 149). The postmodern ideology of late capitalism ensures that the subject colludes in his or her own subjugation (Nicol 149), and such collusion could no doubt be considered as another way of traversing the fantasy. The way in which the *Edge of the Construct* films engage with the concept of the subject’s collusion in his or her own subjugation will be explored in the next two chapters of this thesis

Psychoanalysis has played a significant role in film theory, indelibly marking the trajectory it has taken and contributing significantly to the forging of a place for film studies in academia. The work of Žižek stands as a continuation of this relationship; however, in its idiosyncratic and self-reflexive method and form, Žižek’s work provokes new insights and exposes the field to new perspectives. In

⁸² This is an odd attribution to Žižek; surely he is following in Althusser’s thesis that there is no existence outside an ideology?

particular, Žižek's contribution to psychoanalytically-inflected theories of subjectivity and ideology can be seen as a bridge to the now canonised and in ways criticised (or oedipalised) 60s and 70s film studies that focused on the same nodal questions of subjectivity, ideology, and culture. Žižek's work reminds us of the importance of these questions, and that these questions remain to be answered. To return to the figure of the border, for the political modernists of the 60s and 70s, mainstream narrative cinema and its apparatus formed a border between the audience and their real, material conditions of existence.

Of most importance to this thesis, however, is how Žižek's project involves an examination of Lacan's category of the Real, a psychoanalytic category occluded in what constituted 'psychoanalytic film theory' in the 60s and 70s. The Real is an important category for this thesis, and it represents an attempt to understand the same key idea of poststructural thought that order is both supported *and* undermined by an unspeakable disorder. It is from this category of the Real that the social subject and the symbolically-generated ideology within which he or she lives can be best understood, and it is my contention that it is this category of the Real with which the Edge of the Construct films are engaged and which they complicate.

The following chapter will consider the representation of the barrier demarcating a symbolically constructed reality in the Edge of the Construct films, and what is implied to exist beyond this barrier. The psychoanalytic emphasis on gaze has been considered with respect to the order of the imaginary in this chapter. The following chapter will consider gaze as well as the psychoanalytic concept of voice as formal ways the Real can interrupt a symbolic reality, in this case, narrative film.

Chapter Four

The Figure of the Border and the *Sinthome*.

“I...fear for what I know is there, but cannot see, as one naturally fears the presence of a vast formless something...[M]agnitude, which up to a certain point has grandeur, has beyond it ghastliness”...They were oppressed with the presence of a vastness they could not cope with even as an idea, which hung about them like a nightmare. (Hardy 68-69)

As Žižek tells his readers repeatedly, the fascination with the barrier between the Real and reality is one exhibited by the later Lacan. This barrier comprises one of the most fundamental concepts of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory: “In the last stage [of Lacan’s work], the emphasis shifts to the barrier separating the Real from symbolically structured reality: to those leftovers or remnants of the Real that escape symbolic ‘mediation’” (‘Undergrowth of Enjoyment’ 11). In this statement, it appears that Žižek is conflating two different things: on the one hand there is the notion of the barrier demarcating the Real from symbolically generated reality. On the other hand there are those ‘parts’ of the Real that escape symbolic ‘mediation’, those tricky parts of the Real that give signification the slip, that erupt into the symbolic to remind us of its deception, its faulty attempts to paper over the cracks in symbolic efficiency.

The first section of this chapter will consider the first part of this statement: the depiction in popular cinema of a barrier that separates the Real from symbolically structured reality, and what lies beyond that barrier. Žižek writes in *The Fragile Absolute* that psychoanalysis “entails the acceptance and admission that all our

discursive formations are forever haunted by some ‘indivisible remainder’, by some traumatic spectral ‘rest’ that resists ‘confession’, that is, integration in the symbolic universe” (98). It is the rendering of this ‘indivisible remainder’ in the Edge of the Construct films that concerns me most in this thesis. The first section of this chapter is concerned, then, with the more or less literal rendering of this ‘indivisible remainder’ as it lurks on the other side of a barrier. In the second section of this chapter I will consider the second part of Žižek’s assessment of Lacan’s later work – “those leftovers or remnants of the Real that escape symbolic ‘mediation’”, and how they can be rendered in cinema. I will look at the more covert ways the Real irrupts into my examples of mainstream narrative cinema, and by extension, I will indicate that representations of the Real as such exist elsewhere in mainstream cinema where formal irruptions magnify thematic content.

In the concluding scenes of *Fight Club* our nameless narrator (Edward Norton) stands hand in hand with Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) – a woman he never apparently liked – as together they watch “the collapse of financial history”. The odd couple finds itself at the border between a construct and something else: the narrator and Marla gaze upon the fall of the delusory, bankrupt world order constructed by late capitalism and its consumer culture. Accordingly, it is implied, these two misfits hover on the brink of a more authentic world order. They gaze upon what the construct of post-industrial capitalist culture serves to conceal; they stand to see what lies *behind* the construct. In the terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, our narrator and Marla in *Fight Club* are set to be shown what lies behind the web of symbolic discourse: the Real. Or are they? The edge *Fight Club* interrogates is not

only the one between a symbolically constructed reality and something else, but also the 'edges' of the illusion of coherent subjectivity. *Fight Club* indicates that interrogating the edge of one's constructed reality necessitates an equal interrogation of one's identity. This trajectory is shared by each of the Edge of the Construct films, and is something I will explore throughout this chapter.

While this chapter will focus primarily on *Fight Club*, a similar moment of being on the edge between a sham reality and something else promised to be more authentic is shared by *The Matrix*, *Dark City*, and *The Truman Show*. Demonstrating the intensity with which the Edge of the Construct cycle was being made in the final years of the twentieth century, each of these films involves a moment where the protagonist is confronted with the worrisome border between his symbolically constructed 'reality', and something unknown. For example, in *The Matrix* Neo (Keanu Reeves) is intercepted by Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) and his group and is told about the digital code which generates a virtual illusion separating him from what are alleged to be his actual conditions of existence: he *thinks* he is a computer programmer; he is actually a source of power for the Machines. Towards the end of *Dark City*, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) encounters a wall that separates his 'fake' world from an unknown 'real' world beyond. And, at the end of *The Truman Show*, Truman (Jim Carrey) sails to the perimeter of his manufactured world, and finds, on the horizon, a door in the sky.

The dystopian near future *Fight Club* presents shares a certain kinship with the postmodern dirty realism of cyberpunk. The blighted urban landscape depicted in

Fight Club is very much that of cyberpunk fiction: “post-industrial urban cores, filled with abandoned buildings, decaying factories, and the waste products and ‘throwaway’ populations of twentieth-century capitalist culture” (Wegner 174). The scarred ‘desert of the real’ in *The Matrix*, and the dank, decaying appearance of the metropolis in *Dark City* share this decrepit air. *Truman Show* is the notable exception to this, depicting an unsettling world with too much light and colour. However, all of the Edge of the Construct films being considered in this thesis have an affinity with cyberpunk in ways that exceed visual design. If we consider Jameson’s words, the similarity is also one of narrative form, or its breakdown:

what is implied [by cyberpunk] is simply an ultimate historicist breakdown in which we can no longer imagine the future at all...Under those circumstances...a formerly futurological science fiction...turns into mere ‘realism’ and an outright representation of our present. (*Postmodernism* 286)

The vagueness of what lies beyond the construct for Marla and the narrator in *Fight Club* resonates with Jameson’s notion that in cyberpunk an imaginative paralysis of sorts is at work: except for Tyler Durden’s (Brad Pitt) enigmatic and decidedly primitivist parting monologue to the narrator, in the world that is *Fight Club* we can no longer imagine the future. In a scene rendered with editing a sound to evoke a dream state, Tyler intimates the new world order in the following:

In the world I see, you’re stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Centre. You will wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You’ll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you will see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison in the empty car pool lane of some abandoned super-highway.

It is crucial to note that this future world is rendered verbally, and not supported visually⁸³.

A similar imaginative paralysis occurs towards the end of the *Matrix* trilogy, *The Truman Show*, and *Dark City*. At the conclusion of the *Matrix* trilogy, the implication that Neo and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) will be able to live in an authentic, future world is undermined. The first instalment presents a scarred, desolate landscape, the battery fields and the Nebuchadnezzar as belonging to the authentic, real world. This parallels the Marxist position of *Cinématique* whereby an individual's 'real' conditions of existence lie in their material, economic relations. While the scarred 'desert of the real', the battery fields, and the Nebuchadnezzar appear to constitute the material conditions of existence, this world, in its all-too material tangibility, cannot be the Real, understood as something that always-already exceeds signification. However, the following instalments – *Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions* – problematise this depiction. If, as the second and third instalments suggest, Neo has the same powers in the 'real' world as he has in the fake Matrix, the implication is that the real world is no less a construction than the virtual one; the real world is, in fact, not an objective, true reality, but another virtual construction. In this regard, the 'real' is layered without end; the films continue to reach for it, but the Real continues to insist itself in its discrediting of the perceived reality the audience and the protagonists are presented with.

Similarly, at the end of *The Truman Show* Christof (Ed Harris) tells Truman that the so-called 'real' world beyond the hermetic bubble of Seahaven is no less fake

⁸³ This messianic speech is regarded ironically by the end of the film as the ultimate delusion/illusion, bringing us closer to Žižek's contention that the stepping out of ideology signals in fact its power ('Spectre of Ideology' 6).

than the staged town. We do not see Truman outside of the sound stage – the film itself does not imagine his future, and undermines his transcendence of illusion. In *Dark City*, John Murdoch breaks through the wall separating him from the Real of his existence, and finds it intolerable. Using his special power to ‘tune’ (to physically alter the world using the power of his mind), he fashions an idyllic seaside scene, complete with a pier. In this sense, Murdoch manufactures the Seahaven that Truman escapes. Irony abounds.

To return to the interior landscape of subjectivity equally interrogated in these films, the Edge of the Construct films regard with uncertainty the promise of a more authentic, self-knowing subject to accompany the more authentic ‘real’ beyond the edge of the constructed reality. For example, in *Dark City*, John Murdoch acknowledges that his identity is a sham, but, in an ironic twist, perversely fashions a unified and coherent identity from this mask.⁸⁴ Similarly, none of the *Matrix* films succeeds in ruling out the suggestion made by the verbose Architect that Neo is “the sum of the remainder of an imbalanced equation...the sixth version...of [an] integral anomaly...not unexpected and thus not beyond a measure of control”. Alternatively, however, Neo proves that he is, indeed, ‘special’ by defeating the agents and the machines.

At the end of *Fight Club*, it would seem that the nameless narrator has abolished the many fissures in his subjectivity – the blank nameless narrator, the third person “I am Jack’s [insert body part or emotional state]” statements, and Tyler Durden – but he has not. We know these fragments are not eradicated, because, in

⁸⁴ John’s acceptance of his inauthentic identity which he knows to be a fabrication is a useful illustration of Žižek’s notion of cynicism as a form of ideology, as explored in Chapter Three.

Tyler's words, of the insertion of "a nice big cock" into the final frames of the film. This rupture into the 'reality' of the film indicates that an unknowable kernel remains at the centre of this subject. The Edge of the Construct films, then, illustrate the Lacanian position that the dissolution of the symbolic is attendant with a crisis for the subject: a "psychotic autism" results (Žižek, 'Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 16; *Looking Awry* 19).

Why the ironic retreat to yet another symbolic order in each of these films? Why the reassertion of coherent, self-knowing subjects, only to undermine them? It could be suggested that this is a result of the formal constraints of commercially viable narrative film. These constraints dictate that while the Edge of the Construct films may interrogate the concept of symbolic efficiency, and in many ways depict it as thoroughly problematic and damaging to subjects, they necessarily reinvoke it to bring about necessary but ironic narrative closure. After all, how could film, itself a symbolic system, do otherwise?

In his discussion of 1950s melodrama, Robert Lang conceives of a similar tendency of American melodramatic film in the following way⁸⁵:

The Law might be paternal, familial, social, divine – but the melodrama investigates it, challenges it, in some fashion articulates how it functions, and then in the narrative invariably comes down on the side of it, usually without much conviction. In the best melodramas the "old order" is plainly irrecoverable, but since the form cannot envision a radically new order, the restoration of the "old order" (having been decisively discredited) is regarded ironically. (18)

⁸⁵ To recall a note made in the Introduction to this thesis, for L Williams Melodrama is the dominant mode of American cinema ('Melodrama Revisited' 42), and while the cycle I examine here is not melodramatic generically, at particular moments the melodramatic siphoning off of excessive sensibility to soundtrack and form can clearly be seen.

While formal constraints are not to be discounted, I would suggest that there is more to the situation than that. Following my discussion of form, content and matter in Chapter Two of this thesis, formal constraints are never solely formal. The formal outcomes concretise and negotiate the thematic struggles with the questions of illusion and ideology, and the attempt to represent the unrepresentable.

Žižek's discussion of the 'Lacanian act' can also shed some light on the imaginative blockage these films display at the moment where the protagonists reach the edge of their respective constructs. Through a discussion of the Lacanian act we can consider further how formal constraints and thematic content contaminate one another in the generic cycle of films I am examining. Resonating with Lang, Butler describes the Lacanian act as operating to break decisively with existing symbolic conventions:

There is always an element of the unexpected and unpredictable associated with the act, of something not foreseeable within the current conceptual horizons. And this means that if the act necessarily arises from within the old symbolic order, it cannot be named or judged within this order. Its very aim is to redefine what is possible... (66-67)

In Žižek's words, "...an authentic *act* occurs only when the subject risks a gesture that is no longer 'covered up' by the Big Other" (*Ticklish Subject* 264). To unite the Lacanian act with Lang's assessment of Hollywood melodrama, melodrama as the dominant mode of Hollywood cinema operates as a Big Other, a symbolic system which cannot successfully name or incorporate the new order inaugurated by the act without fatally compromising itself; the founding assumptions of Hollywood cinema, therefore, cannot tolerate the narrative content which threatens its symbolic imperatives. In each of the Edge of the Construct films, the protagonists engage in

self-destructive acts in their endeavours to reconstitute identities outside their respective symbolic orders. These acts institute, in turn, new symbolic orders. In this sense the act retroactively exposes the symbolic order as exactly that: a symbolic order. Each act inaugurates a new symbolic order, which will be historicised by an act to come, and so on. What happens, however, when the failure of a symbolic order implies not the invocation of a new master-signifier and a new symbolic order, but possibly posits the end of all symbolic orders?

With respect to the Real, the fact that no clear future can be imagined at the defining moment of any of the Edge of the Construct films – when the protagonist comes up against the limits of the symbolic law – leads us in two different directions. On one hand, the failure to imagine a coherent future for the protagonist and the audience could be interpreted as denying a representation of the Real, if we consider this defining moment a depiction of the threshold between symbolically-coded reality and the Real it conceals. On the other hand, given that the Real is that which defies signification, the ending of *Fight Club* could be considered to more fully render the Real in remaining silent about its ‘appearance’, if such a word can be used.

For psychoanalytic considerations of the Real, the Real is that which may be skirted around and gestured towards by verbal language, but which may never be explicitly named or shown. In cinema, therefore, the depiction of the Real must either be endlessly deferred by depicting instead a layering of fabricated realities, as the case in *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, and *Fight Club*). Or the filmmaker, in attempting to approximate the immateriality of the concept, is forever stymied by the

concrete, indexical nature of cinematic representation, (as is the case for *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor*). Here it is once again important to note that the Real is alternately described as a “raw material” that eludes conceptualisation, and yet is decidedly ‘present’, while it is also conceived of as a void, or absence of material. These are two contrasting images that are irreconcilable, and yet they are presented in various forms in commentary on Lacanian psychoanalysis.

My intention is not to set the two categories in opposition, to somehow assess which category more “authentically” shows the Real, but to consider how they differently respond to the desire to confront the ‘indivisible remainder’, that which defies incorporation into the symbolic chain.⁸⁶ That said, the ambivalence with which *Fight Club* ultimately treats the Real will be used to evaluate the ability of mainstream narrative cinema to ‘show’ the Real.

⁸⁶ It can be argued that those films depicting something on the other side of the barrier do so as a device for imparting the idea that there is no longer an objective ‘real’. It is an enduring device of SF fiction to “reveal to us an infinite series of unknown universes...” without ever showing us ‘the real’ (Wolfe 33). Stanislaw Lem bemoans the barrier that reveals not ‘the real’, but another in potentially infinite artificial environments: “...it is a sign of weakness in the science-fiction imagination that so often the barriers are purely artificial, and what lies beyond them in the unknown is just more of the same...” (cited in Wolfe 34).

What lies beyond?

The comparison of 'layered' and 'stymied' films reveals that within the Edge of the Construct microgenre two further sub-categories can be delineated: on the one hand there are those films that depict *something* physical, however ill-defined, beyond the barrier or construct (and here I would include *The Matrix*, *Fight Club* and *The Truman Show*). On the other hand there are those films that depict, or, attempt but fail to depict *nothing*, a horrifying void, on the other side of the barrier or construct. To this latter group I would include *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor*. *Dark City*'s depiction of twinkling stars in the sky is not, strictly speaking, *nothing* (in fact, empty, starless space is still something), but the vortex of empty space surrounding the 'world' of the protagonist at the film's end is a step closer to the concept of 'nothing' and 'immateriality' than the substitution of another material reality. Similarly, in *The Thirteenth Floor* the audience is shown the green digital frame which constructs the fake realities, fading into the distance in decreasing detail. This digital outline is still *something*, although it evokes the void upon which the fake worlds are created.

At first glance, *The Matrix* seems to belong to the first category identified here, showing a material wasteland to be the actual reality behind the fake reality of the Matrix, with the green alphanumeric code being the digital support or reality generating the illusory Matrix. However, the use of virtual reality as barrier differentiates it from *The Truman Show*, where the barrier is physical, and *Fight Club*, where the barrier is ideological and/or psychological. More pressingly, however,

while *The Matrix* appears to belong to the first category, the ultimate ambivalence of the trilogy towards the authenticity of ‘the desert of the real’ undermines such a neat categorisation. This profound ambivalence toward the authentic future moment it promises is equally shared by *Fight Club*.

This section will compare these two categories of Edge of the Construct films in order to come to a greater understanding of what they have to say about theories concerning cinema and ideology, and more the implications of these films for psychoanalytically underpinned considerations of the barrier separating the Real from symbolically generated reality.

In his critique of the first instalment of the *Matrix* trilogy, Žižek takes umbrage with the idea that beyond the barrier of the fake universe lies an objective true reality. He writes “...what if it is precisely this ‘happy’ denouement...that is ideology at its purest? What if ideology resides in the very belief that, outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some ‘true reality to be entered?’” (‘The Matrix’ 242).⁸⁷ Thus, according to Žižek, we are all the more in the thrall of ideology for believing that beyond or beneath the perceived, symbolic, fake reality we can have access to a true, authentic reality. He writes, “the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it” (‘Spectre of Ideology’ 6).

Here I would like to first consider those films that attempt precisely that impossible gesture: that attempt to depict *nothing* beyond the symbolic construct. Of those selected for examination here are *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor*. I will

⁸⁷ Žižek suggests that a more accurate understanding of the Real, in Lacanian terms, would be “the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent...a deadlock of impossibility” (‘The Matrix’ 246). Already the difficulties for mainstream narrative cinema to depict such an abstraction are clear. Furthermore, Žižek’s use of the hypothetical mode, through the conjunction ‘what if...?’ here signals his own unease in proposing the truth of the matter.

proceed from an evocative example deployed by Žižek to convey the relationship between the Real and reality, and the function of the barrier as separating inner (real) and outer (reality) ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 3).

It is difficult to discern, but Mark Rothko's *Untitled No. 4* depicts a large rectangle of black, floating in a void of a slightly different black. Matthew Collings writes about the abstract expressionist Rothko that, "...his paintings emphasised the Void. The Void with all its dread" (167). Žižek seizes upon Rothko's looming, tortured works as expressions of the Real ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 16; *Looking Awry* 19). Of Rothko's work, Žižek writes: "...they represent a series of colour-variations on the motif of the relation between reality and the Real" ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 16; *Looking Awry* 19). In Žižek's formulation, the black background represents reality, which in turn

derives its consistency and meaning entirely from the 'black hole' in its centre (the Lacanian *das Ding*, the Thing that gives body to the substance of enjoyment) from, that is, the exclusion of the Real, the transformation of the status of the Real into a central lack. Like all Rothko's late pictures, this is a manifestation of a fight to maintain the frontier separating reality from the Real, to prevent the Real (the central black square) from overflowing the entire field, to preserve the distinction between the square and what must at all costs remain its background; for if the square comes to occupy the whole field, and the difference between figure and ground is lost, we are precipitated into psychotic autism. ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 16; *Looking Awry* 19)

Here it is worth recalling the notion of reality as a 'plug', of sorts, for this lack: if the plug is removed, the Real threatens to flood through the hole and to engulf the reality so tenuously perched on its edges. The situation compulsively forestalled in Rothko's

works is produced. Seen in this way, Rothko's works constitute compulsively repetitive attempts to stave off this annihilation.

In contrast to Rothko's work, Žižek refers to the science fiction short story 'The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag' (Heinlein 1964). This story tells of a protagonist who discovers that his world is the creation of mysterious beings "who create different worlds, including our own, as experimental works of art" (Žižek, 'Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 12). The protagonist is further informed that there are one or two imperfections in the design of his world, which are to be repaired in the next few hours. He is instructed to drive to the city with his wife, but that under no circumstances are they to open the windows of their car. However, as they are driving they see a road accident, and then a police car. Their sense of duty prevails and they stop to inform the police of the accident. The protagonist asks his wife to lower her window

She complied, then gave a sharp intake of breath and swallowed a scream. He did not scream, but he wanted to. Outside the open windows was no sunlight, no cops, no kids – nothing. Nothing but a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life. They could see nothing of the city through it, not because it was too dense but because it was – empty. No sound came out of it; no movement showed in it. It merged with the frame of the window and began to drift inside. Randall shouted, 'Roll up the window!' She tried to obey, but her hands were nerveless; he reached across her and cranked it up himself...The sunny scene was restored; through the glass they saw the patrolman...and the city beyond. Cynthia put a hand on his arm. 'Drive on, Teddy!' 'Wait a minute,' he said tensely, and turned to the window beside him. Very cautiously he rolled it down – just a crack, less than an inch. It was enough. The formless grey flux was out there too; through the glass city traffic and sunny street were plain, through the opening – nothing. (Heinlein 147-148)

In this case for Žižek, the “grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life” represents “the Lacanian real, the pulsing of the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality” (‘Undergrowth of Enjoyment’ 12; *Looking Awry* 14-15), and the interior of the car and its ‘screens’ represents reality. Of these two reversals on the relationship between the Real and reality, Žižek elaborates:

It would be difficult to invent a better metaphor for psychosis: in contrast to the ‘normal’ state of affairs, in which the Real is a lack, a hole in the middle of the symbolic order (the central black spot in Rothko’s paintings), we have here an ‘aquarium’ of the Real encircling isolated islands of the Symbolic. In other words, it is no longer enjoyment which drives the proliferation of signifiers by its lack, functioning as a central ‘black hole’ around which the signifying network is interlaced; it is, on the contrary, the symbolic order itself which is reduced to the status of floating islands of signifiers, albuminous *iles flottantes* basking in a sea of yolky enjoyment. (Žižek, ‘Undergrowth of Enjoyment’ 19-20)

It is precisely this ‘psychotic’ version of the relationship between the Real and reality that the Edge of the Construct films seek to depict when they attempt to show us ‘nothing’. Consider the scene the viewer is presented with in *The Matrix* when Neo is introduced to the loading program, or John Murdoch’s discovery in *Dark City* that his world is confined to a disk, floating in infinite space, or how Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko), the protagonist in *The Thirteenth Floor*, is confronted at the edge of his reality with an infinitely expanding inky blackness.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Roz Kaveney observes that at this moment in *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, and *Thirteenth Floor*, the protagonists are only doing “in an actualised metaphor, what [they have] gradually been doing throughout the movie”, which is to confront the limits of their knowable subjectivities as well as those of the consensual realities circumscribing them (70).

The central paradox of cinema attempting to represent the ineffable can be illustrated in a comparison of the sign in verbal language and the sign in visual representation. James Monaco writes:

In literature, the relationship between signifier and signified is a main locus of art...but in film, the signifier and signified are almost identical: the sign of cinema is a short-circuit sign. A picture bears some direct relationship with what it signifies, a word seldom does...Film does not suggest...: it states. (158-159)

Vivian Sobchack identifies this attitude as 'naïve' (*Screening Space* 24). She concedes, however, that

Certainly, abstractions and ideas are best communicated through written language and mathematical formulae...But – and this must be emphasised – SF literature is also in no way able to duplicate ...abstract thought and still remain fiction...Good fiction may provoke ideas, but it does not present them in the raw. (*Screening Space* 24)

I am inclined to agree with Sobchack; however, there are two problems with her suggestion. Firstly, I would question her emphasis on mathematics as a privileged field having unmediated access to abstract thought. Let it not be forgotten that the symbol π , for example, is exactly that: a symbol. Mathematical language is still a symbolic system and cannot represent anything "in the raw". The second problem here is that the Real is by definition an *exceptionally* abstract concept. The question needs to be asked: in the cinema's deployment of the short-circuit sign, where the signifier nearly equals the signified, what happens when the cinema attempts to speculate about the frailty of the Real, as the *verbal* example of 'The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag' does? What happens when cinema attempts to render the Real, that concept for which no signifier is adequate, least of all a signifier that is

‘almost identical’ to the signified, material object captured by the photographic process?

Daniel Galouye’s ‘Tonight the Sky Will Fall’ is a science fiction story that tells the tale of Tarl, who realises that he generates the world somnambulistically. The shock of this realisation results in the unravelling of the world around him:

...He turned and looked up the street.

Then he staggered backward in amazement! The scene was as it had been, at least for a distance of three hundred feet.

But, beyond that was – *nothing! Absolutely nothing!*

It was as though someone had taken a giant cleaver and cut the rest of existence away, leaving on the other side of the cut an unimaginably dark, starless, sightless, soundless void!

Shaking, he whirled around and stared to the rear of them. It was the same in that direction. A block of the scene of devastation. But beyond that *nothing!* He and the girl and Charles were standing on a disk that was located in an infinite void. They were the centre of a sphere – a sphere of reality – scarcely more than six hundred feet in diameter, with the vast reaches of an unbounded, matterless universe around them. (96)⁸⁹

It is enlightening to compare these verbal attempts to render ‘nothing’ with the visual representations of the moment when our cinematic protagonists arrive at and breach the boundaries of their worlds. In *Dark City* John Murdoch, for example, breaks through the brick wall enclosing his world, to reveal not the desired, nostalgically imagined Shell Beach, but an infinitely vast expanse of space, stretching out in all directions (see fig. 7, p 195). There is one crucial difference, however, between the verbal examples quoted above, and the scene with which we are

⁸⁹ It is interesting to note that the verbal language in this example needs to take recourse to the font effect created by use of italics, bestowing greater emphasis to the words than the words alone could carry. It is also important here to note the risk in overemphasising the spatial dimension of the Real. In the verbal examples provided here, the Real is often accompanied by a certain stifling claustrophobia, invoked in reaction to its infinitely sprawling void.

presented in *Dark City*: forced into a frame, the Real is bereft of its yawning infinity; it may stretch in all directions, but only until it meets the edges of the frame. This is a simple observation, but is not to be underestimated when considering attempted renditions of the Real. As Natalie Kosoi observes of the nothingness represented in Rothko's work, a painting about nothing is still *something* (21).

The depiction of *something*, a positive presence beyond the barrier might not immediately present us with the Real (and no system of representation, no matter how subtle or inclined to the abstract it may be, can ever achieve this), it could be considered to evoke the infinite quality of the Real in another, less obvious way. In the third instalment of the *Matrix* trilogy the audience is shown that Neo's special powers to exert mind over matter in the illusory virtual reality of the Matrix mysteriously work in the 'desert of the real' also. The effect of this is to undermine the authenticity of the 'desert of the real'. This then opens the trilogy to the possibility of there being an "infinite series of virtual realities" (Žižek, 'The Matrix' 245). Similarly, in *The Truman Show* Christof tells Truman that the world out here (the 'real', authentic world) is no less fake than the meticulously constructed stage set of Seahaven where he has lived his whole life. Finally, the narrative of *Fight Club* makes clear that the 'real', more authentic life proposed by Tyler Durden is just as ideologically circumscribed and governed by rules as the consumer culture it seeks to denounce, if not more so.

Žižek astutely observes that this outcome, where we have potentially infinite 'fake' realities, evades the Real defined as "the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent...a deadlock of impossibility" ('The Matrix' 246). I do not intend to

argue with this, as for psychoanalytic understandings of the Real it is irrefutable.

However, it seems that Žižek is condemning film for failing to do something it is

impossible for film to do. As Kosoi writes of the nothingness made visible in

Rothko's paintings:

...how can we perceive nothingness or know what it is?
Everywhere we look we can see, feel, or think something. If
we shut our eyes and ears, we can always sense our
heartbeat; no matter how much we try not to think about
anything at all, we will still be aware of our own existence;
hence, to associate an artwork, which is always something,
with nothingness seems absurd. (21)

We can see a solution to this impasse when we consider Eagleton's
conception of the Real discussed in Chapter Three as

[an] 'inruption' of ... non-sense into our signifying systems
... because it can never be signified, seen head-on, it is also
a sort of nothing, detectable only through its effects... We
know it only from the way it acts as a drag upon discourse.
('Enjoy!' 42)

Eagleton's interpretation of the Real can be usefully paired with Sobchack's
contention that the aim of all fiction is not to declaratively yield information, but to
provoke the audience to think, via the indirect "development of an abstract premise"
(*Screening Space* 25). Synthesising the approaches of Eagleton and Sobchack, the
following formulation results: the Real cannot be shown "head-on", nor is it fiction's
duty to provide such explicit formulations of abstract concepts. As outlined earlier, no
system of representation has privileged access to 'abstract concepts'. Moreover, the
Real as a concept can only ever be revealed "through its effects" or by indirect
development. The edge of the construct narratives offered by the *Matrix* trilogy, *The
Truman Show*, and *Fight Club* may attempt to show something material beyond the

barrier or construct, but ultimately each of these films undermines the authenticity of that revelation. By extension, they impart a sense of inconceivable vastness, sharing the characterisation of the Real as infinitely boundless, and therefore provoke the viewer's imagination to conceive of the abstract nature of the Real in ways that the truncated, delimited, framed images of the infinite universe in *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor* do not.

To put this another way, we could consider Mark Rothko's wish for his own work to "cover up something similar to this 'nothingness'" (Kosoi 30). In covering over the possibility of nothingness, these films, like Rothko's paintings,

draw our attention to the fact that they simply *are*, that they are something rather than nothing, and in this sense they conceal nothingness. Paradoxically, this concealing is also a revealing, first, because for Heidegger, nothingness is what makes it possible for us to be aware that something is in the first place, and second, because it draws our attention to the fact that there could be nothingness instead. (Kosoi 30)

The Real could be characterised as the unbearable, unknowable vastness of being, and ultimately even those films that attempt to depict the Real in its empty chaotic horror, the characters are shown to be unable to withstand the intolerability of the notion that beneath the symbolic surface lies a chaotic void. Recall the decidedly ambivalent closure of *Dark City*, as John Murdoch, having perceived the gaping chasm of the Real, proceeds to cynically extend upon and thus ratify the fake world, creating Shell Beach.

The Lacanian way of thinking about the dissolution of the symbolic, resulting in the approach to the impossible-Real, as explored in the previous chapter of this

thesis, can shed some light on why Murdoch finds nothing intolerable, and why he ironically restores the 'old order':

In psychoanalysis, knowledge [of the impossible-Real] is marked by a lethal dimension: the subject must pay the approach to it with its own being. In other words, to abolish the misrecognition [upon which the imaginary self is founded] means at the same time to abolish, to dissolve, the 'substance' which was supposed to hide itself behind the form-illusion of misrecognition. This 'substance' – the only one recognized in psychoanalysis – is, according to Lacan, enjoyment [*jouissance*]: access to knowledge is then paid with a loss of enjoyment – enjoyment, in its stupidity, is possible only on the basis of certain non-knowledge, ignorance. (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 68)

In this way, the two groups identified at the outset of this section (those that materially attempt to show something, and those that attempt to show nothing) ultimately share an ambivalent attitude towards the Real they offer. Both groups fail to depict the Real, fail to give the audience direct access to an excessively abstract concept. But they cannot help but fail. In their defence, if we consider those films which attempt to *represent* nothing, we can see that while not actually *being* nothing, they cover over nothingness in a way which foregrounds the notion of nothingness. Similarly, films like *The Matrix* trilogy, which present the audience with a seemingly infinite array of fake realities, evoke nothingness in two ways: firstly, they open out to a sense of the boundlessness of the void, and secondly, as with the first group, they cover over nothingness in a way that reminds us that there *could be* nothingness.

The vision of the not-too-distant future advanced by the Edge of the Construct films is profoundly paradoxical: it is a vision of the future as the Real, a vision that forces us to the impossible limits of imagination, and to the limits of all

representation. As the example of *Dark City* shows us, the infinite vastness of the Real is depicted as intolerable, and while we know it is there, those of us that identify with the protagonist are happier covering it over and pretending it is not.

Rather than criticise the folly of these films' attempts to grapple with the Real, we could view them not as sincere attempts to display the Real, but instead as ways of historicising the present (as Jameson suggests all future projections inevitably are ['Progress Versus Utopia' 152]). Seen from this perspective, these films cannot and do not show us the Real, but they can remind us that what we see is not it.⁹⁰

The *Sinthome*: hearing the inaudible, seeing the impossible.

Having examined the Edge of the Construct films and the way they attempt to render what lies beyond the barrier between reality and the Real, I would now like to turn my attention to the second way in which the Real can be revealed through cinema. I turn now to "those leftovers or remnants of the Real that escape symbolic 'mediation'" (Žižek, 'Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 11). The Real is not restricted to its characteristic of infinite vastness: to repeat Eagleton's formulation of the Real, it is the interruption of meaninglessness into symbolic systems, which makes itself visible indirectly through the way it contaminates and impedes discourse ('Enjoy!' 42).

⁹⁰ The persistence of the motif of the individual who overcomes the duping effects of ideology can be considered a perverse undertaking for the cinematic medium in a second way, which cannot be fully explored but deserves mention here. Since its inception, the cinematic medium has been considered among certain quarters (such as the political modernists) to be a complicit agent in the ideological process. But in showing protagonists who become alert to the presence of ideology's masking processes the Edge of the Construct films do something provocative, which is to engage with ideology overtly, in ways perhaps unforeseen by the political modernists.

Žižek reinforces this idea when he reminds us that the Real is “the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent...a deadlock of impossibility” (‘The Matrix’ 246).

As explored in Chapter Three, while nothingness or ‘the void’ is a fundamental characteristic of the Real, it is not necessarily synonymous with the Real, and to consider the rendition of the Real only to the extent that a sense of *nothingness* is evoked would be to risk misrepresenting what the Real is. While nothingness is indeed a characteristic of the Real, it is important to remember that the Real is more complex than that. Recall that the Real is not only that which lies beyond the horizon of our knowledge: it is also that which is seated at meaning’s heart. Consider the case of Rothko’s pictures where, in Žižek’s analysis, the Real is the gap or hole in the centre, around which meaning revolves. As a name for such a hole or gap, Žižek, via Lacan, designates *le sinthome* as “that singular element of the Real to be found adrift within each subject” (Wright and Wright 12). The *sinthome* is “...a fragment of the signifier, inescapably permeated with mindless enjoyment” (Žižek, ‘Undergrowth of Enjoyment’ 10).⁹¹ Such a conception is not unlike Eagleton’s conception of the Real as evidencing itself in the way it impedes symbolic orders and causes them to fail.

The notion of the *sinthome* thus radically alters the procedures of ideological analysis:

ideology is usually conceived of as a discourse, an
enchainment of elements whose meaning is overdetermined

⁹¹ Here ‘enjoyment’ is understood as the common translation for the French *jouissance*. In Lacanian terms, *jouissance* refers to “a moment of pleasure when *the body* breaks free from social control” (Fiske 94 [emphasis added]), or a moment that eludes expression in the symbolic order. I have deliberately emphasized *the body* in the Fiske quote, as it anticipates the examination of the body as a site for the *sinthome* to come in the following chapter. It is also not without significance that *jouissance* is conceived of here as a substance, as excessively material matter, not a conceptual abstraction.

by their specific articulation, by the way some nodal point or master-signifier totalises them into a coherent and homogeneous field...It is no longer sufficient to denounce ideological experience as artificial...What we must do...is...to isolate the *sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination, to force us to see its utter stupidity, as a meaningless fragment of the Real...the stupidity of a material presence which escapes historical mediation. (Žižek, 'Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 10-11)⁹²

Perhaps it derives from Žižek's intense interest in Lacan's later work, that which emphasises the Real rather than the signifiers or symbolic that hopelessly try to substitute for it, but Žižek's work exposes the emphasis on the material or economic conditions of existence stressed by *Cinéthique* and, to a certain extent, the *Cahiers* and *Screen* theorists, as another ideology. Interrogating the modernist approach to technology, Žižek writes:

modernist technology is 'transparent' in the sense of retaining the illusion of an insight into 'how the machine works'; that is to say, the screen of the interface was supposed to allow the user direct access to the machine behind the screen; the user was supposed to 'grasp' its workings... (*Plague of Fantasies* 131)

While Žižek is describing digital technologies, it is not difficult to perceive that the political modernists suffered from the similar illusion of understanding how the machine *really* works. In Žižek's work, we can discern a shift in the theorisation of what is supposed to lie beneath the illusion of ideology. Rather than the material or economic conditions of existence, Žižek gives a name to the 'eruptions' or cracks in

⁹² It is important to note the similarity of the 'meaningless' of the *sinthome*, and Kristeva's formulation of the abject as "the place where meaning collapses" (*Powers of Horror* 2). This anticipates that the body may be one way in which the Real is rendered in cinema. For Roland Barthes, *jouissance* results in a loss of selfhood, a regression, momentarily, back to the real; Barthes emphasises the blissful characteristic of *jouissance*, and distinguishes it from pleasure in that it cannot be expressed in words, it cannot be contained in the symbolic order (21).

the edifice of ideology: the Real. For Žižek, this Real consists not in the material conditions of existence, but in something far less certain and tangible.

Žižek manages, by a sleight of hand perhaps, to unify Marxism and psychoanalysis without having to choose one or the other: beneath the veil of ideology, he suggests, is struggle, or antagonism. Via Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, he interprets class struggle in this context as Real, rather than as part of objective social reality (“I Hear You with My Eyes” 113). This struggle or antagonism is the very impediment that undermines every rational totalisation. In other words, class struggle is Real in

the strict Lacanian sense: a ‘hitch’, an impediment which gives rise to ever-new symbolizations by means of which one endeavours to integrate and domesticate it...but which simultaneously condemns these endeavours to ultimate failure. (‘Spectre of Ideology’ 22)

‘Struggle’ or ‘antagonism’ understood in this way are less clearly defined and discernable as ‘material conditions of existence’, but remain the permanent engine of ideological activity and its contestation. The Real, for Žižek, is (as already considered) the impediment that refuses the totalising gesture of every symbolic order (Žižek ‘Spectre of Ideology’ 22).

Considering the Real as contained in ‘intrusions’ into the symbolic world inhabited by the narrator, *Fight Club* is arguably the film out of all those selected for examination that is the most fruitful in this regard. Several of the devices used by director David Fincher hark back to structuralist-materialist films, in particular the self-conscious appearance of celluloid wavering, in a key scene where Tyler addresses the audience. Fargier and Leblanc would surely have applauded this

technique in a mainstream narrative film ‘revealing’ its material conditions of existence. Furthermore, there are frequent instances where narrative content refers to narrative form. For example, subliminal inserts are referred to as part of Tyler’s mischief at his job as a cinema projectionist and *de facto* editor in the diegetic world, and simultaneously subliminal inserts of Tyler and penises ‘appear’ as senseless interruptions to that diegetic world for the observant viewer. Upon reflection, however, rather than being senseless they are actually loaded with overdetermined significance pertaining to the narrative on masculinity in crisis offered by the film, and its overriding tone of irony.

At other moments in *Fight Club* characters self-consciously refer to narrative techniques including ‘flashback humour’. At the end of the film the elliptical narrative form is acknowledged as the narrator says “I still don’t know what to say”. Each of these examples could be read as a *sinthome*, were they not so calculated; the interruption of the primary narrative with these self-reflexive moments does not result in any way in the utter senselessness that the *sinthome* should evoke, according to Žižek’s definition. Indeed, the momentary disruption of the dominant narrative with these moments of self-reflexive play in *Fight Club* results in a re-reading of that primary narrative, and a more complex, deeper meaning is made open to the viewer. The interruptions allow the viewer to retroactively perceive the crisis of subjectivity experienced by the protagonist in a decidedly calculated fashion; the nameless narrator (as foreshadowed by his very namelessness) is, in fact, Tyler Durden. Tyler Durden is not his external friend, but one of many fissures in his identity. There is no ‘stupidity of a material presence which escapes historical mediation’ to be found here.

Žižek advances gaze and voice as privileged conduits whereby the Real erupts in cinema, which is not surprising given the emphasis Lacan places on gaze in the imaginary order, and the role of the voice in the symbolic order of language. Žižek and Renata Salecl identify gaze and voice as Lacan's addition to Freud's 'partial objects': remnants of an excessive *jouissance* that are not yet contained by the symbolic system (2-3).⁹³ Where Freud posited the breasts, faeces, and phallus as such partial objects, Lacan added the phoneme, the gaze and the voice – “the nothing” – as undisciplined interruptions to symbolic stability ('Subversion of the Subject' 315).⁹⁴

For Žižek, the Lacanian gaze and voice are neither attributes nor activities of a subject; rather, they are 'on the side of the object', in the sense that they mark the point from which the viewed object 'returns the gaze' (or voice) and regards us, the spectators (*Fright of Real Tears* 34; “I Hear You with My Eyes” 91). In Žižek's estimation, the gaze results through a fault of the suture, and is *the* cinematic expression of the uncanny: the object or thing to which the spectator's gaze becomes attached cannot provide us with a “point of view”; it is “the spectacle of a free-floating Gaze” (*Fright of Real Tears* 33). In this sense, the gaze as the impossible point of view shot is, in fact, more common than the perfect shot reverse-shot.

Gaze as a conduit for the Real is exploited with irregularity in *Fight Club*. A disorienting example of this occurs at the film's commencement, with the molecular vision which renders the narrator's synapses and neurons, before panning across the

⁹³ In the same volume Mladen Dolar discusses voice in 'The Object Voice', against the Derridean tradition which sees a bias in metaphysics towards the voice over the written word. Dolar instead argues for a different metaphysical tradition, one which sees the voice as dangerous, and to be tamed (7-31).

⁹⁴ Freud's emphasis on body parts and the excremental foreshadows the discussion of the body's relationship to the Real to come in Chapter Five.

surface of his skin, along the barrel of the gun stuffed in his mouth, to the hand that holds the gun, until his face, to this point rendered in such extreme close-up that it is blurry and indefinable, comes into focus. In this example, then, the gaze as a *sinthome* exemplifies the eruption of a certain meaninglessness into *Fight Club*: the absence of a character's point of view confuses the viewer and could plausibly be considered as 'meaningless' or utilised as an instance of *jouissance* as opposed to contributing anything of significance. What we are seeing is an impossible view. Paradoxically, this only adds to the significance of the film, given that a key theme this film explores is coherent subjectivity, which is traditionally thought to be connected to the human brain.⁹⁵

Similarly, the camera work in *The Matrix* is deliberately disorientating at crucial moments: in particular, the shot reverse-shot technique is manipulated to confuse the viewer. When Morpheus greets Neo in the loading program, shot one shows Morpheus from Neo's point of view, as Neo is located to the left of the frame in an over-the-shoulder shot before the camera tracks in to Morpheus. Shot two, however, shows Morpheus turn to look to the right of the frame, where Neo now stands in the distance. Neo is now at the other side of the white space they occupy.

This place, it is clear, does not obey laws of physics or continuity of space and time. A similarly disorienting disjunction between the rendering of point of view occurs in the scene when Neo is 'born', and in one shot we are shown, it would seem, his point of view overlooking a vista of pods, but then the camera zooms in on Neo.

⁹⁵ Žižek discusses similar camera work in the opening of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, although it works in the reverse, and at the beginning of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* ('Lamella of David Lynch' 206-207).

The effect of this is to imply either that he is looking at himself, or that this is a place where conventional rules of space and time do not apply.

In addition to citing those uncanny moments where the gaze is irreconcilable with any subject position in the diegetic world ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 8), Žižek considers those moments where the voice is disengaged from any particular subject ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 9). Žižek borrows from Michel Chion's concept acousmatic sound, defined as sound that is heard in the visual absence of the source of the sound (Chion, *L'Audio-vision* 63). Žižek is interested in acousmatic *voice* in particular, understood as voice that "cannot be properly located, being neither part of the diegetic 'reality' of the story nor of the sound accompaniment" ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 9). Crucially, for Chion, acousmatic voice is "Neither inside nor outside" (*La Voix au Cinéma* 30, 34 my translation⁹⁶). Acousmatic voice, then, disrupts secure categorisation of the world into binary pairs. The acousmatic "being" occupies this no-place (Chion, *La Voix au Cinéma* 34), and therefore shares in the liminality of *khôra* and the Real.

Taking his analysis of voice further, Žižek asserts that it is "an uncanny presence" ('Eclipse of Meaning' 211). He continues:

I hear myself speaking, yet what I hear is never fully myself but a parasite, a foreign body at my very heart...The voice's 'self-identity' resides in the fact that the voice *qua* medium of transparent self-presence *coincides* with the voice *qua* foreign body which undercuts my self-presence 'from within'. ('Eclipse of Meaning' 211)

Voice, for Žižek, is the meaningless fragment of the Real that remains when signification has been 'deducted'; voice resists meaning ('Eclipse of Meaning' 212).

⁹⁶ All quotations from *La Voix au Cinéma* are based on my translation.

It is “the opaque stain which decentres me from within, a strange body in my very midst...” (‘Eclipse of Meaning’ 212).

The example of voice as *sinthome* provided by Žižek (via Chion) is that of Mrs Bates’ voice in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*: hers is a voice that is disembodied; we hear her voice, and see Norman’s (Anthony Perkins) body, which does not speak. It is an interior monologue we witness (symbolically), but it exceeds that significance through its strangeness, in the sense that it does not seem possible that this voice, rendered in the conventions of internal diegetic sound, could belong to Norman. But it does belong to him, and this results in an uncanny effect upon the audience.

Tracing the status of voice in *Fight Club* reveals a significant way in which the blurring of the safe binaries of inside and outside, and of coherent and secure subjectivity, is articulated in this film. Analysing this film for sound that is diegetic and non-diegetic is difficult, precisely because it is elaborately layered; the confusion between these levels is exploited to magnify the subjective confusion experienced by the narrator.

Fight Club begins with a conventional past-tense voice-over narration, describing the events as they unfold. However, at key moments it is apparent that this voice-over is not reliable. When the narrator first meets Tyler Durden, the voice-over narration and diegetic voice interact: the voice over narration begins with “This is how I met...”, and the narrator on-screen finishes the sentence: “Tyler Durden”. Already, then, Tyler Durden is associated with the becoming-unhinged of neat levels of film form, and the undermining of navigable temporality.

The instability of the border demarcating diegetic sound from non-diegetic sound is intensified prior to the first fight between Tyler and the narrator. The narrator's voice-over says "Let me tell you about Tyler Durden". The narrator then appears in frame, in a scene depicting Tyler's work in a cinema projection room. The narrator addresses the audience, while Tyler busies himself in the background. Tyler then addresses the audience, asking "Why would anyone want this shit job?", and the narrator answers, as though it is a rhetorical question. This interaction between the narrator and Tyler, both addressing the audience, continues in a scene depicting Tyler's work as a banquet waiter at a hotel. The blurring of the status and function of voice, then, accompanies the fissuring of the apparently unified narrating subject.

Literalising Žižek's contention that the voice in talking cinema exemplifies the uncanny status of the voice in general, which never *quite* belongs to the body it comes from, and which requires a certain degree of ventriloquism ("I Hear you with my Eyes" 92), Tyler occasionally can be seen 'feeding' the narrator dialogue. In a doctor's office, receiving treatment for wounds sustained while fighting, Tyler appears, out of focus in the background, saying "I fell down some stairs", which the narrator, in focus, then repeats. A similar exchange occurs when Tyler whispers "This conversation is over", from the basement of the Paper Street House, a sentence which the narrator instantaneously repeats to Marla.

In the Paper Street House, the narrator discovers *Reader's Digest* articles written in first person, from the point-of-view of body parts: "I am Jack's medulla oblongata". This is a conjunction the narrator adopts to articulate his emotional states in the scenes he describes, and begins in the voice-over narration only. The present

tense of the 'am' in "I am Jack's raging bile duct", for example, destabilises the formerly consistent and conventional past tense used in the voice-over narration, indicating the intrusion of the Real and its disregard for stable temporality.

The instability of the status and function of voice reaches a climax when this phrasing, previously uttered only in the voice-over narration, is used by the narrator in the scene when he confronts his boss. 'Jack's Smirking Revenge' is described by Žižek as "an almost unbearably painful scene", ('Ethical Plea for Lies' 180). This scene constitutes a key moment in *Fight Club* not only for the continuation of the theme of masochistic violence, but also because it is in this scene where the boundary between the voices in the narrator's head and external subjectivity is breached. In this scene, our narrator beats himself up in the presence of his boss. He says, in the diegetic space: "I am Jack's complete lack of surprise", a turn of phrase previously reserved for his internal reflections made audible via voice-over. Drawing our attention back to the Real, the narrator's voice-over narration of this scene explains that "under and behind and inside everything this man took for granted, something horrible had been growing". Like the Real, this 'something' is everywhere and nowhere; it is nameless. The confusion between the status and function of the voice indicates the Real in its collapsing of the distinction between inside and outside, past and present.

Following the use of voice in *Fight Club* as an indicator of the Real, Tyler's maniacal giggle is first heard in the diegetic space, when he asks the narrator to hit him. This giggle recurs throughout *Fight Club* in the accompanying soundtrack, echoing in the scene where the narrator realises Tyler Durden is a part of his identity.

However, while the giggle does not clearly belong to the diegetic space, it does not sit comfortably in the soundtrack, and becomes acousmatised. In becoming acousmatised, Tyler's giggle takes on the horrifying dimensions of the spectral acousmatic voice, hovering in an indeterminate space (Žižek, "I Hear you with my Eyes" 92).

To conclude my analysis of voice in *Fight Club*, I want to return to Žižek's assessment of the voice in *Psycho*. The scene where Tyler feeds the narrator dialogue from the basement of the Paper Street House recalls the scene in *Psycho* where Perkins' Bates and his mother are heard fighting off-screen in a similar way. If we return to Žižek's example of Mrs Bates' voice in search of a body, the question arises: how is this an example of the *sinthome* understood to operate as the 'stupidity of a material presence which escapes historical mediation'? Surely the articulation of Mrs Bates' voice yields further meaning, in its implication of the impossibly fractured subjectivity of Norman, rather than senselessness?⁹⁷ It is a profound addition to the meaning of the film, rather than 'stupid' or the collapse of sense in *jouissance*. Similarly, voice in *Fight Club* operates, at first glance, to destabilise the safe distinction between inside and outside, past and present, in order to bring about senselessness. And yet, it is precisely this senseless, unknowable kernel of the Real at the centre of the subject that the film approaches in its interrogation of the narrator's coherent identity. As with *Psycho*, then, the voice in *Fight Club* highlights the impossible fracturing of the narrator, adding complex meaning to the film, rather than undermining it.

⁹⁷ There is the further implication of the audience through this disembodied voice – in true Hitchcockian style, the audience is here required to make the link between the otherness haunting Norman via their privileged access to his interior monologue between himself and his (m)other.

As another sonorous example of *sinthome*, Žižek invokes Michel Chion's concept of *rendu*, whereby

contemporary techniques of sound recording and reproduction...enable us not only exactly to reproduce 'original' sound, but to reinforce it and so render audible details which we should not be able to hear if we found ourselves in the 'reality' recorded by the picture. ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 19)⁹⁸

Chion insists that *rendu* designates not only *sound* sensations associated with a scene, but other, non-sound sensations, such as speed and materiality (*L'Audio-vision* 94).

Confirming Žižek's interpretation, Chion explains that *rendu* is a term applied to sound rendition that expresses not only objective properties of the cause from which it emanates, but also imparts other, less tangible properties of the source of the sound.

Chion advances the example of a caress, and explains that *rendu* imparts not only the sound of skin rubbing on skin, but also gives the audience the impression that the image confers something of sensuality (*L'Audio-vision* 96).

The sound of fighting is rendered throughout *Fight Club* in such detail and clarity that the audience hears things that would be inaudible in the diegesis. The consistently blurred yelling, and hard, flat, hacking sounds of flesh pounding on flesh, "...the wet choke when someone caught their breath and sprayed..." is gloriously and carefully detailed. It usually accompanies the image of a man's face, clown-like, grimacing, covered in black blood. The heightened quality of the sound of violent conflict in *Fight Club* reaches its peak in an unforgettable scene – the scene 'Psycho Boy', in which the narrator breaks the rules of Fight Club and brutally beats Angel Face. This scene is particularly shocking not only because of the visual representation

⁹⁸ These 'details' are those which are normally excluded material, in excess of the normal symbolic ordering of sound.

(which is indeed shocking) but because of the highly enhanced soundtrack that accompanies this scene, in a method that is reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*. At the commencement of the scene, the sound is dull and slow (corresponding with the image which is slow and dark), as if we are underwater. It then rapidly increases to normal volume and speed, and sounds too fast (while the pace of the image-track is still unclear due to the emphatic use of dim lighting).⁹⁹ The camera movement is disorientating as it pans, pivots and circles, to simulate the subjective point of view of someone in the midst of a fight. It is a total *mise en scène* of disorientation. The camera now tilts and falls as Angel Face does so. The sound softens, quietens. We see a close up of men yelling, and yet we hear nothing. It is not just the camera movement that is subjective, but the sound perspective too. The only (all too clearly) audible sound is that of the narrator's fist landing on Angel Face's face. Blood flies. The narrator kneels over Angel Face, covered in spatters of blood. Cut to a shot of Angel Face, upside down, lying on the floor, so that his chin is at the top of the frame, eyebrows at bottom. His mouth is a gaping, bloody maw, and its inhuman proportions are exaggerated by the fact that it is upside down. He is missing more teeth than he has retained. His nose is oozing, *bubbling* blood. Blood cakes his blond-white eyebrows, and his eyes are puffy with trauma and blackened with blood and bruising.

It is in attempting to render in words what is truly horrible about the 'Psycho Boy' scene that I reach a fundamental realisation. While the scene would not be as horrible were it not for the confusing and ominous quality of the sound, it has to be

⁹⁹ For more on the painstaking efforts to create a dark and grimy effect via lighting in *Fight Club* see Christopher Probst's 'Anarchy in the USA'.

acknowledged that the most consistent and arresting avenue via which the Real penetrates the symbolic veil in *Fight Club* is through the eponymous fighting. If the *sinthome* operates in its most pure form as a persistent and inexplicable presence of meaninglessness (and a perversely joyous one at that), then it is the fighting in *Fight Club* and the resultant bodily damage that are without question what we need to examine above all in order to understand how the Real is revealed in *Fight Club*. Indeed, Žižek tells us that “Pain is by definition experienced as a meaningless real...” (“I Hear You with My Eyes” 105). As the narrator explains: “You weren’t alive anywhere like you were there”. Through fighting, through inflicting and receiving bodily violence, the members of Fight Club get close to experiencing something beyond the symbolic: “Fight Club wasn’t about winning or losing. *It wasn’t about words*” (emphasis added). The fact that the bodily violence exchanged in Fight Club is beyond words gives us a clue that it is accordingly beyond the symbolic, and is therefore Real; this links to the tacit notion that the body is the material ground upon which the Real and symbolic compete¹⁰⁰.

The emphasis on the two elements of gaze and voice persist throughout Žižek’s work, as evidenced in ‘The Undergrowth of Enjoyment’, “I Hear you With My Eyes”, ‘The Lamella of David Lynch’, ‘The Eclipse of Meaning’ and *The Fright of Real Tears*. In each of these texts Žižek interrogates gaze and voice via popular film. It would seem, then, that Žižek has very selective and specific tools for detecting the Real in cinema. This becomes more pronounced when considered in

¹⁰⁰ The relationship between violence and the Real is alluded to in Bataille’s notion of sacrifice discussed in *The Accursed Share*. Opposing everyday consumption to sacrifice, Bataille notes that a kind of freedom from perceived reality and access to a more “divine” Real is brought about through sacrificial destruction of the *accursed share*, that which is “destined for violent consumption” ... “Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates” (*Accursed Share*, 57-60).

terms of his professed fidelity to the later Lacan's fascination with the border between the Real and reality. As the last section of this chapter has explored, the gaze, voice, and *rendu* have uncanny and unsettling effects that propel us, the audience, towards the Real. It occurs to me, however, that in advocating a very specific method of 'looking awry' at the cinematic object, an exclusively Žižekian approach risks being unnecessarily constrained, and ultimately advocates an approach not at all dissimilar to that of political modernism, most famously advanced by Comolli and Narboni: what is this 'looking awry' if not looking "obliquely" at the film, as Comolli and Narboni recommend (27)?

Here it is important to trace carefully the idea of 'unveiling' what lies beyond ideology for theories of film and ideology, as it is in this historical progression that a distinction between 'ideological' unveiling of ideology and seeing the Real can be made. In this sense, in light of the above discussion of Žižek's specific methods for 'reading' the Real in cinema, we can see that perhaps Žižek too makes a similar error of presuming to unveil ideology in his somewhat programmatic access points to the Real. It is this action of unveiling, and what is supposed to lie behind the veil, that is central to this thesis. To compare the politically modernist theories explored in Chapter One to the equally Marxist and psychoanalytic (although less semiotically-inclined) work of Žižek, we can trace a clear distinction. The 'political' in political modernism gives us a clue: while the body of work grouped under this label is undeniably inflected by Lacanian psychoanalysis, in emphasising Marxism, the overwhelming tendency is to argue that behind the illusion of ideology lie material (or economic) conditions of existence.

Concurrent with the work of Žižek has been growing a body of work on the way the ‘eruptions’ of the Real into symbolically constructed reality occur in representations of the body. Barbara Creed’s study of horrifying bodies in cinema is a key example of this field. While Žižek refers to the bodily dimension of the Real, his work is not consistent in this regard. The result of this is that at times he appears to restrict his analysis to specified, privileged moments where the Real erupts into the otherwise consistent dominant ideology, and sees the body as a manifestation of ideology, rather than a site where ideology breaks down.¹⁰¹

Žižek is renowned for his inconsistent style. However, that Žižek is selective in his deployment of key concepts of the Real is important, given that a significant contribution of his work to critical theory more generally and film studies in particular is an ostensible return to the Lacanian order of the Real. The Edge of the Construct films thematise the confrontation with the Real Thing that fascinated Lacan, and which, in turn, fascinates Žižek. They also offer a discourse on the fragile nature of the self, and, to borrow from Creed, they foreground the “ease with which the body could fall apart, and bleed into nothingness” (‘Horror and the Carnavalesque’ 144). The symmetry between the unstable symbolic worlds and the fragile nature of the self presented in these films articulates precisely, I think, the psychoanalytic understanding that the Real Thing is not only ‘out there’, but that it is something couched within the subject more than the subject itself.

¹⁰¹ For example, see *The Plague of Fantasies* (4) where defecation is interpreted as an act that is ridden with ideological coding. In this sense, Žižek conceives of the body as purely ideological and symbolic, and does not consider it a site where the Real may erupt. This resonates with Michel de Certeau’s claim that “there is no law that is not inscribed on bodies” (139). The difference between de Certeau’s body submitted to law and Žižek’s conception of the body as symbolic is that de Certeau suggests that this is not the only way the body can be conceived, he leaves room for the body to also be the site of something other than the law, whereas for Žižek the body, it would seem, is always already inscribed in ideological practices.

According to Žižek, the Real held fascination for Lacan in two different ways: the barrier between the symbolic and the Real formed one of these fascinations, the other being the manifestation of the Real's meaninglessness in symbolic reality. This chapter has examined how the Edge of the Construct films that proliferated in the late 1990s also shared a fascination with the frontier between the Real and reality, but how it is visually impossible for cinema to render this barrier and what it conceals. Nevertheless, popular cinema can evoke a sense of the Real in the process of deferring the Real, by intimating that what lies beyond the border depicted may not be authentically Real after all.

This chapter has also considered the eruptions of the Real identified by Žižek as they operate in cinema, showing how they may be limited, or result in a partial analysis of film's engagement in the paradoxes of depicting the Real – in particular with regard to the Edge of the Construct films. In the following chapter I will take recourse to the body as an emergent site for the eruption of the Real in cinematic narrative, in order to show how, while Žižek is reticent about the subject of the body, and conversely, theories of embodiment in cinema studies avoid considering other ways in which the Real can penetrate the veil of the symbolic that do not involve the body, these two approaches are occupied with the same nodal point: what lies beyond the surface appearance of consistency and neat categories of subject and object. This is, of course, the Real.

Chapter Five

“This Will Feel a Little Weird”: The Body as a *Sinthome*

Somehow, in some manner, Ragle found himself poking through reality. Enlarging the hole. Or being faced with its enlargement, perhaps a splitting rent opening up, a great gash.

We can put everything we know together, he realised, but it doesn't tell us anything, except that something is wrong. And we knew that to start with. The clues we are getting don't give us a solution; they only show us how far-reaching the wrongness is. (Dick 95)

I started this thesis with the assertion that the figure of the barrier that divides the known from the unknown is ubiquitous to the science fiction genre (Wolfe xiv). Žižek suggests that the border dividing the knowable from the unknowable extends beyond this genre, and that it is the narrative motif par excellence of twentieth century (*Welcome* 12). Žižek cites Dick's *Time Out of Joint* (quoted above), and a range of other films and texts as twentieth-century examples exploring the division between a symbolically circumscribed reality and an ostensible Real in popular culture ('The Matrix' 242-243; *Welcome* 14). I argue that the Edge of the Construct films are descendants of this and represent and intensification in the decade approaching the new millennium. This is exhibited by the urgent increase in frequency with which these films were produced.

The popularity of representations of the confrontation with the border between the known and the unknown, or between reality and the more authentic Real could be due to a desire to encounter the unbearable. Accordingly, the Edge of the Construct

films exhibit the desire to “penetrate the Real Thing” (Žižek, *Welcome* 12). The ‘Real’ has been explored throughout this thesis as variations on the unthinkable, such as “the foreclosed element of discourse” (Sheridan x) or the “indivisible remainder”. I have also explored the Real as an unbearable, “traumatic spectral ‘rest’ that resists ‘confession’, that is, integration in the symbolic universe” (Žižek, *Fragile Absolute* 98).

Building on the already developed concepts of *khôra* and the Real, this chapter will mobilise a discussion of the theories of the grotesque, the abject, the uncanny, the cyborg and the sublime. These theories all similarly grapple with ‘that which is in excess of signification’, as ways in which the Real can be signalled in narrative film. Moreover, the relationship between the Real and the films I am considering in this thesis becomes more compelling as the films themselves thematise the delineating contour between the knowable and the unknowable, or symbolically constituted reality and the Real.

The previous chapter considered the way in which the Edge of the Construct films represent the border between the Real and the symbolic (or the symbolic and another symbolic), and the way in which the psychoanalytic concepts of gaze and voice are deployed in *Fight Club* to signal the Real. The Real both generates symbolic ideologies and is the unknowable “lethal dimension” at the core of individual subjectivity (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 68). To recall a quote from Wright in Chapter Three, the Lacanian orders of the symbolic, the imaginary and the Real map themselves on the *body*, and turn a body into “a socialised being” (Wright 5). Accordingly, it is at the level of representations of individual, embodied subjectivity

that I will consider as a key way in which the Real can be signalled in narrative film. This chapter is composed of two main parts: the first considers the theorisation of the body in cultural representation and the relationship this bears to the Real. The second part discusses *Fight Club* and *The Matrix* in light of such theorisation.

Symbolically Wrought Flesh: Embodied Subjectivity.

On the amorphous distortion of the face of the Phantom of the Opera and other horrible faces in popular culture, Žižek writes:

The flesh has not yet assumed definite features, it dwells in a kind of preontological state, as if ‘melted’, as if having undergone an anamorphic deformation; the horror lies not in his death mask, but rather in what is concealed beneath it, in the palpitating skinned flesh – everyone who catches sight of this *amorphous life substance* has entered the forbidden domain... Therein consists the ultimate paradox of the ‘living dead’: as if death, the death stench it spreads, is a mask sheltering a life far more ‘alive’ than our ordinary daily life. The place of the ‘living dead’ is not somewhere between the dead and the living: precisely as dead, they are in a way ‘more alive than life itself,’ having access to the *life substance prior to its symbolic mortification*. (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 114-116, emphases added)

Earlier in the same text, Žižek evokes a similar concept of the Real when writing of Oedipus’ fulfilment of his destiny: “[Oedipus] found himself reduced to a kind of soap bubble burst asunder – a scrap of the real, the leftover of a *formless* slime without any support in the symbolic order” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 21, emphasis added). He proceeds from the notion that “...the Real is not only death but also life: not only the pale, frozen, lifeless immobility but also ‘the flesh from which

everything exudes,' the life substance in its mucous palpitation" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 22).

The Lacanian name Žižek gives this "life substance" in its almost formless, shape-shifting, pulsating splendour is "lamella" ('Lamella of David Lynch' 205). The lamella is, for Žižek, an idea central to the Lacan of the Real. Lamella for Lacan designates the mythical embodiment of libido which "articulate[es] itself on the real in a way that eludes us" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 205). As such, lamella is material. In his analysis of the lamella in the work of director David Lynch, Žižek refers to Lynch's use of sound, and argues that "the fundamental noise in Lynch's films is not...caused by objects that are part of reality; rather, it forms the ontological horizon or frame of reality itself, i.e., the texture that holds reality together" ('Lamella of David Lynch' 208).

The question I seek to address in this thesis is what is it that lies beyond the "frame" of reality that Žižek refers to, and how can it be explored in mainstream cinema – particularly in those popular films that thematise the encounter with reality's frame? The above quote foregrounds Žižek's emphasis on sound, as explored in the previous chapter. As discussed in Chapter Four, for Žižek sound is a privileged means by which the Real can be signalled as that which lies beyond the *frame* of reality. In this chapter, however, I will consider the notion of the frame (recalling my discussion of this in the second chapter of this thesis with reference to the unravelling of form), and how this can be applied to considerations of the body as represented in narrative film. In Chapter Two a symmetry was identified between the film content which thematises the border – or frame – between reality and the Real, and the films

as aesthetic objects having their own frame or border between an illusion of completion and a more unstable realm. In this chapter I am adding another figure of the border: that of the skin of the human body, and the disorder it conceals.

To begin, consider the following elaboration from Žižek on the “crack in the texture of reality”, or the crack in the frame of symbolic efficiency he sees operating in Lynch’s work, where the discussion of monstrous faces is extended to the entire body:

What we encounter in this “black hole” is simply the body stripped of its skin. ...Lynch perturbs our most elementary phenomenological relationship to the living body, which is based on the radical line of separation between the surface of the skin and what is beneath it. Let us recall the uncanniness, and even disgust, we experience when we endeavour to imagine what goes on just under the surface of a beautiful naked body – muscles, glands, veins, etc. In short, our relating to the bodily implies the suspension of what lies beneath the surface, and this suspension is an effect of the symbolic order – it can occur only insofar as bodily reality is structured by language. In the symbolic order, we are not really naked even when we are without clothes, since skin itself functions as the ‘dress of the flesh’. This suspension excludes the real of the life-substance, its palpitation; one of the definitions of the Lacanian real is that it is the flayed, skinned body, the palpitation of raw, skinless red flesh. (‘Lamella of David Lynch’ 208)

The second chapter of this thesis began with a consideration of Žižek’s description of such a skinless body. Musing on the strangeness of animals like shellfish, snails and tortoises, Žižek suggests that they evoke the Real in the relation between skin and shell they share: “The body never fully fits the shell” he begins; “...deprived of its shell, the body is an almost formless spongy entity...Is this squishy body not the perfect figure of the Real?” he asks (‘Rhetorics of Power’ 99).

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘lamella’ designates “a thin plate, scale, layer, or film, especially of bone or tissue, for example one of the thin scales or plates which compose some shells, [or] one of the gills forming the *hymenium* of a mushroom...” (‘Lamella’, emphasis added). Similarly, Derrida meditates upon the word ‘hymen’ in Mallarmé’s *Mimique*, reading it as both “membrane” and “marriage” in its original Latin sense (*Dissemination* 181-182).

Derrida writes:

Υμην [hymen] designates a fine, filmy membrane enveloping certain bodily organs; for example, says Aristotle, the heart or the intestines. It is also the cartilage in certain fish, the wings of certain insects (bees, wasps, and ants, which are called hymenoptera), the foot membranes in certain birds (the hymenopoda), a white pellicle over the eyes of certain birds, the sheath encasing the seed or bean of plants. A tissue on which so many bodily metaphors are written. (*Dissemination* 213)

As such, hymen, like lamella, is another parergonic figure as discussed with reference to the frame of form in Chapter Two: the hymen is both separation and union, it perpetuates the distinction of inside from outside, while simultaneously erasing that distinction. The conjunction of “both...and” used here recalls the “not only... but also” conjunction used by Žižek to describe the Real in corporeal terms (see p 223).

Derrida explains: “*At the edge of being*, the medium of the hymen never becomes a mere mediation or work of the negative; it outwits and undoes all ontologies, all philosophemes, all manner of dialectics. It outwits them and... it envelops them” (*Dissemination* 215, emphasis added). This is remarkably similar to the concept of the Real as something that undermines signification, while

simultaneously circumscribing signification. More importantly, it tells us that the Real, as delineated by the hymen, is something that we encounter “at the edge of being”, or at the edge of a constructed reality.

While Žižek returns to a bodily conception of the Real throughout his work¹⁰², it is curious that he does not engage Kristeva’s similarly psychoanalytic theory of the body and its connection to the Real. Žižek’s description of the uncanny reaction provoked by the contemplation of the visceral palpitation of the skinned body evokes directly Kristeva’s concept of the abject. In Kristeva’s view, the abject is intimately linked to the body, and what the “clean and proper body” must do to remain contained and secure (*Powers of Horror* 102). Where Žižek locates the Real within both the subject and the social world it inhabits, Kristeva similarly identifies the abject as a threat to a condition of the subject and the social law it enters into.

Žižek’s omission of any reference to Kristeva is more surprising, given Kristeva’s emphasis on the relationship between the abject and her concept of the ‘border’; the abject is, as I will explore in more detail directly, that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers of Horror* 4); the abject is the rupturing of the Real at the border of the subject’s “condition as a living being” (*Powers of Horror* 3). The resonance of this with Žižek’s faithful elaboration upon Lacan’s fascination with the border between the Real and reality, as explored in Chapter Four, is remarkable. Accordingly, this chapter will consider the way in which the breaching and distortion of the surface of the body complements the theme of reaching the threshold between the Real and reality in the Edge of the Construct films.

¹⁰² Indeed, Slavoj Žižek asserts that one of the main aspects to consider in judging *The Matrix* is “the triumphant return of the body” (‘Reloaded Revolutions’ 199). This aspect, however, is not one that Žižek goes on to explore.

That Žižek does not engage with Kristeva's consideration of the body is especially curious in the context of this thesis, given that Creed's work represents an application of Kristeva to film studies; Creed's work also represents and an interrogation of Kristeva's Lacanian concepts through popular cinema. Understood in this context, surely Creed, via Kristeva, is one of the Lacanians working in the contemporary field of film studies that Žižek claims to be missing from the period of political modernism?

In the context of the above discussion of lamella and the hymen, I want to return to Žižek's notion of a "shell", "frame", "skin", "membrane" or "border" with reference to the Edge of the Construct films. From these material, slightly nauseating elucidations of the Real, we can consider the notion of the human skin as analogous to the frame of reality, or border of the symbolic, represented in the Edge of the Construct films. Accordingly, the unravelling, becoming-unhinged human form can offer us a glimpse of the Real. I will elaborate the links between Žižek's Lacanian theory of the Real and theories of embodied subjectivity advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin and Kristeva. Recalling the epigraph to this chapter from Dick, "the splitting rent or great gash in reality" beheld by the protagonists in these films is enhanced by the similar rents and gashes inflicted on the physical, material bodies and worlds depicted in these films: consider the swelling, unstable world of *Dark City* as it morphs nightly; the broken, bloody bodies of men in *Fight Club*; the extreme containment of Truman's body in *The Truman Show*; and the anamorphic, multiplying, unbounded bodies of *The Matrix*. This chapter will consider how such

physical distortions tell us “how far-reaching the wrongness is” (Dick 95), or that all is not right with the symbolic edifice.

In recent film studies there has been an interest in the body as an important site for negotiating and resisting prevailing ideologies and articulating the complexities of subjectivity. In varying ways the Edge of the Construct films I am considering in this thesis all contain haunting details that bear on matters of the human body. To begin with the most unlikely example, *The Truman Show* is a film that is *obsessed* with the containment of the body. To reprise Žižek’s bodily evocation of the Real, Truman’s is a body that *must* fit its shell at all costs. “You’ve got to know your limits, Truman”, his father tells the intrepid Truman as a child. Demonstrating the film’s preoccupation with the contained body, the audience is shown the lengths the producers go to to contain Truman: he is conditioned as a child to become seasick, and is threatened by fire, nuclear leakage, and a violent storm to remain contained in his secure shell. In this sense, *The Truman Show* can be read as a parody of the secure, unified subject, and what is involved in maintaining its (false) stability.

In contrast to Truman’s excessive containment, in *The Thirteenth Floor* and *Dark City* we see bodies that shake uncontrollably, in a state of torment, during the encounter with the edge of the construct. It is clear that this is not a physically comfortable encounter. For John Murdoch in *Dark City*, this encounter involves the penetration of his skull with a sharp, and rather large, needle. The body at the edge of the construct opens up, therefore, to unorthodox penetration.

At the far end of the scale from Truman’s excessive containment, the white male body in profuse disarray is a key characteristic that unites *The Matrix* and *Fight*

Club. I will return to the bawdy, dirty, wound-riddled bodies of men in *Fight Club*, and the cool yet at times repugnant meshing of man and machine in the *Matrix* trilogy, later in this chapter in greater detail. The fascinating and contorted human form (or the obsession with protecting the human form, in the case of *The Truman Show*), then, is an insistent motif across this microgenre.

The study of the body as it operates as a cultural object and problematises and interrogates received notions of human subjectivity is largely taken up by gender studies and originated as a tool in literary criticism with the work of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Creed tells us:

Notions of the body occupy a central place in current theoretical debates...It is not that the body has been forgotten over the preceding centuries – rather, it has functioned as the debased ‘other’ within a series of binary oppositions that have been central to Western thought: mind/body; spirit/flesh; culture/nature; immortality/mortality. (‘Horror and the Carnavalesque’ 127)

Directly echoing Creed, Grosz contends that the human subject as viewed by mainstream Western philosophy is “made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology” (*Volatile Bodies* 3). Grosz adds that:

This bifurcation is not simply a neutral division of an otherwise all-encompassing descriptive field. Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarised terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart...Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term. It is what the mind must expel in order to retain its ‘integrity’. It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment... (*Volatile Bodies* 3)

Extending upon this, Creed makes clear that “Significantly, in philosophical and religious discourses, the body is linked to the feminine – woman is emotional and more ‘of the body,’ whereas man is usually positioned on the side of logic and rationality” (‘Horror and the Carnavalesque’ 127).¹⁰³

Weber’s observation that *khôra* is “quite disorderly” provides a further layer of significance here, then, as *khôra* is feminised in *Timaeus* as a passive “receptacle, and, as it were, the *nurse* of all becoming and change” (Plato, *Timaeus* 49, emphasis added). More explicitly, “we may indeed use the metaphor of birth and compare the receptacle to the mother...” (Plato, *Timaeus* 69). That this unthinkable, “apoeretic...*thing*” (Caputo 84, emphasis added) (which I have argued shares much in common with the Real) is elucidated via maternal metaphors is of significance.

The fact that each of the films under close study here depicts a *male* protagonist could be seen to reflect the long tradition in Western thought Creed alludes to, whereby masculinity is positioned as the normative model for subjectivity, thus denying the possibility of a place for woman. That all the films depict white, heterosexual males as symbols of human subjectivity adds a conservative dimension that might be argued to support an interpretation of these films as reactionary rather than progressive.¹⁰⁴ The placement of the white male at the centre of the crisis in these films could be understood, however, as a grand gesture of crisis, in as much as the very symbol of the first term (of masculine order, transcendence, and reason) is

¹⁰³ For detailed discussions of the association of the body with the “debased ‘other’” in a range of binary dualisms that underpin Western thought, see Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (49, 79, 88, 94-95n1); Luce Irigaray’s *This sex which is not one* (74-75, 77, 78) and *Speculum of the Other Woman* (133-143); and Carole Pateman’s *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political theory*.

¹⁰⁴ For a more specific account of the Cartesian masculinisation of reason, see Susan Bordo’s ‘The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought’.

contaminated by the second (of feminine disorder, immanence, and irrationality). In particular, the way in which male heads are feminised in certain scenes of penetration in *The Matrix* and *Dark City* might be used to support an interpretation of these films as undermining dominant conceptions of masculinity.¹⁰⁵ A full examination of gender in the Edge of the Construct films is beyond the scope of this thesis, but would provide a useful path for future research.

For my purposes, the privileging of reason (the symbolic) over embodiment (the Real) is fundamental. The bodily for Carole Pateman is described as irrevocably and ambivalently tied to nature; it is “tainted” by its “daily contact with dirt and with natural processes *only partly under our control*” (25, emphasis added). Tracing the history of aesthetic thought during the eighteenth century, Eagleton agrees with the implication of Creed and Grosz that Cartesian dualism¹⁰⁶ – the opposition of the mind and the body – led to a situation where philosophers privileged the immaterial, “the shadowy” processes of reason and reflection, over the material (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 13). The Enlightenment philosophical field of aesthetics, Eagleton suggests, is a reaction to this favouring of the immaterial:

It is as though philosophy suddenly wakes up to the fact that there is a dense, swarming territory beyond its own mental enclave which threatens to fall utterly outside its sway. That territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world. The aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of

¹⁰⁵ For an analysis of masculine penetration in the horror genre see Carol J Clover’s *Men, Women and Chainsaws*. See also Cynthia Freeland’s ‘Penetrating Keanu’ for a discussion of male penetration in both *The Matrix* and David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ*.

¹⁰⁶ Grosz’s argument, however, is not that dualism is peculiar to Descartes but that it was effected by Ancient Greek philosophers “at the threshold of Western thought” (*Volatile Bodies* 5).

the human, which post-Cartesian philosophy, in some curious lapse of attention, has somehow managed to overlook. It is thus the first stirrings of a primate materialism – of the body’s long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical. (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 13)

Implicit in Eagleton’s argument is the way in which the mid-eighteenth-century ‘awakening’ described above is the ancestor of today’s interest in the body in critical theory (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 7).

Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity emphasised the mind over the body. The subject was transcendent to the extent that it existed above and beyond the bodily and the material. Grosz puts it more forcefully when she writes that “The body has remained a conceptual blind spot in... mainstream Western philosophical thought” (*Volatile Bodies* 3). However, as Pateman describes, this transcendence was underpinned by an active contempt for, or exclusion of, corporeal processes in Enlightenment thought. As Eagleton suggests, since the mid-eighteenth century there has been a counter-force to this trend, focusing on the realm of the senses, the biological and the material: the bodily. Romanticism exemplified the drive to raise the banal and everyday to the level of the sublime, concurrent with Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* whereby the material could be elevated to the level of the ideal.

As Adrian Martin notes, there are two general approaches to considering cinematic depictions of the body. The first trend Martin identifies is that where “we talk about a full body, stressing the real, live presence of the actor” (‘The Body’). The second tradition he recognises is that which considers bodies in films “as fragmented or fetishised, a bunch of separate body-bits stuck together by editing” (‘The Body’).

This second approach can be fruitfully related to Lacan's mirror stage whereby the body coalesces out of fragments, or *corps morcelé* ('Some Reflections' 13).

Resonating with the grotesque, Lacan writes:

the resemblance is to a jig-saw puzzle, with the separate parts of the body...in disorderly array. Even more significant for our purpose are the incongruous images in which disjointed limbs are arranged as strange trophies; trunks cut up in slices and stuffed with the most unlikely fillings, strange appendages in eccentric positions...('Some Reflections' 13)¹⁰⁷

Thus the complete body is seen as a symbol of the nostalgia for the concept of a coherent subjectivity; the body is a visual referent for the concept of an internally coherent self. Here I am reminded of the scene in *The Matrix* where Neo gazes at his own reflection in a cracked mirror. At first there is no face, then a fragmented face appears, and finally the mirror coalesces and the cracks disappear, to reveal a whole, complete face. I am equally reminded here of the way in which the illusory 'residual self image' of subjects in the Matrix is without the chrome ports and tooling that adorn their 'real' bodies: a nostalgic vision of unadulterated completion.

¹⁰⁷ This concept is telling of Lacan's movement within surrealist circles.

The Uncanny Abjection of the Grotesque: three theories of the unsettling body.

As foreshadowed by Lacan's grotesque description of the *corps morcelé*, in order to come to a deeper understanding of how representations of the body might signal the Real, it is imperative to consider the work of Bakhtin. Bakhtin's theorisation of the grotesque body underpins contemporary theoretical discourse on the potential for the body that breaches its boundaries to disrupt the dominant logocentric, patriarchal order. Kristeva's theory of bodily abjection is equally important as an inspiration for assessing cultural representations of untidy bodies that are said to be symptomatic of greater social instability. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva imports psychoanalytic concepts and vocabulary, including Lacanian ideas about subject formation, into Bakhtin's theory of the challenging, untidy body, to develop a framework for considering the repugnant body. The abject for Kristeva is the eruption of the Real (that which is in excess of and motivates signification) into our lives (*Powers of Horror* 9, 11).¹⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny similarly scrutinises the body as a site of unspeakable, hair-raising horror, where structural borders begin to waver.

Following Bakhtin, the manifestation of the grotesque in cultural production is considered to be an indication of a culture experiencing violence, upheaval, terror, and alienation (Gleeson-White 109). In opposition to Enlightenment thought, the grotesque material bodily element is "opposed to the [mind's] severance from the

¹⁰⁸ Kristeva is credited with first bringing the work of Bakhtin to the attention of Western scholars (Gleeson-White 109).

material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense [*sic*] to renunciation of the earthly” (Bakhtin 19). Bakhtin contends that the Romantic grotesque was:

...a reaction against the elements of classicism which characterized the self-importance of the Enlightenment. It was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism. (37)

Kristeva adds the logocentric symbolic to the series of concepts against which the unstable body simultaneously rails and makes possible (*Powers of Horror* 4, 6, 14).

The grotesque for Bakhtin is closely linked to the carnivalesque (the unofficial folk celebration wherein hierarchies are inverted) and shares its potential for disruption to the prevailing order (Bakhtin 10, 15). In doing so, the absurdity of the ruling ideology is highlighted (Bakhtin 13). As with the grotesque, the abject figure threatens prevailing models of coherent identity and knowledge. It hovers “On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (*Powers of Horror* 2). Kristeva writes: “The vision of the abject is, by definition, the sign of an impossible object, a boundary and a limit” (*Powers of Horror* 154). As with the grotesque, which highlights the absurdity of prevailing ideologies, the abject emphasises the “fragility of the law” (*Powers of Horror* 4). Moreover, the impossibility of the abject described here by Kristeva resonates remarkably with the simultaneously seductive and destructive lure of the Real: “the subject must pay the approach to it with its own being” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 68).

As noted, Bakhtin’s assertion that the carnivalesque and grotesque are indicative or symptomatic of culture in crisis potentially assists us in attributing the

series of Edge of the Construct films to social, political and economic determinants associated with the millennial post-Cold War context of their emergence. Citing a diverse list of Renaissance authors and texts, Bakhtin argues that:

... the carnival-grotesque form exercises [this] function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. *This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.* (34, emphases added)

In other words, "...the grotesque...discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable....the bodily awareness of another world has an immense importance for the grotesque" (48).

Similarly, it is worth observing that in Bakhtin's view "the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by 'normal,' that is by commonplace ideas and judgments" (39). As such, the grotesque as a mode of expression articulates political, social and cultural anxieties, while also showing an alternative to these tensions. Glimpses of 'completely new orders' are offered at the border in the Edge of the Construct films, and this is enabled by the 'madness' of the protagonists. Once again, this reinforces the symmetry between the role of the Real in generating and undermining both the subject and the social world it inhabits. As the social world begins to disintegrate under the weight of the Real, the subject too begins to fracture as its constitutive lack emerges.

Over the idea of a tidy, discrete, individual body, the grotesque celebrates the slippery, untidy and open body. As already noted, Bakhtin accords the grotesque with immense power for social and political disruption, and this is directly connected to its quality of incompleteness: “incompleteness...is precisely the grotesque concept of the body” (Bakhtin 26). Creed identifies Kristeva’s abject as that which threatens to cross the border, as that which functions to “bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (‘Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine’ 40); it is precisely this encounter between symbolically constructed ideology and that which lies beneath it that theories of film and ideology have historically tried to come to terms with, and that Žižek explores in his work. Moreover, it is precisely this encounter that is depicted in various guises in the Edge of the Construct films.

Anticipating Deleuze and Guattari’s principle of rhizomatics, Bakhtin emphasises the grotesque’s quality of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’, and describes how, from its earliest origins in archaic ornaments, the grotesque evidences dynamism brimming with creative potential rather than stasis:

[the grotesque] seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being. Its images present simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born; they show two bodies in one, the budding and the division of the living cell. (52)

Thus it is important to note here that while the grotesque is seen as a symptom of crisis, it is equally described as a remedy or alternative to such crisis. Moreover, the key characteristic of the grotesque as unfinished and incomplete resonates with conceptions of the Real as a lack or absence, as a constitutive incompleteness. As Žižek writes, “...the ‘preponderance of the objective’, that which eludes our grasp in the

Thing, is no longer the excess of its positive content over our cognitive capacities but, on the contrary, its *lack*, that is, the traces of *failures*, the *absences* inscribed in its positive existence” (*Ticklish Subject* 89).

Bakhtin emphasises the grotesque trait of the unfinished, open body, as opposed to the complete, closed, discrete body in the following:

...grotesque images preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed being. They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of “classic” aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed... They are contrary to the classic images of the completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all of the scoriae of birth and development. (25)

Similarly, Kristeva discusses the separation of the “clean and proper body”, and the improper, abject body, or the body that no longer pretends to fit its shell (*Powers* 72). Such a separation can be seen in *The Matrix* in the contrast between the tidy version of Thomas Anderson in the matrix, and his state of utter abjection when he awakes in his pod in the ‘real’ world.

Importantly, the abject body in *The Matrix* is in close proximity to the border between ‘reality’ and the Real, while the ‘clean and proper body’ is located in the symbolically circumscribed Matrix.

On the theme of ambiguity and indeterminacy Bakhtin writes:

...the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the

phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits... (26)

As opposed to the finished, 'classical' body, the grotesque body is replete with protuberances, offshoots, convexities and apertures (Bakhtin 29). As a body that resists the boundaries and coherence of the 'classic body', the grotesque body contests and disturbs the idea of coherent, stable identity and knowledge.

Similarly, Freud observes that "Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist...feet which dance by themselves...all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them...being buried alive...intra-uterine existence...the female genital organs" (220-221). Echoing Freud's emphasis on maternal motifs, Kristeva identifies menstrual blood as a particularly abject substance (*Powers of Horror* 71). Coupling Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque with Freud's uncanny, the visceral, oozing bloody wounds caused by fighting in *Fight Club* become endowed with potentially greater significance.¹⁰⁹ The profound discomfort of witnessing Neo in *The Matrix* emerge from his womb-like pod is undoubtedly associated with the "dread and horror" of the maternal uncanny (Freud 193). Maternal metaphors abound, then.

To reprise an earlier discussion, the Real is commonly described with reference to untidy material and inchoate bodily metaphors. For example, for Grosz the Real is "a continuum of raw materials" (34); for Žižek it is a "substance" (*Sublime Object* 68), it is something which "pulses slowly with inchoate life" ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 19-20), it is a visceral, nausea-inducing "Monstrousness" (*Ticklish Subject* 53). Recalling the 'hideousness' and 'monstrousness' of the grotesque, the

¹⁰⁹ As do the repellent openings in Jude Law's navel in *eXistenZ*.

abject is the human sensation of loathing caused by the disruption to the symbolic system of meaning that is elicited by untidy bodies (*Powers of Horror* 6), particularly the corpse (*Powers of Horror* 3-4, 109) and the mother's body in childbirth (*Powers of Horror* 155). In addition to the untidy body, however, Kristeva lists other material items (many of which issue from or are directly connected to the body) that can evoke the same response: filth and waste (*Powers of Horror* 2), vomit, the open wound, blood, pus, shit, sewage, and items of food such as the skin which forms on warm milk (*Powers of Horror* 3).¹¹⁰ These abhorrent items traumatically remind us of our materiality, literally de-grading us from our transcendent illusions, bringing us back to earth (*Powers of Horror* 3). We expel them, these traces of our materiality, "in order to live" (*Powers of Horror* 3), in order to enter the symbolic order of meaning and structure. Resonating with the potentially disruptive powers of the grotesque, "It is...not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 4). Once again, maternal, feminine metaphors proliferate. It is beyond this project to interrogate this tendency with rigour; I can, however, acknowledge that the unthinkable and the feminine have long gone together, and both the theories and the Edge of the Construct films I consider bear traces of this legacy.

Freud's uncanny exhibits the same ambiguity and evasion of language as the abject and grotesque. He writes: "...we get an impression that many languages are

¹¹⁰ Indeed, the skin which forms on warm milk could be said to be another manifestation of lamella or hymen as discussed earlier in this chapter. Similarly, Lacan evokes lamella as the broken membrane of the egg when a foetus emerges as a newborn, although "it is just a little more complicated" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 197).

without a word for this particular shade of what is frightening” (195). In his analysis of the word ‘uncanny’ in German (*unheimlich*) and its ostensible opposite (‘canny’ or *heimlich*), Freud illustrates how linguistic usage renders problematic the distinction between the terms, such that *das heimlich* “develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite”, *das unheimlich* (196-201). While this implies the proximity of the familiar with the strange, the tame with the terrifying, it also implies that there is something of the Real at work here: as the Real disrupts the distinction between form, content and matter, so too does it undermine the boundary between the uncanny and the familiar.

Evocative of the proximity of opposites indicated in Freud’s assessment of the uncanny, of the Romantic grotesque tradition, Bakhtin notes the replacement of joviality and humour with terror: “All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure” (39). The suitability of such a terrifying mode should not be overlooked for the Edge of the Construct films examined in this thesis where the familiar is rendered unfamiliar, where established orthodoxies are shown to be fraudulent.

Further to the fundamental element of incompleteness, the grotesque for Bakhtin is characterised by a profound ambiguity (24): a grotesque body is neither this nor that, but is composed of a conflation of heterogeneous elements (41). The figure of the hybrid is noted as a key element in grotesque imagery. Bakhtin contends, “One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image is to show two bodies in

one: one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born...at their extreme limit the two bodies unite to form one” (26). Echoing the profound ambivalence of the grotesque, the abject is neither subject nor object: it refuses neat categorisation. Kristeva writes: “...abjection is above all ambiguity” (*Powers of Horror* 9). The abject is “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognise as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (*Powers of Horror* 2). Such a concept of a destructive ‘something’ at the heart of subjectivity recalls the notion of the Real as an alien thing in-me-more-than-me discussed in Chapter Three, and which we have considered in relation to the instability of the subject presented in *Fight Club*.

Before proceeding any further it may be worth heeding the caution of Paul Allen Miller who fears that the historical and generic specificity of Bakhtin’s theorisation of the grotesque may be overlooked in the hurry to “hail the triumph of the lower bodily stratum, the celebration of fertility, and the subversion of authority wherever images of the grotesque are to be seen” (257). After all, how sound is it to apply discussion focusing on Renaissance or Romantic literature to contemporary film? Here we may turn back to Bakhtin for some reassurance: the grotesque, he argues, is not limited to one genre or historical period; by definition it is boundless, “it is noncanonical by its very nature...never fixed and immutable” (30). Indeed, Bakhtin traces the development of the grotesque as a mode of expression across cultures and history, in a range of expressive forms. As Kristeva’s consideration of modernist literature and Creed’s work on the horror genre in cinema illustrate, the grotesque provides a framework for the study of a range of cultural practices.

According to Kristeva (as explored in Chapter Two), the abject preserves the trace of *khôra*, the primal place designated by Plato as preceding the split between subject and object, self and other, form and content (*Powers of Horror* 13-14). The abject is a marker of the moment when the child separates itself from its mother, and “recognises [its] image as a sign, and change[s] in order to signify”, that is, in order to participate in the social symbolic order (*Powers of Horror* 14). Thus, the abject acts as a counterpoint, disrupting both the symbolic order and the subject’s illusion of coherence and stability, but also acts as a means of creating the very frame it undermines (*Powers of Horror* 9). In this sense, the abject is remarkably similar to the Real. Further forging the similarity between the abject and the Real, Kristeva writes “The abject is edged with the sublime” (*Powers of Horror* 11) and thus exists in close proximity to the ineffable. The abject is a name for the function of *objet petit a*: it both threatens *and* sustains our security in the symbolic order.

Feeling with One's Eyes: Embodied Spectatorship

The key to the way in which the Edge of the Construct films signal the Real lies, then, in part, in their depictions of grotesque and abject embodiments. However, the potential of narrative film to signal the Real is not limited to the representation of the human form: in its affective interaction with the spectator's body, narrative film can perform the crossing of another boundary, evoking the Real in yet another way.

Steven Shaviro writes:

Something has happened to the act of looking. Outbursts of violence and gradations of light arouse, agitate, and unsettle the spectator. Narcissistic gratification is interrupted, not through any recognition of loss or lack, but because I am drawn into a condition of excessive, undischageable excitation. I am deposed and dispossessed by the film's incessant modulations of visibility, no less than by its concise articulations of action and movement. (9)

The interplay between cinema and the body relates not only to the representation of the body in film, but also how the body of the spectator is implicated in the experience. This marks a particularly pertinent shift in film studies whereby the spectator, in contrast to the passive, 'duped' spectator occupying an illusory position of mastery outlined by the 60s and 70s theory, becomes theorised as active. I argue, then, that film can also signal the Real by engaging the body of the spectator in 'excessive excitation'. The theories of engaged spectatorship advanced by Shaviro, Julie Turnock, L Williams and Vivian Sobchack encompass (but are not limited to) the qualities of gaze and voice and their uncanny effect on the spectator, considered earlier.

As Julie Turnock observes, the physical engagement of spectators is a relatively new interest in film theory (264). Turnock's brief historiography reveals that scholarly interest in the subject of audience affect tends to be limited to feminist explorations of horror, pornography, and melodrama (263), coined by Carol Clover as the "body genres" (in L Williams, 'Film Bodies' 4). I intend to consider the way in which the influential theories of bodily engagement advanced by L Williams, Sobchack, Laura Marks and Shaviro can be usefully applied to films that do not always strictly 'fit' into any of the body genres: *The Matrix*, *Dark City*, *Fight Club*, and *The Truman Show*.

Linda Williams is considered one of the key theorists of the body genres. Here I intend to examine how her work, which is primarily interested in gender identity, can be applied to films that show a subject hovering on the border between the known and the unknown. The horror, pornography, and melodramatic genres she focuses on in 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess' depend on the spectacle of the female body "caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion" ('Film Bodies' 4). The excessive, convulsing on-screen body "beside itself" with sensation is linked by L Williams to the spectator's "almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation" ('Film Bodies' 4). As Turnock notes, L Williams focuses on the on-screen feminine body and does not attempt to account for the excessive male body (264). Brad Pitt's and Keanu Reeves' bodies are often beside themselves and frequently excessive in *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*. The 'jerk' or 'jolt' effect theorised by Williams is suggestive of how the Edge of the Construct microgenre may deploy the spectacle of the physically excessive body for signalling the Real and in turn negotiating

subjectivity. At the Edge of the Construct, the body is absolutely ‘beside itself’; this is exhibited in *Dark City* when Murdoch tunes (physically alters the world with the power of his mind) and is ‘imprinted’ with a composite of others’ memories; in *The Thirteenth Floor* when Douglas uses the machine to transfer from one level of constructed reality to another; and in *The Matrix* when characters ‘jack in’ to the virtual Matrix and other virtual programs.

While L Williams begins her essay intending to investigate the effects of excessive on-screen sensation on the bodies of spectators (‘Film Bodies’ 3), ultimately this intention remains unfulfilled as she focuses more closely on the on-screen body and its role in the genre film’s function as cultural problem-solver. L Williams concludes by speculating that “we may be wrong in our assumption that the bodies of spectators simply reproduce the sensations exhibited by bodies on the screen” (‘Film Bodies’ 12).

Enter Vivian Sobchack’s ‘What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh’. Sobchack argues that contemporary film theory has overlooked the ongoing and compelling problem of the somatic effects of cinema (‘What my Fingers Knew’). Seeking to provide an account of how film literally touches the spectator, and why this matters, Sobchack’s project is to “come to grips with the *carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility*” (‘What my Fingers Knew’). In opposition to the traditionally theorised spectator who is tethered always outside the frame¹¹¹, always exterior to the screen, whether occupying a position of mastery

¹¹¹ In ‘Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*’ Thomas Elsaesser suggests that the potential for “different forms of audience engagement, different ways of being inside and outside when it comes to identification and participation” is a characteristic of post-classical Hollywood production, otherwise known as ‘New Hollywood’ (197). While I do not intend to

or illusion, Sobchack asserts a “subversive body in the film experience”. This is a subject who experiences, similar to the beholder of the abject, both the “‘here’ *and* ‘there’ ...able *both* to sense *and* to be sensible, *both* the subject *and* the object of tactile desire”. Sobchack names this position the “cinesthetic subject”¹¹². The cinesthetic subject, according to Sobchack, may be located both on and off-screen, and somewhere in between. In its liminality, then, the cinesthetic subject is a grotesque. While reading Sobchack’s description of how the cinesthetic subject is physically touched or moved by watching a film, I am reminded of the cringing and wincing I reflexively display when watching scenes in *The Matrix* and *Dark City* where metal rods are plunged into the protagonists’ craniums. As Sobchack relates, these reflexive physical responses occur in the absence of reflective thought; “[they are] reflexive, protective action[s] that attest to the literal body’s reciprocal and reversible relation to the figures on the screen, to its sense of actual investment in a

delve into the debate as to whether a post-classical cinema does or does not exist here (see, for example, David Bordwell’s ‘Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film’ where he argues that “today’s films generally adhere to the principles of classical filmmaking”, denying that there is a marked difference between the Classical Hollywood cinema and filmmaking today (16)), it is important here to recognise that in recent debates about film style and the effect this may have on the spectator, certain shifts or, to borrow Bordwell’s phrase ‘intensifications’ in editing, camera-work, and continuity of space and time have resulted in different experiences for spectators. Elsaesser notes how the post-classical cinema “conducts a kind of deconstruction of the linear narrative/monocular perspective system of representation which cinema studies has identified with the classical” (200). The ‘deconstruction’ Elsaesser describes is conducted by dint of two key devices: the increasing involution of narrative progression, whereby chronological order is displaced by something altogether more confusing, and the undermining of character consistency, whereby the viewer is confronted “with shape-shifting serial killers, voraciously vigorous vampires or time-travelling terminators” (200). To this list we could add office workers with multiple personalities, computer programs who think they are human, or individuals who literally are not who they believe themselves to be.

¹¹² The neologism ‘cinesthetic’ derives from cinema, synaesthesia, and coenaesthesia. Synaesthesia relates to the rare psychoneurological disorder whereby the senses bleed into one another, such that one can see colours, or taste sounds. Coenaesthesia refers to the “pre-logical unity of the sensorium that exists as the carnal foundation of that hierarchical arrangement of the senses achieved through cultural immersion” (Sobchack ‘What my Fingers Knew’).

‘dense’, albeit also diffuse, bodily experience that is carnally as well as consciously meaningful” (Sobchack, ‘What my Fingers Knew’).

If, as Sobchack argues, the bodily engagement of spectators is ‘meaningful’, what, precisely, might this mean in the context of the Edge of the Construct microgenre’s engagement with the Real? I would argue, following Sobchack’s allusions to the abject potential for bodily engagement to loosen boundaries between self and other, subject and object, and hence to question the very stability of meaning itself, that the manipulation of bodily engagement might manifest in another way precisely the *edge* of the construct that these films depict. In other words, there is a symmetry between the characters’ confrontation with the edge of the law that has previously constructed their fictitious reality, and the spectator’s bodily experience of dissolution of the ‘edge’ or boundary between themselves and the screen.

In contrast to Williams’ and Sobchack’s descriptions of an engulfed spectator whose engagement with the film is one of disorientation and sensorially-loaded confusion, Laura Marks’ concept of ‘haptic visuality’ refers to the way in which cinema may appeal to the tactile, “invit[ing] the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way” (2). Marks links the sense of touch to memory, arguing that “the sense of touch may embody memories that are unavailable to vision” (22). The contrast between Marks’ ‘haptic visuality’ and the accounts of Williams and Sobchack lies in Marks’ emphasis on the superficial nature of haptic vision: “Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture... a haptic composition appeals to tactile connections on the surface plane of the image” (162).

Resonating with the emphasis on materiality of the contribution of *Cinéthique* considered earlier in this thesis, Marks argues that “haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image...The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into the narrative” (163). In other words, haptic visuality “de-emphasis[es] a cognitive engagement with the narrative” (Turnock 265). Accordingly, haptic visuality could be said to disrupt the symbolically constructed narrative of film.¹¹³

The category of ‘haptic visuality’ is useful for rethinking one way in which mainstream film can foreground its material elements and how in turn this can appeal to bodily engagement. Marks describes a range of techniques that appeal to haptic visuality: graininess; blurriness; unmotivated imagery; faded stock footage; palimpsestic markings on the surface of the image; and unconventional changes in focus (127-193). Marks’ emphasis on the materiality of film or video work invokes the same terms of much politically modernist film theory, but it is important to note that it mobilises the emphasis on the material for different ends. Where certain proponents of political modernism argued that when the materiality of a work is foregrounded, the viewer is able to recognise that cinema is a construction and accordingly that reality itself is a construction, Marks instead suggests that the foregrounding of material elements undermines the concept of a stable, unified subjectivity. Marks writes:

Theories of embodied visuality acknowledge the presence of the body in the act of seeing, at the same time that they

¹¹³ It is not my intention to argue that Marks’ theory of haptic visuality applies wholesale to the films considered by this thesis. Indeed, to do Marks’ project justice it is important to recognise that the popular Hollywood films examined here share little in common in terms of style and content with the intercultural film and video she examines that exists on the margins of the mainstream.

relinquish the (illusory) unity of the self... We need not respond with dread to cinema's threat/promise to dissipate, or even to wrench away, our unified subjectivity. A tactile visuality may be shattering, but... cinema may reconfigure, rather than shatter, a subjectivity that may not be cast in stone in the first place. (151)

The Edge of the Construct films engage the viewer ambivalently, as both duped cinema-goer and (self-)knowing subject.

What are the elements of the Edge of the Construct films that appeal to haptic visuality? Throughout the *Matrix* trilogy the viewer's attention is drawn to the surface of the screen through the repetition of what Thomas Zummer aptly describes as "Glitches – visible puncturings or destabilizations of the technological index of photographic verisimilitude inscribed on the surface of the screen. As a result, the viewer's cognitive engagement with the narrative is momentarily suspended (2005). Resonating with Marks' argument, Zummer suggests that all such tremors, from "the circular wave as Neo leaps into the air, the travelling wake as he flies through the city, the aftershocks of explosions, various species of technological traces flashing across the screen, or alphanumeric POV shots ... serve to ground the eruption of the uncanny in the (already uncanny simulated) world" (2005). This uncanny eruption offers a similar destabilisation of the subject to that advanced by Marks, although ostensibly to more conventionally narrationally thematised ends.

The Truman Show can also be said to share aspects of haptic visuality, although in a decidedly qualified way. In framing the majority of scenes set in Seahaven with a prominent iris, or using bizarrely unconventional camera angles and positions to enhance the covert nature of filming, *The Truman Show* works to undermine the viewer's illusionist consumption of the narrative. While the

foregrounding of the iris and camera angles is motivated by the diegesis, they also serve to remind viewers that what they are seeing is fabricated. While it is arguable that the foregrounding of camera work qualifies as one of the tactile elements identified by Marks, it is a material element of *The Truman Show* that has the effect of suspending the viewer's full engagement with the narrative.¹¹⁴

The approach to analysing the materiality of film offered by Marks is remarkably similar to the way, in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek advocates that a more general focus on the “material externality” of an object “can provide fruitful analysis of how fantasy relates to the inherent antagonisms of an ideological edifice” (3). He continues:

What we are thus arguing is not simply that ideology also permeates the alleged extra-ideological strata of everyday life, but that this materialization of ideology in external reality reveals inherent antagonisms which the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge: it is as if an ideological edifice, if it is to function “normally”, must obey a kind of ‘imp of perversity’, and articulate its inherent antagonism in the externality of material existence. (*Plague of Fantasies* 4)

Until recently, then, narrative cinema, as a constructed illusion of reality, has worked to narrativise the disunity and mess of the Real to provide a fantasy of wholeness. In turn, this work is marked by the ‘imp of perversity’, thus entrenching the contradictions and tensions even as it operates. The Edge of the Construct films mark an apparent break with this tradition. For Žižek this fantasy of wholeness is precisely related to subjectivity. Sharing much with Marks’ linking of haptic visuality to an undermining of coherent subjectivity, Žižek writes: “[fantasy] bears witness to (and

¹¹⁴ The prominence of lenses in *The Truman Show* could also be considered an instance of the gaze as theorised by psychoanalysis, in the sense that it imparts the sense of there being “a pre-existing gaze, a kind of staring at us by the outside world” (Quinet 139).

tries to cope with) the fact that I am originally decentred, part of an opaque network whose meaning and logic elude my control” (*Plague of Fantasies* 9).

Where Marks argues for a “reconfiguration” of subjectivity via the embodied tactile experience of haptic visuality, Shaviro suggests that an obliteration of subjectivity occurs in the face of the violent assault of the cinematic image (56). I acknowledge the potential incongruity of using Shaviro’s work – which iconoclastically seeks to “blow the paradigm” of “utterly bankrupt” psychoanalytic film theory “apart” (14, ix, 14) – in this project, where I am primarily guided by the Lacanian theory of Žižek. However, I find Shaviro’s ideas of spectator engagement useful for rethinking ways in which the Real is discussed in film studies. Indeed, Shaviro’s work is indispensable for analysing the visual excess of *Dark City*, *Fight Club*, and *The Matrix Trilogy*, and the at times excessively restrained visual style of *The Truman Show*.

Shaviro’s emphasis on the physical, pre-reflective pleasure afforded by the film image confronts directly the foundational body of work in film studies that argues that the cinematic apparatus serves to reproduce dominant ideologies. Shaviro suggests that the reflexive affect of cinema “frees perception from the norms of human agency and human cognition” and is, as such, “directly opposed to the [argument] that sees the cinematic apparatus as primarily a device of ideological reproduction” (31). More explicitly, sharing affinities with Sobchack’s and Marks’ positions, Shaviro contends that the perception enabled by cinema is “stubbornly concrete, immanent, and prereflective: it is devoid of depth and interiority” (32). This loss of control, this complete surrender to the image, Shaviro argues, is a primary

source of pleasure in the film-going experience (57). In this pre-reflective zone identified by Sobchack and Shaviro, that bypasses cognition, the viewer occupies not a position of mastery, not even an *illusory* position of mastery, but one of a paradoxically (bodily) engaged (mental) voluntary subordination:

I am violently, viscerally affected by *this* image and *this* sound, without being able to have recourse to any frame of reference, any form of transcendental reflection, or any Symbolic order. No longer does a signifying structure anticipate every possible perception; instead, the continual metamorphoses of sensation pre-empt, slide beneath, and threaten to dislodge all the comforts and stabilities of meaning. (32-33)

Echoing Marks' discussion of the potential for cinema to undermine coherent subjectivity, Shaviro asserts:

...contrary to the claims of psychoanalytic film theory, cinematic pleasure does not put the spectator in a position of active mastery of the gaze, and does not necessarily depend upon specular identification. Pleasure can just as well be linked to the destruction of identification and objectification, to the undermining of subjective stability, and to an affirmation of the multiple techniques that denaturalize (or de-Cartesianize) cinematic perception. (43)¹¹⁵

I would, however, exercise caution, where Shaviro continues that the “fact is that distancing and alienation-effects serve not to dispel but only to intensify the captivating power of cinematic spectacle” (43). While it is undeniable that distancing and alienation-effects *can* serve to increase a film's seductive power over a viewer, I would suggest that the two positions are not mutually exclusive. I argue that a film

¹¹⁵ Shaviro is incorrect in attributing to “psychoanalytic film theory” the claim that “cinematic pleasure... put[s] the spectator in a position of active mastery”. As discussed in detail in Chapter One of this thesis, the position of active mastery is described by politically modernist film theorists as *illusory* and never objectively real. In this sense, Shaviro could be seen as both confirming an argument he seeks to denounce, and of contributing to the false attributions to so-called psychoanalytic film theory that Žižek objects to.

can use such alienation effects to offer the simultaneous possibility of both increased captivation *and* alienation for the viewer. As such, film can be said to be grotesque.

Of further relevance to this thesis is Shaviro's attempt to recuperate the potential of commercial, mainstream cinema for resistant or subversive 'lines of flight', previously deemed always-already beyond the realms of the possible for such cinema (12). Complicating Elsaesser's overview of post-Classical Hollywood, Shaviro sketches a historical lineage of self-reflexivity and "alienation-effects" in Classical Hollywood cinema. For example, he refers to the prevalence of "impossible points of view, non-naturalistic transformations of décor, and other forms of visual and narrative discontinuity" characteristic of many a Hollywood musical or Jerry Lewis comedy (42). Most explicitly, Shaviro argues that American mainstream film has "produced pleasure for mass audiences by highlighting, and reveling in, those very processes that – according to the suppositions of psychoanalytic film theory – the commercial cinema needs to dissimulate and repress in order to function successfully" (42).

Shaviro outlines an approach to cinema that expands zones of haptic visuality. Shaviro claims that the experience of all film is "ultimately *tactile*...Images literally assault the spectator, leaving him or her no space for reflection" (50). Referring to the persistence of vision discussed earlier in this thesis, Shaviro describes cinematic perception as "the suffering of a violence against the eye" (51). By this reasoning, cinematic images depicting even the most benign content in the most conventional way have an altogether corporeal effect. Furthermore, in this *material* impact upon

the spectator, film can breach the border of the screen, indicating in yet another way in which film can signal the unruliness of the Real.

Shaviro asserts that cinematography offers the viewer “a new form of direct contact with the real”, by virtue of the fact that it relies upon machinery which is part of the real (39). As machines are part of the real, and not separate from it, unable to observe the real from some detached vantage point, “The machines used by the filmmaker can no longer be regarded as tools to manipulate reality from a distance, for there is no longer any distance. In a world of mechanical reproduction, fragmentation and construction are not modes of representation, but processes of the real itself” (Shaviro 40). Shaviro persists with this line of argument, concluding “...that what film offers its viewers is...a Bataillean ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment – neither Imaginary plenitude nor Symbolic articulation, but the blinding intoxication of contact with the Real” (54).¹¹⁶ In its agitation, excitement, infection and visceral manipulation of the spectator’s body, cinema allows us to see “that which exceeds the possibility of seeing, that which it is intolerable to see” (Bataille in Shaviro 55). In stretching towards that which is “intolerable to see”, therefore, cinema’s engagement of the spectator’s body can signal the Real.

To this point I have explored ways in which the theories of the abject, grotesque and uncanny focusing on representations of the human body can signal the Real in narrative cinema, and how the narrative film’s engagement of the spectator’s body can similarly evoke the Real. There remains one further aesthetic concept

¹¹⁶ Here Shaviro’s vocabulary is remarkably psychoanalytic (and, in particular, Lacanian) for an ostensibly anti-psychoanalytic project.

associated with the Real yet to explore: the sublime. This will be carried out via a textual analysis of *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*, where the many strands of the discussion in this chapter will be brought together.

“Get Yourself Together”: or, why the body cannot cope being at the edge of the construct.

It sounds as though we are underwater; we can hear breathing as though submerged. Bubbles pass by our eyes as we watch. The body we are in is plugged into tens of tubes that form a confused web before our eyes. Cut to an overhead shot of a hand stretching past this web of tubes through a clear, jelly-like membrane. Pink back-lighting obscures the body directing this hand and lends to the scene a flesh-toned hue. This shot evokes the uncanny Freud associates with inter-uterine existence. Cut to a side-on shot of the upper-body stretching the membrane, the tension audible. Watching the translucent membrane stretch causes my stomach to turn. Subject and object collapse as I respond to what I perceive.

The membrane breaks with a *snap*, signifying all too viscerally the border between the symbolically constructed reality of *The Matrix* and the supposedly more authentic Real of this place. Cut to an overhead shot as the body breaks through the membrane, fluid splashing, compounding the now heavy-handed metaphor; this body is about to be (re)born. Cut to a front-on shot of this hairless, slick body as it retches and pulls a huge length of tubing from its mouth and nose. As it retches, I feel my

diaphragm constrict. *He* gasps and flails helplessly.¹¹⁷ Several shots later, we are shown a close-up of the industrial metal tubing attached to the base of this man's head. He grabs at the tubing blindly, and in another pre-reflexive, physical response worthy of reference to Williams, Sobchack, and Shaviro, I wince. He touches the tubing gingerly and I wince more, shuffling uncomfortably to the edge of my seat, muscles clenched. An ominous chord sounds. I hear static electricity and dripping. Lightning crackles as he peers over the edge of the pod in which he has been existing to be confronted by an infinite array of HR Giger-esque pods identical to his own. The scale is epic. The intensity of the soundtrack reinforces this. A mechanical bug swoops down on our shiny and confused hero (Keanu Reeves). It grabs him by the neck and proceeds to remove the main plug, the one at the base of his skull. He groans and I wince and squirm as a drilling tool is used to efficiently remove this plug at the back of his head. My heart rate increases. The plug makes a squelching sound as it leaves his skull and our hero collapses. I am tense. He is flushed unceremoniously from his pod into a murky pool, as if his body were excrement. A space-craft appears overhead and he is lifted by a mechanical claw into the white light. Inside the craft he is greeted by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), who utters a "Welcome, to the real world". Fade to black. Relief.

In this pivotal scene, *The Matrix* begins to imply that the 'real world' is a scarred and desolate place, and the familiar contemporary world that our hero (and the spectator) knew is illusory and fake. The line of demarcation between the realm of

¹¹⁷ Notice the shift in pronoun from 'it', 'the body', to 'he'. This is exemplary of linguistic slipperiness that is not necessarily available in cinematic or photographic language. From the first or second glance, we know that 'this body' is a human and a 'he': the visual sign suggests this by showing 'its' human and masculine physique.

delusory virtual reality and that of authentic reality begins to be drawn. In depicting a world in which the veil of illusion can be pulled away from some objective, authentic, *real* reality, free from the taint of ideology, the first instalment of the *Matrix* trilogy, upon initial consideration, is a neat example of naïve ideological critique. *The Matrix* introduces us to a protagonist who exists in a delusory reality not of his own making. Thomas Anderson in *The Matrix* believes he is a computer programmer who hacks into computers in his spare time: the stereotypical everyman, he apparently has “a social security number, pays his taxes, and he helps his landlady carry out her garbage” (Agent Smith [Hugo Weaving] in *The Matrix*). In ‘reality’ (as it is presented in the ‘birth’ scene), none of these facts is true; rather, Anderson is one of infinite, anonymous and disposable human batteries the Machines farm as their source of energy.¹¹⁸ According to Morpheus, not only do Thomas and the majority of humanity exist in a delusional reality, but they do so to serve the interests of another. In this regard, *The Matrix* could be read as a parallel to the Marxist critique of *Cinéthique*, whereby beneath the fake illusion the humans are a means of reproduction of the machines’ existence, and the machines are a figure for the ruling class and system. Beneath the ideological illusion, such an argument would assert, we can locate the material conditions of existence in an economy of energy. As will be explored directly, it is not surprising to discover that Žižek argues that in its representation of the Real as material conditions of existence, *The Matrix* misses the point of the Real, as he understands it.

¹¹⁸ Further complicating a Marxist interpretation of the trilogy, in *The Animatrix* (‘The Second Renaissance Part I’) articulates that the humans are in some way responsible for their own plight: they invented the Machines, mistreated and exploited them. They rejected the Machines’ attempts to join the equivalent of the United Nations.

With the exception of the cynical Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), who requests to be re-inserted into his pod where “ignorance is bliss”, the humans in *The Matrix* unknowingly accept the simulation of subjectivity and of a social world as a substitution for the real thing. In this sense this film could be interpreted as simultaneously undermining and confirming the notion of transcendent subjectivity, depicting humans who accept the identities projected onto them from external and nefarious sources, while ultimately a “special”, transcendent “one” is promised to triumph against the Machines. However, unlike the other human subjects who populate this dystopia, there is something ‘special’ about Thomas Anderson. Thomas Anderson’s computer-hacking attracts the attention of Morpheus and his band of rebels, resulting in his being offered a choice between waking up, recovering access to one’s ‘true self’, and entering reality, or remaining in the illusory Matrix. He chooses to experience reality as it truly, materially is, and is subsequently ‘reborn’ (or, more precisely, is ‘born’) as Neo. In its invocation of Plato’s allegory of the cave, this film depicts subjects who are blind to the truth of their existence.¹¹⁹ The way in which *The Matrix* reproduces a faithful analogy to a naïve ideological reading of the everyday in its supposition of “another ‘real’ reality behind our everyday reality sustained by the Matrix” has led Žižek to condemn it as being “not ‘crazy’ enough” (‘The Matrix’ 245).

Consequently, we need to return to the discussion of the authenticity of the new realities presented in the Edge of the Construct films. In his response to the first

¹¹⁹ As Žižek observes, however, the main difference between *The Matrix* and Plato’s cave is that when the characters in the film are freed from their ‘cave’ (it is a pod in this case), “and step out onto the bright surface of the Earth, what they find there is no longer a bright surface illuminated by the rays of the Sun, the supreme Good, but the desolate ‘desert of the real’” (Žižek, ‘The Matrix’ 241).

instalment of the trilogy, Žižek argues that *The Matrix* is firmly located on the well-trodden path of sci fi films depicting a hero who lives in a controlled and artificial universe, although he begrudgingly credits it for bringing this old story into the more contemporary location of virtual reality ('The Matrix' 241). Žižek bases his critique on a reading of the film's presentation of this naïve version of ideology, taking recourse to his often-expressed argument that "*the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*" ('Spectre of Ideology' 6). This position displays the influence of Louis Althusser's maxim that "ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time... *is nothing but outside (for science and reality)*" ('Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses' 49). "What if ideology resides in the very belief that, outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some "true reality" to be entered?" Žižek asks ('The Matrix' 242).

That the 'real world' Morpheus welcomes Neo into is not entirely 'real' is implied in a pivotal scene. The scene in the loading program, where Morpheus explains the 'truth' of the world to Neo contains several details that indicate how problematic revealing the 'real' can be. Morpheus informs Neo about the 'real world', then, in a computer program. Interestingly, he illustrates his narrative with images on an antiquated television screen. Appealing to haptic visuality, the images on the screen are intermittently grainy, and disrupted by a pixelated pulse. The fact that Morpheus' 'revelation' of the Real is mediated in not one, but two ways, indicates that the 'real' world revealed is no less a construction than the virtual one described by Morpheus as "a dream world".

In this way, from the first instalment, the *Matrix* series enacts one of Žižek's predictions: that the sequels would depict an "infinite series of virtual realities mirroring themselves in each other" ('The Matrix' 245). Complicating this prediction, however, Žižek writes:

the paradox is that both versions – (1) a subject freely floating from one to another VR, a pure ghost aware that every reality is fake; (2) the paranoid supposition of the real reality beneath the Matrix – are false. They both miss the Real. The film is not wrong in insisting that there *is* a Real beneath the Virtual Reality simulation – as Morpheus puts it to Neo when he shows him the ruined Chicago landscape: "Welcome to the desert of the real."...However, the Real is not the "true reality" behind the virtual simulation, but the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent, and the function of every symbolic Matrix is to conceal this inconsistency. One of the ways to effectuate this concealment is precisely to claim that, behind the incomplete/inconsistent reality we know, there is another reality with no deadlock of impossibility structuring it. ('The Matrix' 246)

Here Žižek makes explicit that the film is 'wrong' according to Lacanian theory because it attempts to show that which is unrepresentable – the Real. I would argue that in light of the layering of mediating technologies, and the grainy, glitch-ridden quality of the 'unveiling' carried out by Morpheus, that *The Matrix* in fact shows that the attempt to unveil the Real is itself deeply problematic, unstable and ultimately impossible.

In the above quote the crux of the problem explored in this chapter, and this thesis more generally, becomes obvious: while Žižek often evokes the bodily dimension of the Real in his work, he reserves such discussion for isolated examples (most notably the work of David Lynch). Žižek is here examining *The Matrix* from the level of theme, without considering the visual form used to convey its thematic content. As such, he could be said to be doing the inverse of the political modernists

(ignoring the form of the film), to his own peril. The situation is more complicated than Žižek's argument admits. Thematic content cannot be abstracted from the visual form used to express that content, yet this is what Žižek appears to do in his representation of Morpheus' 'unveiling' of 'the real'.

It is my contention that the visual representation of the human body *becomes* the thematic content of the film in its breaching of the barrier between the symbolically constructed reality and the Real. Without ever *showing* us the Real (which would be impossible), there are details of the human body that can evoke "the deadlock of impossibility" in an altogether different way. Given his many and varied discussions of the Real as human form without skin, or inchoate, palpitating matter, it is interesting that Žižek does not apply this approach to *The Matrix*, a film that is preoccupied with what penetrates the surface of the skin. Žižek's work is notoriously evasive, slippery, and, at times, inexact, and his approach to the *Matrix* trilogy could be yet another example of his inconsistency. However, given that a significant contribution of his work to critical theory more generally and film studies in particular is an emphatic return to the Lacan of the Real, that Žižek is selective in his deployment of key concepts of the Real is of fundamental concern to this thesis.

Here it is worth repeating the series of borders and their negotiation at work in the Edge of the Construct films. The psychological or physical barrier the protagonists encounter between their symbolic reality and another 'more Real' world is replicated in three ways: first, the embodied subjectivity of the protagonists is explored via depictions of their bodies as incomplete and/or wayward; second, the boundary between the film and the spectator is decisively interrogated in scenes of

uncanny body-horror; and third, the coherence of the narrative world presented in these films is undermined by interruptions and inconsistencies.

Engulfing and disorientating the viewer, rupturing the coherence of the diegetic world, and the ostentatious visual style of the *Matrix* trilogy raises questions about the human body and its boundaries. The revolutionary digital effect of ‘bullet time’ represents bodies able to dodge bullets, far exceeding physical and temporal limitations in the spectator’s ‘reality’. In *The Matrix* bodies defy gravity, jump buildings and fly, and the audience is viscerally implicated in this excessive display.

At the conclusion of *The Matrix* Neo says:

I know you’re out there. I can *feel* you now. I know that you’re afraid. You’re afraid of us. You’re afraid of change. I don’t know the future. I didn’t come here to tell you how it’s going to end. I came here to tell you how it’s going to begin. I’m going to hang up this phone. And then I’m going to show these people what you don’t want them to see. I’m going to show them a world...without you. A world without rules and control, without *borders* or *boundaries*. A world where *anything is possible*. (Neo in *The Matrix*, emphases added)¹²⁰

Here Neo articulates how a delight in breaching bodily borders operates in the *Matrix* trilogy. Affinity with Bakhtin’s grotesque and Kristeva’s abject is forged with the linking of the breaching of boundaries to change, possibility, and ways of doing things vastly different to the status quo: Neo (naively) envisions “A world without rules and control”. The film offers the viewer a sense of this new world in its momentary suspension of the border between the viewer and the screen, somatically affecting the viewer.

¹²⁰ The slipperiness of subjectivity is foregrounded in this monologue by the disorientating alternation between the second and third person pronouns “you” and “them” respectively.

The white male form in a grotesquely liminal and untidy state is a key characteristic that unites *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*. Both films are strewn with bruised, open, hybrid, and messy bodies. At the end of Chapter Four I stated that it is above all through the fighting in *Fight Club* and the resultant bodily damage that the audience is presented with kernels of the Real, or, to use Žižek's term, *sinthomes*. However, from the earliest moments of *Fight Club* the audience is provided with clues that the human body as an indicator of subjectivity (and its unravelling) will be a preoccupation for this film, and that this will permeate the film in ways that do not always involve fighting.

The opening credits of *Fight Club* render in molecular vision what lies under the skin of the human skull. What we are being shown is a tracking shot of the synapses, arterial blood supply, cortical bone, fibrous attachments and motor neurons at work on the right side of the narrator's brain. The discomfort in viewing this is derived from the fact that we are seeing an impossible view; it is what should be tidily contained and 'inside', and yet it is rendered in minute detail on the big screen, 'outside'. This cues the preoccupation with the body (and its relationship with the mind) that is to follow. Exiting through the bone and skin, the tracking shot continues across the surface of the narrator's skin, which is replete with beads of sweat, pores and hairs. This focus on the skin anticipates the violation of this surface, this parergon, that serves as a receptacle or frame for neat, discrete subjectivity. What the

audience will view in the next two hours is the rupturing of this veil of consistency; the constitutive lack of this subject will rise to the surface.¹²¹

The character Robert Paulson (Meatloaf) is arguably the most Bakhtinian grotesque character in *Fight Club*. The first time we meet Bob, the narrator is clasped to his postoperative bosom at the testicular cancer support group 'Remaining Men Together'. This cues the grotesque in two ways: firstly, Bob's is a hybrid body in the Bakhtinian sense: his large breasts and high, soft voice sit uneasily with his large stature and butch crew cut. The irony of this is heightened when viewed in contrast to Bob's former status as body builder (an equally grotesque figure). Secondly, the fact he has testicular cancer indicates that he is grotesque in the sense that he is 'incomplete'; to be frank, he is castrated. Ultimately, Bob's gender is irrevocably ambiguous, the fundamental criterion for the abject (Kristeva *Powers* 4, 9). Indeed, cancer itself is a grotesque notion at the cellular level. Bob's is a body that refuses to be categorised neatly within the symbolic order.

The list of self-help groups perused by the narrator attests to the prevalence of unruly bodies in this world: the first three are Alcoholics Anonymous (listed the most frequently, incidentally), overeaters anonymous, and sex addicts anonymous. These first three attest to unruly appetites that violate social and physical ideals, and also stipulate 'anonymity': namelessness. 'Positive Positivity' (cancer), 'Free and Clear' (TB), 'Onwards and Upwards', and 'Remaining Men Together' attest to bodies that are open to disease and deformation. The sheer volume of support groups indicates that the narrator inhabits a world where disease and perverse appetites are prevalent.

¹²¹ This observation can be usefully paired with Neo's remarks at the end of *The Matrix* that he is going to show '[a] world...without borders and boundaries' in the sense that it articulates the common preoccupation of the films with rupturing boundaries and borders of all manner.

That the narrator inhabits a world of unstable bodies is reinforced by his job: his role as a recall officer for a leading car manufacturer is masked by a beige corporate setting and clinical formulas, but it is essentially about human carnage. In one scene the narrator tells the audience about his work, and we witness as gruesome details of a horrific car crash are outlined: the windshield is missing from the car's burnt-out shell because an infant was projected through it, the teenager's braces are stuck in the ashtray, and there is human fat burned to the upholstery. Moreover, the narrator's work directly relates to human carnage in the service of corporate greed; capitalism is cited as one of the key culprits in the dystopian vision of this film, and the reason Tyler is conjured into being in the first place.

Belied by his deadpan voice over, the narrator's violent impulse is never far below the surface. He tells the audience that his fantasy would be to die in a midair collision while on one of his innumerable business flights. His disaffection is made clear as he is depicted in his fantasy, sitting impassively, 'calm as a Hindu cow', indifferent to human carnage around him. Immediately following this fantasy the narrator 'wakes' into another fantasy – that of meeting his new friend, Tyler Durden.

The first fight between the narrator and Tyler is initiated after the narrator's home is destroyed. This scene is intercut with an introduction to Tyler Durden: the narrator informs the audience of Tyler's subversive antics as a cinema projectionist who inserts pornographic 'glitches' into family films, and as a waiter who urinates into soup tureens. At multiple diegetic levels, we are presented with bodies doing things they should not and appearing where they should not.

The Paper Street House is a significant grotesque body, serving to undermine the stability of the world presented. It is an improper house, acting as a metaphor, in true gothic style, for what occurs therein – physically and psychologically. Its disorienting proportions and disrepair are to the orderly cubicle nest of the narrator's former condo what the narrator's bruised and bloody face is to his manager at work. After Tyler abandons the narrator, the narrator explains: "The house had become a living thing. Wet inside from so many people sweating and breathing. So many people moving, the house moved." The house swarms with the bodies of Project Mayhem members. Project Mayhem is a grotesque, collective corpus, which offers a nightmarish mirror image of corporate franchises complete with redundant jargon and rigid hierarchies.

The discrete, tidy body is linked explicitly throughout *Fight Club* to white collar middle-management: the narrator's boss criticises his blood stains and comportment at work, telling him to take the rest of the day off: "Get yourself together". The narrator's voice over explains: "I got right in everyone's hostile little face. 'Yes, these are bruises from fighting. Yes, I'm comfortable with that. *I am enlightened*'".

That the bodily damage inflicted and received during fighting is about rejecting or resisting dominant value systems is made abundantly clear. At the narrator's work, during a PowerPoint display on 'cybernetting and efficiency', Walter (the presenter) addresses the narrator who replies by gurgling quietly as he grimaces through bloody teeth and lips.

The fight between Tyler and Lou foregrounds bodily subversion in the sense of the properly inside forcing its way out. Tyler leaks blood all over Lou, with glee. Furthering the 'inside out' motif, one of Lou's goons vomits in reaction. Fluids ooze from Tyler's mouth, nose and ears.

As the narrator is stitched up in a doctor's surgery his voice-over can be heard: "deliver me from being perfect. Perfect skin and perfect teeth". It should be noted that skin and teeth are particularly interesting choices, as they articulate a profound ambivalence: Tyler and the narrator make and sell soap, and in several scenes the narrator is pictured manically scrubbing his teeth. As the narrator explains further, "Fight Club was now the reason to cut hair short or trim fingernails." Strangely, then, Fight Club is at once a vehicle for abjection, and a reason to make one's body 'clean and proper'. This articulates the fundamentally ambivalent status of the competing ideologies presented in *Fight Club*.

The scene where Tyler gives the narrator a chemical burn on his hand articulates the overall masochistic tone of the film, and provides an example of the narrator's fractured subjectivity. As the narrator tries to deal with the resultant pain, his subjective state bleeds on to the screen via insert shots of his 'visualisations'. Pain here is privileged as a means of ascetic 'enlightenment'. Tyler shows his own similarly scarred hand which bears a crooked, distorted kiss. Cut to a close up of the narrator's hand: toxic steam rises from it with a hiss, as his flesh makes a cooking, sizzling sound. Momentarily suspending the border between me and what I see on the screen, I anticipate smelling the putrid stench, and I hold my breath. He shakes and

sweats, as smoke rises from the deep reddish-green welt taking shape on his hand. Tyler pours vinegar over it, causing it to sizzle, and the narrator's relief is palpable.

The theme of bodily subversion is brought to a climax in *Fight Club* with the kinetic montage of the narrator searching for Tyler. As the narrator travels across America, all the men he encounters are scarred, bruised or broken in some way. The prime example is the barman who wears an elaborate neck brace which appears to be the only thing holding his head up. With its four metal struts resting on his shoulders, his aspect is less human and more...something else. A close up reveals that his chin and forehead are elaborately damaged. He shows the narrator his matching scarred hand. All of the men participating in Fight Club and Project Mayhem are represented as magnificently moronic. It is through the film's implicit denouncement of the followers of Project Mayhem and the alternative ideology Project Mahem represents that it becomes clear that Tyler's vision is not necessarily an avenue to 'the Real' as post-ideological existence (as the Real is often type-cast), but another sham ideology doomed to fail.

At the end of *Fight Club*, the narrator commits the ultimate act of bodily violence when he shoots himself in the head, precipitating the end of Tyler Durden, or so it seems. The narrator miraculously manages not only to live, but to stand and to converse. The skin we have been shown in lingering, minute close-up at the film's opening has been brutally violated. The consistent subject it supposedly contained has been shown to be radically inconsistent, and this inconsistency is worn on the surface of the body. This inconsistency echoes on the surface of the film itself, with the

grainy insertion of “a nice, big cock”. This crude interruption indicates that the fissuring of this subject is far from resolved.

Resonating with the grotesque body theorised by Bakhtin and in large supply in *Fight Club*, bodies in the *Matrix* trilogy are open to all manner of unorthodox penetration, from the chrome ports lodged in the skull, spine and limbs of ostensibly ‘human’ bodies, to the invasion of Thomas Anderson’s navel with an all-too literal mechanical bug. A climactic moment in *The Matrix Reloaded* comes when Neo plunges his hand into Trinity’s simulated chest cavity, and is shown in relief scooping out the bullet that would otherwise kill her. Their bodies become gleaming green code against black. Neo reaches into Trinity’s body and then proceeds to gruesomely (yet bizarrely romantically) massage her heart.

There is also the less anatomically explicit way in which the viral Agent Smith transgresses his own bodily limits and those of others by invading bodies with his bare hands to invade and replicate in the body of his unwilling ‘host’. Notable examples of this are when he plunges his hand into Neo’s chest at the climax of *The Matrix*, and when he forces his hand into the Oracle’s (Mary Alice) forearm toward the end of *Matrix Reloaded*. Her flesh becomes liquid and greenish as his hand contaminates it. This tendency is not exclusive to Agent Smith, however, as Neo returns the favour in *The Matrix* by forcing his hands into Smith’s chest, causing him to explode in a dazzling, blinding light. Neo repeats this action in *Matrix Revolutions* where he penetrates Smith’s chest with his hands, visibly spreading like quicksilver across his body, until Neo inhabits Smith’s shell.

The excessive, contorted body emphasised by the grotesque is also evidenced in the scene where Agent Smith and his assistants hold Thomas Anderson down as lips begin to coalesce into a messy, sticky hole, preventing him from speech. It could be said that the *Matrix* trilogy exploits the grotesque devices already established in folk and literary traditions, as outlined by Bakhtin, in its depiction of hybrid and incomplete bodies. For example, the discomfort experienced in viewing the birth scene in *The Matrix* can be explained, at least in part, by its depiction of a grown man being born, complete with the “scoriae of birth” (Bakhtin 25), from a mechanical pod. The *deus ex machina* who rules over the machine world and confronts the blind Neo at the culmination of the *Matrix* trilogy is revealed to have the face of a cherubic human child, formed out of machines, and with the ominous, low voice of not one but several angry giants.

Agent Smith poses a particularly compelling digital version of the grotesque and the abject in his disregard for the limitations and boundaries presented by his own body. This disregard is facilitated by the digital. In a strong blow against the concept of the complete, discrete, isolated body, Agent Smith multiplies infinitely, until there is a swarm of Smiths.¹²² Agent Smith undermines the ‘realness’ of Zion by bleeding out of the electronic Matrix into the body of Bane (Ian Bliss).¹²³ Here we can detect a

¹²² It is telling to hear Hugo Weaving wonder if, in the light of such a collective swarm of Smiths, there is a dissipation of the energy of Smith, for the viewer, if there isn’t “one central Smith”. He asks, “Does the viewer really want there to be one central extremely bad Smith, that they can...focus on?” (*Revolutions Recalibrated*).

¹²³ It is interesting to note that Bane’s mental instability is visually manifested in *Matrix Revolutions* by his self-mutilation. No doubt as a reference to Smith’s loathing for the stench of flesh, Smith as Bane lacerates his own forearms. Referring to Bane’s body, Smith tells Neo “Look at how pathetically fragile it is. Nothing this weak is meant to survive” (*Matrix Revolutions*). The denigration of the body articulated in this instance taps in to a more generalised cultural desire for the abandonment of the body in that it shares much in common with Case’s loathing for ‘meat’ in *Neuromancer*, and Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein’s description of the demise of the body in *Data Trash*. They write:

shift in the import of the motif of shape-shifting and boundary-breaching in the *Matrix* trilogy.

To this point we have discussed the non-human invading the human, the human being open (willingly or unwillingly) to the electronic. However, by the third instalment of the trilogy, *Matrix Revolutions*, the inverse is foregrounded, and the electronic shows itself to be open to the human. In the limbo of the train station, neither in the Matrix nor the ‘real world’, Neo meets Rama-Kandra (Bernard White) and his wife Kamala (Tharini Mudaliar), two redundant computer programs. They are software programs personified, intending to bring something from their world (the machine world) to the Matrix. They want to send their daughter Sati (Sanveer K Atwal) to the Oracle in the Matrix, in order that she might live a better life than they. Rama-Kandra speaks of love. As Neo points out, “It is a human emotion”. Here we are presented with a mode of embodiment arguably more complex and confounding than the considerations of depictions of disorderly human bodies carried out so far in this chapter. Here we are presented with a non-human entity making claims on the category ‘human’ via affective links; a virtual ghost occupies these apparently ‘real’ human shells, casting the reality and stability of those shells into doubt. This further raises questions of what it means to be a human. Thus, boundaries are blurred in both directions: not only does the infection of the human with the electronic question what it might mean to be a human, but the depiction of electronic entities as human, and as

“Now that our electronic bodies have merged somewhere in the Spools and Slip gateways of the Ethernet, we can finally get to know one another as electronic beings. Never fused to flesh but wired, never local but splayed across a global grid, not retrograde but immediate, never retrospective or durational but instantaneous” (52).

experiencing human psychological affect (emotion), queries long-held assumptions about what it means to be a machine.¹²⁴

The science fiction genre has long concerned itself with speculations on the relationship between humanity and technology, and Wolfe argues that the attitudes towards machines represented by science fiction “can be almost historically correlated with changing popular attitudes towards science and technology in general” (153). However, I would argue that historical attitudes towards science and technology have always been ambivalent – science and technology are always highly contested topics, rather than subjects of consensus. As such, science fiction represents both the dream and nightmare that science and technology potentially pose. Claire Sponsler writes, “...for many cultural critics, SF has become the pre-eminent literary genre of the postmodern era, since it alone seems capable of understanding the rapid technological and cultural changes occurring in late capitalist, postindustrial society” (625). P Chad Barnett refines this, arguing that within “the SF genre, cyberpunk concerns itself most directly with the implications of cyberspace, virtual reality, and a host of technologies that place *real* human forms at risk of extinction” (360). Barnett identifies *The Matrix* as the cinematic text to have revived the cyberpunk genre (360). Echoing Barnett, and evoking the ambivalent reactions science and technology provoke, Livia Monnet contends that cyberpunk (with *The Matrix* as an example) “is a paradigmatic expression of the contemporary angst and exhilaration inspired by new media and computer culture” (226).

¹²⁴ Accordingly, it is probably not a coincidence that in ‘the real world’ there is the recurrence of the imperative to do things “as fast” or “as soon” as *humanly* possible”. Morpheus wants the Nebuchadnezzar up and running “as soon as humanly possible” in *Matrix Reloaded*, and the Captain Roland (Daniel Roberts) in *Matrix Revolutions* wants the Logos repaired “as soon as humanly possible”.

Discussions of the historical development of the relationship between humanity and technology in science fiction in general and cyberpunk in particular are well-rehearsed by now, and I do not intend to rehearse them further. However, in the context of this thesis the relationship between the ‘human’ and the ‘machine’, and, more precisely, the blurring of the distinction between the two terms, is worth dwelling on. It is precisely the tenuous relationship between human and machine that is the crystallisation of the grotesque in science fiction, and in *The Matrix* in particular. A key concept in posthumanism in this regard is Donna J Haraway’s cyborg. Like Bakhtin’s grotesque, Haraway’s cyborg is profoundly hybrid: it breaches borders supposed to exist between human and animal, between organism and machine, and between idealism and materialism (72-74). Indeed, while Haraway’s essay on the cyborg locates it as a motif of the late twentieth century, when seen as a particular instance of the grotesque the cyborg’s lineage extends much further. Much like the grotesque, the cyborg is “monstrous and illegitimate”, concerning itself with “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities”; it is “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (Haraway 74, 70). The most striking similarity uniting the cyborg with the grotesque, the abject, and the uncanny (and their ability to signal the Real or *khôra*) is its opposition to the fixity and structure of “Western logos”, or to symbolic efficiency (Haraway 81). Through an understanding of the contemporary cyborg, while the Renaissance grotesque of Rabelais and of the archaic ornament that are Bakhtin’s focus are characterised by their commingling of the animal and the vegetable, here we

can further contextualise the unsettling mishmash of man and machine in *The Matrix*.¹²⁵

The Morph: The Digital Grotesque

The breaching of bodily borders depicted in the *Matrix* trilogy is facilitated by digital special effects. In particular, the digital *morph* enables the completeness of the human body to be interrogated, and provides a way for the indeterminacy of the Real to be evoked. In *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change*, Sobchack writes that computer-generated morphing fascinates because of its grotesque and uncanny “confusions of the animate and the inanimate, its queerly hermetic liquidity, [and] its homogenizing consumption of others and otherness” (Introduction xi). Morphing, according to Sobchack, “interrogates the dominant philosophies and fantasies that fix our embodied human being and constitute our identities as discrete and thus reminds us of our true stability: our physical flux...” (Introduction xii). Compellingly, Sobchack endows the morph with the ability to make “formally visible the very formlessness at its centre” (Introduction xii).

The word “form” appears throughout Sobchack’s writing on the morph, first instantiated in her epigraph from Giambattista Vico. Beginning his chapter on ‘Poetic Physics’, Vico writes of his understanding of how early physicists conceived of

¹²⁵ This implicates other contemporary texts such as William Gibson’s vision of man and machine hybridity in *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (directed by Robert Longo, 1995, and starring Keanu Reeves), the similar figure of the human-machine hybrid in *Robocop* (1987) or the *Terminator* trilogy (both directed by Paul Verhoeven), or the disturbing chemo-technical figure of Bob in *Fight Club* who embodies both male and female traits. Hybrid, shape-shifting and boundary crossing bodies are further alluded to in *Matrix Reloaded* when the men guarding the Merovingian (who, we are told, can only be killed by silver bullets) are interrupted watching a vampire film on television.

“Chaos”: “They imagined it as...a misshapen monster which devoured all things...[it was] the prime matter of all natural things, which, formless itself, is greedy...and devours all forms” (260). This description is remarkably similar to both Žižek’s evocation of the Real as basic matter which resists comprehensible form, and Plato’s concept of *khôra* as a protean location of sorts where matter is transformed. Of key relevance to this thesis, Sobchack writes that morphing “seemingly breaks down and collapses *boundary distinctions*” (Introduction xvi).

Following the theme of the morph and its potential formlessness, Kevin Fisher elaborates:

Within any morph between two objects there is a midpoint at which the morph is minimally recognisable as either ‘source’ or ‘target’ image. It is at the moment of midpoint that, if only just for an instant, the morph lapses from the order of known things. Most important, this lapse (or lack) of formal definition is still figured in the full three-dimensional extrusion, and the paradoxical presence of *being-without-thing-ness* blinks at us like some denuded metasubstance stripped of the overdetermined trappings of symbolic designation and fixity. (118)

In the same text Fisher examines the concept of the fourth-dimensional tesseract, understood as “both a technique than enables a transmutation of form...and as the ability to spontaneously alter one’s coordinates in space and time” (105). Tessering enables the copresence of present and future, in a gesture that evokes Derrida’s insistence upon the future perfect, and Žižek’s assertion that linear models of time are not the most useful when considering the Real (“The real beginning is not at the beginning”).¹²⁶

¹²⁶ An example of how this could be represented in cinema is provided in *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly 2001).

The formal and material indeterminacy of human and machine as depicted in *The Matrix* is an instance of the grotesque, if, following Bakhtin, grotesque is to be understood as a conflation of disparate elements or “the half-formed, the perplexed, and the suggestively monstrous” that issues from “[w]ithin the gap of ambivalence or ambiguity” (Drew 181). However, echoing Kristeva’s theorisation of the abject, and Sobchack’s and Fisher’s allusions to formlessness or ‘thing-ness’, Philip Drew offers another way of approaching the grotesque, suggesting that, in addition to an unsettling combination of things which do not belong together, it is

another word for a non-thing, for a concept which is just beyond the reach of language. Its use is a sign that significant portions of experience resist satisfactory verbal formulation. ...It...exists between the known and the unknown...In its struggle to formulate a concept, to wrest a new shape from the stone, the mind sometimes stops short of its goal prior to the full statement of the idea. It hesitates before full disclosure...The grotesque is a purgatorial stage, an interval of confusion, that is halfway between absolute confusion and full disclosure of the concept. (181)

Drew’s definition of the grotesque as attesting to the idea that “significant portions of experience resist satisfactory verbal formulation” resonates with both Freud’s uncanny and Doane’s assigning to crisis the characteristic of carrying with it a “remainder...that which is in excess of signification” (‘Information, Crisis, Catastrophe’ 236).

Following Fisher’s elaboration of the formlessness evoked in the digital morph, it is not difficult to understand that perhaps when “formless” is used it is referring to those troubling, formally indeterminate representations that challenge symbolic efficiency and fixity inherent to the cinematic medium. Here I am reminded

of Immanuel Kant's conception of the sublime, which shares the same 'formless' persuasions of Drew's grotesque:

The Sublime...is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented....[The Sublime] is incompatible with physical charm; and as the mind is not merely attracted by the object but is ever being alternatively repelled, the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much involve a positive pleasure as admiration or respect, which rather deserves to be called a negative pleasure. (102)

Thus the sublime is characterised as producing pleasure through the mediation of an initial displeasure. Once again, in Kant there is a reference to the 'formless object', to something that pushes at the margins of both representation and comprehension.

It is not unexpected then, that Žižek deploys Kant's concept of the sublime to elaborate his theory of ideology. Drawing on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Žižek confirms that, as with the grotesque outlined by Bakhtin and further with Kristeva's abject, the sublime is characterised as being shapeless and boundless; "the Sublime, in its extreme, in its approaching the Monstrous, indicates an abyss which is already concealed, 'gentrified', by the Ideas of Reason" (Žižek, *Ticklish Subject* 39). Žižek quotes Kant's definition of the sublime as "an object (of nature) the *representation [Vorstellung]* of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation [*Darstellung*] of ideas" (Kant, cited in Žižek, *Sublime Object* 202). Žižek incorporates Lacan's use of Kant's sublime whereby "an object is raised to the level of the (impossible-real) Thing" (Lacan, cited in Žižek, *Sublime Object* 202-203). Žižek continues:

The paradox of the Sublime is as follows: in principle, the gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself is insurmountable – that is, no

empirical object, no representation [*Vorstellung*] of the object can adequately present [*darstellen*] the Thing (the suprasensible Idea); but the Sublime is an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of representation to reach after the Thing. Thus, by means of the very failure of representation, we can have a presentiment of the true dimension of the Thing. (*Sublime Object* 203)

It is my contention that the many depictions of grotesque, abject, uncanny, sublime human forms, in their incompleteness, hybridity and boundary-crossing in the *Matrix* trilogy¹²⁷ and *Fight Club*, exemplify such an object that enables the viewer to “experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of representation to reach after the Thing”. Beholding the human form in a state of abjection, hybridity, and incompleteness elicits a negative pleasure in the spectator; or, in rendering such primal horror, the scenes where this occurs remind us that there are indeed experiences and concepts for which there are no words, and for which even images are inadequate. The grotesque, abject, uncanny and sublime gesture towards that which cannot be thought: the thing-in-itself (the thing in this case being, rather circularly, embodied human subjectivity), and the totality of existence, both being characterised by their evasion of adequate formulation and ‘boundlessness’.

Bodily metaphors are among Žižek’s most compelling evocations of the Lacanian Real, recurring as a frequent motif throughout his work, and yet he uses such metaphors with irregularity. I have shown that the way in which *The Matrix* can signal the Real through its representations of the body has not necessarily been considered in its fullness by Žižek on his own terms. While, as Chapter Four discussed, gaze and voice as antagonistic kernels of the Real do indeed exist in the

¹²⁷ In the context of cyberpunk literature, Jack G Voller writes that cyberspace “is an extension upon one of the most significant elements of Romantic aesthetics, the sublime” (19).

Edge of the Construct film cycle, these films share another crucial conduit through which the Real is evoked. *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* represent the way the Edge of the Construct microgenre tells us that the human form cannot withstand being at the edge of its symbolically coded reality; the unravelling of the social order is concomitant with an undoing and interrogation of the coherence of the human body and subjectivity.

Since Marx, the prevailing understanding of ideology has been that it serves to circumscribe subjectivity. An operative ideology should guide people in their actions, beliefs, and identities; it should locate a place for them in the social order within which they find themselves. Therefore, a subject in crisis indicates an ideology that is no longer working as it should. A subject in crisis experiences, as Žižek forcefully describes, a kind of ‘psychotic autism’, which indicates the eruption of the Real. A subject who no longer recognises its own borders is a sign that the plug or stopper to the Real – ideology, the symbolic – has come adrift. And in all forms of representation, a crisis in the coherent subject is most commonly writ on the body. The body becomes, therefore, a *sinthome*. Like the *sinthome*, the effect of the grotesque, the abject, and the uncanny is to spur us, as the audience, towards elements we can never really grasp. This is achieved in the Edge of the Construct films through the depiction of half-finished, frenzied, and hybrid bodies, those bodies that transgress and disregard the sanctity of borders, and in so doing throw the certainty of those borders into doubt. A similar effect is achieved in *The Truman Show*, which depicts a world that over-vigilantly patrols its social borders; this vigilance is mirrored in the obsession with containing Truman’s body.

The image of the border figures strongly in Kristeva's work on abjection: "The vision of the ab-ject is, by definition, the sign of an impossible ob-ject, a boundary and a limit" (*Powers of Horror* 154); correspondingly, the image of the border between symbolic reality and the Real figures strongly in Žižek's reading of Lacan ('Undergrowth of Enjoyment' 11). The abject, as the Real, then, threatens life, or continued existence in symbolic reality: thus, both the abject and the Real must be excluded from the symbolically constructed reality and subject, "propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (Creed, 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine' 38). The similarity does not end here, however; as the Real is the thing that generates the symbolic, so too is the abject a defining criterion of life, marking our point of entrance to participation in the symbolically circumscribed social order. As such, its shadow must be tolerated. Conversely, as the Real threatens the veil of symbolic law, abject things are those which emphasise "fragility of the law" (*Powers of Horror* 4),

and which exist on the other side of the border that separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction. But abjection is not something of which the subject can ever feel free – it is always there, beckoning the self to take up its place, the place where meaning collapses. The subject, constructed in and through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness – thus, the subject is constantly beset by an abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. (Creed, 'Monstrous-Feminine' 39-40)

The resonances between the Real and the abject become stronger when we consider the above in terms of the Real as something that lurks both at the periphery and at the centre of our knowledge.

In Chapter Three of thesis, I explained that for Žižek both society as circumscribed by symbolic law *and* the individual subject are constitutively lacking. As Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt explain, Žižek's emphasis is on "the subject itself as a 'constitutive lack' rather than [on] the symbolic field of power relations into which the subject is inserted" (84). The same is equally true for Kristeva's conception of the abject. Therefore, if we take the definition of the Real as "the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent... a deadlock of impossibility" (Žižek, 'The Matrix' 246) we can make the following, equally valid formulation: the Real is the void which makes the *subject* incomplete or inconsistent. As outlined in the first part of this chapter, the abject, grotesque, or monstrous body equally indicates a subject that is not consistent, coherent, or discrete in any way, and by extension, indicates a world where boundaries, identities and rules are thrown into doubt. In this sense, the human body represented as incomplete, open, or hybrid, reveals that which lies beyond the surface of ideologically constituted order: the Real

Conclusion.

As Ellie Ragland writes, it was Lacan's view that:

'representation' plays its role in the constitution of meaning by trying to cover over or veil something unrepresentable. But the cover does not work consistently or totally. That is, something disruptive or excessive always returns to perforate meaning with enigma. Lacan viewed this excess as having its own meaning, as that which makes something palpable (or positive) out of the *seeming* negativity or nothingness of impasses or fadings. (Ragland 187)

The Matrix, *Fight Club*, *Dark City*, and *The Truman Show* all precisely depict this notion of a veil of meaning that is under siege from a senseless and aporetic something. Indeed, these films exhibit a fascination with the tension that exists between the symbolic edifice and the unknowable, perturbing Thing it works to conceal.

This thesis has not concerned itself with the political or historical determinants of why such an intense cycle examining the authenticity of one's reality emerged at the millennial moment of 1998-1999, although this would indeed be a viable and enlightening path for future research. Instead, this thesis has sought to explore and interrogate the dominant theories of ideological critique in film studies, which are ostensibly concerned with a similar interrogation of representation and its tireless yet defective efforts to screen subjects from the true horror of their existence, as well as Žižek's contribution to and critique of these theories. I have taken seriously Žižek's claim that no 'true' Lacanians contributed to the era of political modernism, and have examined dominant examples of this field of theory for their conception of the Real and the relationship it shares with cinema. Žižek's claim that no Lacanians

contributed to what is now regarded as canonical (if somewhat passé) film theory is not entirely sound; however, with regard to Žižek's emphasis on the later Lacan, who theorised the centrality of the Real, this thesis has shown that the Real was conceived in 60s and 70s film theory in two slightly different ways. The Real was either conceived of in explicitly Marxist terms as one's material and economic conditions of existence; or, the Real was formularised as an unspecified entity that could be revealed in a film's interstices and moments of narrative and formal incoherence. In both senses, film becomes analogous to the limit or border confronted by the protagonists in the Edge of the Construct films. It has been my argument that the Edge of the Construct films play with and complicate the notion that this is popular cinema's role in their explicit, thematic interrogation of the limit that circumscribes one's world and identity.

However, it has equally been my argument that the cycle of films considered in this thesis explores the notion of symbolic limits and boundaries in more ways than solely through their thematic content. While examining borders may be the overt impetus of the subject matter of these films, their formal articulations are also contaminated by a disregard for secure, whole boundaries. Moreover, the material exigencies of film making are foregrounded in various ways by these films (with varying degrees of subtlety). The effect of this is to puncture the border that is supposed to exist between the illusion of wholeness and completion imparted by their narrative coherence and the material and formal devices used to achieve this illusion. Therefore it became important for this thesis to examine the problematic distinction between form, content and matter in film studies.

This thesis has considered the way in which the concepts of form, content and matter in film studies are analogous in many ways to the psychoanalytic concept of the Real. The Real is described by Žižek as a formless matter, given shape by representation, or the symbolic. Moreover, an examination of the aesthetic concepts form, content and matter reveals that they are codetermining, and cannot ultimately be defined as discrete concepts. Following the lessons of poststructuralism, and Derrida's deconstructive approach in particular, I have emphasised the way in which the psychoanalytic understanding of the symbolic serving to conceal the disorderliness of the Real shares much in common with the poststructural thesis of structure serving to shape an otherwise unruly world into a fraudulently knowable order. Derrida locates *khôra* in Plato as an example of this disorder in Western metaphysics, and I have sought to focus on the similarities between *khôra* and the psychoanalytic Real.

Reflecting the indescribability of the Real and *khôra*, the Edge of the Construct films have trouble portraying what lies beyond the edifice of order in the worlds they depict. This thesis has examined the limit confronted by each protagonist, and the 'beyond' gestured towards by each film. It has considered the way in which the imaginative paralysis at the moment of finding the edge is due to the unthinkable nature of the Real, and the formal limitations of the cinematic medium. Borrowing from the psychoanalytic emphasis on gaze and voice as partial objects that resist symbolic integration, I have examined the Edge of the Construct films – predominantly *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* – for moments where the formal qualities of point of view, voice and sound render suspect narrative coherence. These moments

truly exemplify representation's moments of failure to conceal something disruptive and excessive. Yet using gaze and voice as the only tools through which the Real can be detected in cinema seems somewhat restrictive. When applied to the Edge of the Construct films, such a method for detecting the Real is shown to be incomplete.

As representation strives to cloak an inconceivable excess or lack which perpetually threatens to breach its illusion of order, the skin of the human body works as an index of a subject's containment and wholeness; the skin works to conceal something that disturbs the ideal of discreteness and completion. This thesis has sought to demonstrate the way in which the human form in its obedient containment cannot tolerate being at the Edge of the Construct. Being confronted with the limit of one's constructed reality results in the exposure of one's body to be open rather than contained, hybrid rather than discrete, and frenzied, rather than controlled. The body is the most compelling *sinthome* through which the Real irrupts into the Edge of the Construct films – whether it is the unsettling coupling of man and machine in *The Matrix*, the disconcerting bodily trauma of *Fight Club*, the hair-raising contortion involved in imprinting in *Dark City*, or the excessive containment and surveillance of Truman's body in *The Truman Show*.

Consequently, while psychoanalysis argues that the body is the object upon which the Real, the imaginary and the symbolic imprint themselves, Žižek's psychoanalytic reading of the Real in cinema stands to gain significant insight when coupled with theories of the body in cultural representation including the grotesque, the abject, the uncanny and the cyborg (the second two of which share the same psychoanalytic parameters that Žižek works within). Similarly, theories of embodied

spectatorship in cinema, which are limited to considering the body as a site of sensation, can be mobilised in a most insightful way when understood as breaking down the division between subject and object and, accordingly, evoking something of the Real. The abject and the uncanny are clearly couched within psychoanalysis; accordingly, it is curious that these two concepts have not been mobilised with Žižek's interpretation of Lacan's Real, as well as the grotesque and the cyborg, and theories of cinema's visceral impact upon the spectator, to more fully comprehend the way in which cinema can signal the enigma of the Real.

The Real is present in every utterance, and in every attempt of representation and the symbolic to impart a sense of order and navigability to the world. In this sense, the Real is present in every film. However, in the *Edge of the Construct* cycle a series of questions about cinema and its relation to the Real crystallises: in thematising the border between symbolically generated reality and the excessive Real it conceals, these films prompt a reassessment of dominant theories of the relationship between film and ideology. In bearing the mark of the Real in their form, content and matter, they require a reappraisal of the way in which psychoanalysis and poststructuralism relate to one another. Moreover, in their depictions of the human form in crisis they impel the viewer to contemplate the Real in a manner which necessitates a reconsideration of the way in which psychoanalysis, theories of embodiment, and theories of embodied spectatorship can be combined to meditate upon the Real. While these films, as films, cannot ever show us the Real, they can remind us that the Real is a shadow that portends wrongness in both external reality, and at the heart of the subject.

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