

Embodiment and the Digital Continuum:
Post-Cinematic Diffractions in *Ex Machina*, *Her*, and *Under The Skin*

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores ties between three recent films: *Her* (2013), *Under the Skin* (2013), and *Ex Machina* (2015). I will argue that each of these films incorporates a distinct post-cinematic aesthetic – 1) digitally rendered eco-cinema, 2) hyper-informatic cinema, and 3) transmedia – while narratively working through how bodies are becoming entangled with and porous to their increasingly affective and convergent media. Each of these films show human bodies in-becoming-with technology, both in terms of narrative (or diegesis), and the non-diegetic processes of computer-generated imagery, sonic manipulation and audiovisual or rhythmic intensification that manipulate and digitize bodies as captured by the camera. Each film thus reflexively expresses through post-cinematic affect the spatiotemporal and corporeal discontents associated with the digital shift or the “audiovisual turn” (Vernallis 2013) when humans and technology are in a moment of coevolution: bodies, space, and technology fold into each other and become equalized phenomena, tied by an increasingly reciprocal bio-digital flow.

Keywords:

Post-cinema, affect, embodiment, new media, new materialism, transcorporeality, eco-cinema, hyper-informatic, transmedia

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I. Introduction: Dissipation and Dislocation in a Post-Cinematic Terrain

Cinema at the beginning of the twenty-first century is in a precariously dismantled position. No longer a dominant or monolithic medium, its narratives, subjects, exhibitionary spaces, conditions of viewing, promotion, and materiality are all in the midst of a period of upheaval. Films and television series alike now often have a first release on the widely accessible network of online platforms such as Netflix, blurring irrevocably the once rigid lines between cinema, television, and streamed content. Game industry revenues have surpassed box office revenues, encouraging producers to increasingly merge the aesthetics and narrative mechanics of the two forms. These entangling processes of convergence have reshaped media hierarchies, though the present moment is still arguably one of flux: it seems impossible to predict which media will prevail, and which will fade. Francesco Casetti speaks of a “relocation of cinema” within this media climate, suggesting that cinema could be adapting effectively for survival in the digital age:

The enormous diffusion of screens in our daily life – including those of the latest generation, which are well-integrated into domestic and urban environments, interactive and multi-functional, in the form of a window or tabletop – produces a permanence of the cinema. This diffusion allows cinema to continue to survive, even as it adapts to a new landscape (2011).

Cinema has had to mutate quickly, unfurling beyond the walls of the movie theatre and outside the plastic confines of the DVD or Blu-ray by means of diffusion. This spreading into the network allows cinema a kind of scattered and intangible “permanence” – one in line what Wendy Chun calls the “enduring ephemeral” materiality of digital media (171). Perhaps, one can think of cinema’s current shifting moment as more of a dislocation than a relocation: a displacement with many directions and no certain teleology. In our current

media climate cinema has become, as far as audience perception goes, whatever the sum of its dispersed veins equals: a prismatic medium.

In an essay first published in 2010, Steven Shaviro calls the “structures of feeling”¹ emanating from this protean and at times unsettling media ecology “post-cinematic affect,” with the markedly ambiguous term “post-cinema” signaling an era in which film becomes only a peripheral medium in determining cultural trends (1-8). In Shaviro’s formulation, post-cinematic affect also reflects the impact of neoliberal socio-economic structures in the “affluent West” (2); certain new media forms – including but not limited to film and music videos – acutely render “what it feels like to live in [this version of the] twenty-first century” (ibid.). They do so as affective maps that, in their networked collectivity, actively construct and reproduce the elusive intensities of life under global capitalism. This project draws upon Shaviro’s framework in locating in contemporary (post-digital) cinema emerging affective registers, aesthetic elements, and narrative threads that are symptomatic or expressive of our times. More specifically, my thesis takes up distinct post-cinematic aesthetics latent in three recent films, in order to explore how each one points to a dramatic transformation in the ways we relate to the world through various media, and through our own bodies, in the digital era. Highlighting these films’ depictions of a post-cinematic media climate in the backdrop of their narratives is key to this endeavor (although such a climate might not always be foregrounded or immediately recognizable to the audience), as it speaks to the

¹ Shaviro appropriates Raymond Williams’s term “structures of feeling” in formulating his own concept. Williams published on structures of feeling in 1977’s *Marxism and Literature*, posing a “cultural hypothesis” around cultural “tensions” ultimately “lived and articulated in radically new semantic figures,” thus identifiable in “specific kinds of art” (135). Shaviro admits he uses the term in a way that Williams perhaps did not intend, but post-cinematic affect still draws from multiple threads in Williams’s language and his articulation of affective cultural constructions.

contemporary phenomenon in which media technologies, space, and bodies blend into one another.

Cinema now threads in computer-generated imagery seamlessly, resulting in an obscurely composite texture of captured and simulated images. In a piece centred around post-cinematic affect, Elena del Río addresses these re-compositions by likening film to a body itself: “Like an expired body that blends with the dirt to form new molecules and living organisms, the body of cinema continues to blend with other image/sound technologies in processes of composition/ decomposition that breed images with new speeds and new distributions of intensities” (2016). Here, del Río describes, in material and affective terms, traditional cinema’s demise and the rise of a new, perhaps compost-like, post-cinematic media aesthetics. Films are no longer merely made up of the tactile materials of celluloid, light and shadow, nor even plastic, but are now also shaped by data, code, pixels, which have their own unique enduring ephemeral materiality and networked infrastructure (Parks and Starosielski 2015; Chun 171). A “post-cinematic media regime” (Denson and Leyda 2016) has rendered cinema’s materiality variegated, employing a diverse range of audiovisual sources such as smartphone imagery, surveillance videos, dashboard and web-cam footage to piece together new cinematic textures as well as structures of feeling. This new kaleidoscopic structure challenges film’s aesthetic, material, and affective edges, and creates a fluidity between bodies, spaces, and forms depicted by it. The resulting re-distribution of intensities (to use del Río’s wording) presents a kind of body-space continuum. In the shift from the analog to the digital, the parameters of the cinematic body also shift, together with the space that contains it.

The concept of a body-space continuum blooms in large part out of Mark Hansen's work on "wearable space," a segment of his 2006 publication, *Bodies in Code*, wherein he consistently points to the body's "coevolution" with technology in our contemporary age. Of primary concern to Hansen is what happens when the body or embodiment seems to dictate space, or "embodied affectivity becomes the operator of spacing" (175). Hansen's ideas take on a new light when applied to cinema moving into post-cinema, as he contends: "If the defining material cultural shift of our time – the shift to the digital – has suspended the framing function performed by the (pre-constituted) technical image [...], then the task of clarifying the nature and extent of the coupling of body and space is particularly crucial at this moment in our coevolution with technology" (176). I argue that my three case studies respond to Hansen's call by exploring the coupling of bodies and space through the digital-cinematic body-space continuum, while also narratively working through the destabilizing effects technology has on the increasingly digitally mediated/spatialized body.

The three films I will focus on approach the digital shift with a certain degree of reflexivity. The pervasiveness of the digital and its ensuing discontents are tendered in these films in a self-aware fashion, incorporating – via narrative, filmmaking style and process – the feelings of hybridity, intimacy, and disorientation that can arise in this new media ecology of (self-) dispersal. Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), and *Under The Skin* (2013), directed by Jonathan Glazer, all express different effects that technology has on the embodied experience of daily life. I take embodiment, in this context, to refer to the "lived body," trailing Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology-propelled definition of the term; she states that the lived body is "a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialized capacities and agency" (*Carnal Thoughts 2*). The films

taken up in this project explore directly, and digitally, the material and experiential limitations of the lived body, depicting modes of embodiment that transgress traditional categories. Android, computational, and alien bodies in these films appear as flagrant mutable ensembles, or even assemblages, that seem to be extensions of pre-digital forms of embodiment.

Pointedly, and perhaps problematically, each of these films in some ways reify the female body and female consciousness, in order to contemplate on and work through these effects, and all are directed by males. While (especially new materialist) feminist theory feeds the infrastructure of my project, and I will bring in its threads crucially in places, it is not my goal to engage directly with the implications involved in these films' foregrounding of the female body. Feminist film scholars are already engaged with the representational construction of gendered bodies in these films (Jones 2016; Vint 2015; Zaretsky 2015), establishing a critical discourse around their nuanced propensity for objectifying female forms in particular. However, in its much more limited scope, this project will follow, principally, a post-cinematic theoretical trajectory with a focus on what the films demonstrate about the cinematic body-in-space (female and male, human and nonhuman) now, and what they express on a larger level about embodied experience in a new media regime.

My first chapter centres on *Ex Machina*, directed by Alex Garland, which portrays two male scientists and two feminoid androids as their lives and bodies intersect and muddle within a technologically-veined compound in the middle of nowhere. Connective lines between post-cinema and new materialist feminist readings of the body will formulate this chapter's theoretical underpinnings. I argue that the film establishes a new post-cinematic aesthetic that strikingly combines the affordances of CGI-driven

science-fiction and the thematic/audiovisual strands of eco-cinema, in order to exhibit how nature and technology, seemingly two opposing poles, are always already entangled. This first chapter lays the groundwork for the project as a whole, in determining how the 21st-century entanglements – meaning complex, shifting relationships (or mediations) with many points of connection and even more areas of tension – between nature and technology lead to the emergence of new aesthetic sensibilities in cinema, drawing from current socio-political dynamics like the rise of surveillance culture, ecological concerns, pervasive mediativity, and all-implicating hyper-informatic flows. In *Ex-Machina*, human and android bodies alike are seen under increasingly oppressive surveillance, digitally mediated to the point of crisis. As bodies are pushed to the limits where their status as either natural or technological becomes uncertain, this crisis plays out physically in the makeup of both the architectural compound and the bodies of the characters themselves. The film makes the viewer think about the embodied experience of being mediated/surveyed in every sphere by opaque/transparent digital processes, becoming continuous with highly virtual space, and thus toeing the line between nature and technology. But perhaps more importantly than that, what *Ex Machina* ultimately exposes is the difficulty of distinguishing between nature and technology in the 21st century, since they have become inextricable due to digital technologies' penetration into every facet of life and vis-à-vis the looming ecological crisis.

Knotty entanglements between the body and technology are played out in *Her*, the focus of my second chapter, as well. In Spike Jonze's "utopian" (Howell 2013) near-future world, a man falls for his artificially intelligent operating system, in the ultimate post-cinematic love story. Intimacy and candy-coloured romance provide the symbolic framework for the idea that the lines between our bodies and the bodies of our devices

have been blurred. These mutable borders mean that bodies let in hyper-informatic flows, while they disperse their own affective and even corporeal flows into technology themselves in a kind of feedback loop. I argue that the film's post-cinematic aesthetic falls, if obliquely, in line with Shane Denson's concept of a hyper-informatic cinema, which is a highly processual form of filmmaking that has moved beyond human perception. Hyper-informatic cinema makes way for nonhuman agencies both behind and in front of the camera, reflexively uncovering what happens when our corporeal limitations clash with hyper-informatic flows. The film construes, through the exploration of a transcorporeality that decenters the human, the fact that bodies and technology are becoming – or evolving out of necessity – into equally open, dissipative systems, reflexively porous entities.

Under The Skin, under the lens in my third chapter, seems analogously focused on dispersed bodies, but instead feels more like horror than romance, uncovering the ultimately disorienting nature of a convergent media culture. I argue that director Jonathan Glazer's polarizing construction follows yet another emerging post-cinematic aesthetic, this time influenced by transmedia storytelling, which incorporates not just the styles, but the intensified affects/effects of a diverse range of media, in order to offer a richer or more complex viewing experience. The film seems an "uneven surface" (Vernallis 65), a messy texture incorporating the aesthetics of music video, docu-fiction, and traditional cinema, laced with a cognizant, visceral score. Vernallis's work on "unruly" convergent media in a volatile digital age gives shape to my interpretation in this chapter. The film follows its central character, an impervious female alien, as she makes her way through contemporary Glasgow, picking up men and dropping them into empty space to be suspended until their skins are drained of their contents by dark matter.

Under The Skin dislocates bodies in cinematic space consistently, while also disorienting and unsettling the spectator. The transmedial flux of the film, the un-fixedness of depicted bodies, as well as the icy examination of cameras' ubiquitous presence creates an existential horror of disorientation that might reflect the spectators' own embodied experience of spatiotemporal uncertainty and distributed intimacy under the post-cinematic media regime.

Moments when, in these films, bodies and space blend together most keenly on the digital plane present the climactic points of at once narrative and affective disorientation, symbolic of real-world experiences in a culture of digital diffraction and dispersal. I argue that a potential hybridity can be productive, and there is something to gain in, to echo Donna Haraway, finding "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" between the lived and the digitally mediated (150). Formulating the body this way, as borderless open assemblages, parallels with third wave (material) feminist models of thinking the body. In this way, also, film bodies are now less characters that sit at a distance, within the contained narrative and cinematographic box, but amplified inscriptive expressions of contemporary anxieties around our embodied experience within a rapidly evolving new media ecology. Each film, as well, demonstrates reflexively hyperbolic, digitally altered spaces, producing new dislocations (if the term dislocation seems negative, one can think of these as alter-locations or elsewhere). All of my case studies seem to recognize and work through this enfolding of reality and simulation, and a departure, as per post-cinema, from an anthropocentric cinematic framework.

II. Literature Review: Shifting Bodies, Shifting Cinemas

The contours of this project have undergone a few re-formulating shifts from the time of its inception. Thus, the foundations of my theoretical structure and the underpinnings of my research have endured one or two anatomic transformations. My interest in the beginning was oriented towards a material feminist reading of contemporary horror film that depicts mutable bodies, empowered iterations of monstrously cyborgian, hybrid (Haraway 1985, 1990; Halbertsam 1991) women – such as *Ex Machina*'s transparent/ opaque Ava – that could parallel conceptualizations of the body as performative constructions (according to Butler, 1990), situations (in de Beauvoir's terms, 1949) in becoming (as suggested in Manning's *Politics of Touch*, 2006). These formulations belong to what I argue is a connected web of theorists, who posit the body as an unstable matter, surpassing a Cartesian dualism that may think the body and mind as separate, inert entities. New materialism(s) could be a correct designation for their shared framework: defined by a stream of thought recoupling metaphysics and subjectivity, at the heart of which lie processes of becoming (Braidotti 28, 2012). These processes dictate that human ontologies are always in flux, porous to nonhuman flows and temporalities (Grosz 5, 2011), re-constituted by each interaction (Manning xii; or intra-action, as per Barad 2003, 2007, 2012). My vague initial intention was to pick out threads of new materialism within my three case studies, focusing on the fluidly hybrid cyborgian or artificial bodies that could latently reflect new/feminist materialist readings of the body. This would fall in line with a move beyond a psychoanalytic mode of feminist horror film scholarship, which was initially constructed around Freudian and Lacanian models of interpretation by Laura Mulvey, Barbara Creed, and Linda Williams from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Parallel to this early research, I became aware of a somewhat urgent contemporary conversation, which is the giving way of cinema to post-cinema during the digital shift, cinema's "relocation" (Casetti 2012, 2016). Steven Shaviro's pivotal essay "Post-Cinematic Affect" (first published in 2010), which made a strong case for delineating contemporary media ecology as post-cinema, exhibits a departure from theoretical models fixated on representation; this piece focuses on what cinema expresses, instead of what its narrative elements represent, in a move away from a psychological praxis of cinematic analysis. Cinema is now instantaneous, widely accessible, "network-based" as Shaviro maintains (2, 2010). Similarly, post-cinema theory acknowledges that cinema now sits on an equal plane with the media general – the "media swirl" or "audiovisual swirl" of accelerated and accelerating aesthetics (Vernallis 3; 29). Post-cinema theorists are unraveling the effects of the digital cinematic shift: modes of embodiment, the materiality of the body in film, and the body with film (the body of the spectator) are just a few of the threads under contention. This conversation culminates perhaps with an online publication, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film*, edited by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, released as an open access anthology in 2016. *Post-Cinema* ties together a nebulous discourse making sense of film's volatile position in the wake of ascendant new media that are at once "digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent" (Denson and Leyda 2016).

With this thesis, I aim to participate in this discussion. My constellation of theories, which I will explicate here, draws out the ties that connect new materialism, non-representational or affect theory, and post-cinema. Non-representational theory perhaps provides the bridge that links post-cinema and new materialism. This

triangulation, of sorts, aids in framing the post-cinematic body in shifting space-time, one increasingly bound to and re-constituted by a swirling and often disorienting collection of media. Here I will briefly trace pertinent conceptualizations of the cinematic body, from psychoanalytic readings in the mid-late twentieth century, to today's post-cinematic rendering of how the body sits (in and with) cinema. Moreover, I will illuminate the ties between new materialism and post-cinema.

The foundations of a critical feminist study of the cinematic body lie perhaps within pivotal analyses of horror film by aforementioned theorists, Mulvey, Creed, and Williams. These scholars problematized the cinematic body through a structuralist framework of two staunch designers of psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The monstrous and mutilated bodies of 1970's-1990's horror cinema were posited in their works as projections of male anxiety concerning sexual difference. Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in 1975, uses psychoanalysis as a "political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (14). For Mulvey, psychoanalysis provides the language with which to mobilize against unconscious, dominant patriarchal structures in film. Blooming in part out of an incendiary 1970s cinematic "slasher" moment, routinely reifying and mutilating the female body, Mulvey delivers a striking and germinal examination of the male gaze, identifying that the woman – "bearer of the bleeding wound" – "can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (ibid.). Castration, via Freud, turns out to be the yardstick against which to measure male projections of the female body: the female becomes the signifier of the castrated male, who must herself be castrated. Linda Williams's 1984 essay "When the Woman Looks" builds on Mulvey; the female body is doubly othered as she, the "site of the spectacle," becomes interchangeable with the

phenomenal body of the monster (64). In Barbara Creed's 1993 text, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Creed uses Julia Kristeva's abjection theory to create a multi-faced monstrous female who is effectively castrator herself, a grotesque talisman of sexual difference. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982), also deeply entrenched in psychoanalysis, provides an overall framework for many film texts thereafter. For example, Harry Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* (1997) outlines how horror film demonizes queer identities since its beginnings in silent film, drawing from yet perhaps going beyond the scope of its feminist predecessors.

These works use psychoanalysis to demonstrate cinematic reactions to sexual difference. Generally, they try to disclose the hidden operations of meaning-making behind representational strategies. Early feminist film criticism examines images, intentions and the overall moral configuration of a film, identifying the hegemonic patriarchal structures out of which films, as the dominant cultural products of their time, were produced as well as their broad psychological implications. Other important and nuanced feminist texts stemming out of this temporally situated psychoanalytic interrogation of corporeal horror include Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), a text that pulls fibers from Freud and to some extent Lacan; Carol Clover's Freud-laden examination *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, which initiated the crucial "Final Girl Theory" (1992); Mary Ann Doane's scrutiny of female deception and instability in film noir, in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991); and *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity, and the Histories of Art* (1988), Griselda Pollock's critical inquest into the male-dominant representational canon. These are some of the foundational readings of the cinematic body, ones I feel particularly compelled to

acknowledge in a project so closely focused on cinematically (and male)-rendered female bodies, while ultimately steering towards a different direction through a shift of scope. Though perhaps, as cinema moves away from chemically inscribed representation, and into a more mutable digital sphere, different analytic frameworks become necessary.

Early instances of cinema scholarship that invokes affect theory and phenomenology transcribe a reading of the body in film beyond a psychoanalytic structure. These texts provide new lenses for interpretation. Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body (Theory Out of Bounds)* (1993) actively challenges the psychoanalytic constructs dominating film theory, drawing instead from Deleuze and Guattarian models of thinking the cinematic body and identity. Though Shaviro has since redacted many of *The Cinematic Body*'s polemical declarations in "The Cinematic Body Redux" (2008), he admits that it "was at least groping towards an approach of film that focused on bodies and their affects, instead of upon ideologies and representations" (ibid.). Laura Marks's 2000 book *The Skin of the Film* and Vivian Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts* (2004) follow this move, both fixing on cinema experience through a phenomenological lens, circling embodiment and affect, instead of the representation of bodies. These texts arguably pave the way for post-cinematic theory, the roots of which lie largely in phenomenology (Denson and Leyda 2016). Film bodies and watching-film bodies, in this project, are on a continuum, with space, with technology, and with nature, always becoming. Focusing on not what the body represents but its cinematic materiality and spatiotemporal boundaries, in the vein of Shaviro and Sobchack in particular, arguably requires a similar post-psychoanalytic framing, one which I have found in feminist new materialism and post-cinema theory.

New materialist and post-cinematic understanding of bodies and/in space account for the mutable ontologies (not just of the body, but of media and of cinema) in focus here. The two spheres also arguably share a patronage in the work of Gilles Deleuze. Many new materialist feminists, such as Rosi Braidotti (2006, 2012) and Elizabeth Grosz (41-43, 2011), cite Deleuze in theorizing un-fixed ontologies in-becoming. In *Becoming Undone* (2011) Grosz states that Deleuze “seeks the outlines, contours, and methods of a new way of conceiving ontology, new ways of thinking and conceptualizing the real as dynamic, temporally sensitive forms of becoming” (41). Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari challenge psychoanalysis in *A Thousand Plateaus*: a human “becoming-animal,” for psychoanalysts, concerns principally what this becoming represents, when Deleuze and Guattari contend that the reality of becoming-animal is about “affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing” (259). Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the body is always in motion, a shifting sum of “intensive affects” and materials (260). They argue that the roots of thinking about becoming, and with it individuation, can be traced to Baruch Spinoza’s concept of a “substance monism,” briefly: the concept that all matter is connected (Thacker 137). Alfred North Whitehead’s process ontology is also central to formulations of becoming, in Deleuze’s individual works. Other new materialist and affect theorists (Manning [2006], Massumi [2002]) furthermore look to Gilbert Simondon’s concept of “individuation” to determine the body in-becoming, in which the individual must be produced and is always being produced. Braidotti indicates that the work of these theorists arguably lays the foundation for one of new materialism’s key theoretical arguments: Inertia is out, fluidity is in. Also at its roots, as well as at the core of this project, are texts that uncover the fluidity or hybridity of the subjective body, including Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991) and its now iconic

essay “The Cyborg Manifesto.” The Cyborg Manifesto becomes foundational to this text in its acknowledgment of the body empowered and happily supplemented by technological and natural elements. Foundational new materialist texts that build up from the preceding scholarship include the pertinent *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) – which rounds up works that uncover new thinkings of matter and ontological (ontogenetic, to pull aptly from Simondon) shifts and becomings – and the more fluidly crafted pulling together of dialogues, in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin’s *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (2013). These texts make space for corporeal fluidity. The latter collection includes philosophical conversations with Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti and Quentin Meillassoux that attempt to expound the implications of a new materialism, which moves away from the Cartesian (duality-based) materialism towards an understanding how all matter matters (Barad 2003).

The theoretical engagements of new materialist feminists are also of interest to post-cinema. Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* (2010) informs my second and third chapters, which draw heavily on her benchmark concept of transcorporeality. Alaimo is furthermore the editor for the influential anthology *Material Feminisms* (2010), which brings together the work of prominent material feminists such as Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo, and Karen Barad under the umbrella of new materialism. The scholars featured in the anthology call for a return to matter and materiality, as opposed to language, structure and representation, and this resonates with post-cinematic theory’s excursions into materiality, space-times, affects. In terms of affect, while Deleuzian scholar Brian Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), in which affect is immediate, pre-subjective, intensive (Shaviro 3), provides a common reference text for

post-cinema theorists, Eve Sedgwick's less referenced *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* outlines (2003) similar proposals in moving beyond representation. One of these proposals is Nigel Thrift's "non-representational theory," which notably appears as a reference in the footnotes of Shaviro's post-cinematic affect. The idea of non-representational theory complements affect theory and new materialist lines of philosophy in that, as Thrift argues, non-representational theory tries to capture the "onflow of everyday life" (5).

Shaviro's highly influential post-cinematic affect can be said to synthesize all of these theoretical threads to talk about the aesthetic tendencies of contemporary cinema. The "ambient, free-floating" sensibility that it defines transcribes the intangible affect structures of today's new-media-permeated society (2). In other words, "Post-Cinematic Affect" points to an important shift in the media climate: one moving towards affect. Traditional film theory following Jean-Louis Baudry's 1970 structuralist model of "the cinematic apparatus" (similar in shape to its feminist counterpart, penned by Mulvey) saw in filmic bodies and spectatorship a reflection of Marxist understandings of society: consuming dominant ideologies replicated by cinema, the viewer was thought to be "chained, captured, or captivated" (43) by film as spectacle, in the theatre. The filmic bodies themselves were nothing more than coded signs in this configuration, waiting to be deciphered and freed off of their inscribed ideological content. The shift towards affect, over representation, marked a move from structuralism; that divergence has become vital to post-cinema theory's foundations. In today's post-cinematic climate, it is difficult to speak of a theatrical or monolithic mode of viewing: cinema is immediate and dispersed, much like affect itself. Contemporary post-cinema theory approaches at once the implications and ramifications of cinema's dislocation. Yet in the fragmented spirit of

post-cinema, cinema theory's locations are also widely dispersed: theory appears across multiple and increasingly diverse (non-institutional) platforms – not only widely validated magazines or journals but personal websites, blogs, even, arguably, Twitter.

The post-cinema discussion seems to have been consolidated in the recent publication, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film* (2016). This online, open access anthology pulls together many of the important voices, writing about digital cinema and new media logics. It has also been influential in formulating project, as it situates post-cinema aesthetically, technologically, culturally, and materially, providing a complex overview. The first section of the anthology, edited by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda maps the “parameters” of post-cinema in three essays, with pointed theorists selected to introduce a framework for post-cinema: Lev Manovich, Steven Shaviro, and Richard Grusin. These choices are significant, and speak to post-cinema's hybrid positionality and wider theoretical underpinnings. Manovich is known for new media theory: his *Language of New Media* in 2001 located new media theory within non-teleological visual histories; Shaviro might be post-cinema's guru, providing the roots for most post-cinema essays with his “Post-Cinematic Affect” (2010), and the subsequent book building off of his essay, *Post Cinematic Affect* (2010); Grusin is at the forefront of the theories of mediation: his radical work on re-mediation and pre-mediation, with a heightened attention to the human-nonhuman assemblages that are involved in medial processes and experiences, becomes pertinent to this project. He has also edited a crucial anthology, *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015), shifting the focus of new materialist scholars from posthumanism to thinking about realities and materialities that fall outside the human domain. The selection of these theorists speaks to post-cinema's position as a product of

the new media ecology, one based in affect and intensity, that decentralizes both the human eye and producer.

Ex Machina, *Her*, and *Under The Skin* have been the subject of a plethora of academic and non-academic writing for the past few years. A considerable number of *Ex Machina*'s interrogations approach its gendered "fembot problem" (Angela Watercutter for *Wired*), its potential projection of male fantasies (David Glance for *Technopohrenia*), and the "patriarchal structures" inscribed on the seemingly cyborgian android body (Katie Jones for *Gender Forum* 2016). Jones further exposes a Gothic structure within the film, similar to an argument I make, but more focused on objectification and signification – tracing tropes of porn culture – of the Android body. Brian R. Jacobson's "*Ex Machina* in the Garden" (Summer 2016) acknowledges the film's "fembot problem" as per Watercutter, while highlighting a speculative reflexivity that may look towards a "productive destabilization of human/machine and nature/technology distinctions" (24). Major online non-academic publications, such as *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, have published critical pieces revolving around the implications of the film's gendered, fragmented robot bodies. *Her* has triggered similar readings, but with some pointing to its feminism (exemplified by *Feministing*'s editors claiming the film to be the feminist film of the year), and adversely, the holes in its depiction of women (Monika Bartyzel in *The Week*). The film has also engendered academic discussion on topics that range from its depiction of parasitic surrogacy and exploration of collectivity as well as abandonment (Ivanchikova 2014), to its examination of the limits of love in the face of artificial intelligence (Jollimore 2015). *Under The Skin* draws attention in terms of its projections of gender as well: Ana Osterweil ("Under The Skin: The Perils of Becoming Female" 2014) investigates the film's "woman as alien" threads, calling up and

comparing it with traditional cinematic tropes that posit woman as an iteration of otherness, such as the archetypal femme fatale. The spectrum of scholarship surrounding these three films examines the enfoldings of women and technology, gender and cultural/technological inscription, in readings not dissimilar from my own. In what follows, I hope to examine how these technological and constructed bodies are specifically taking up post-cinematic or post-digital space. The body-space continuum acknowledges the body as a complex phenomenon, something that these post-cinematic films seem to express and produce, in their narratives, effects, and implied modes of “re-embodied” (Thain 2010) viewership.

III. Entangling Nature and Technology in *Ex Machina*

The first moments of 2015's *Ex Machina*, directed by Alex Garland, are flooded with contemporary technology's characteristic blue glow. Four three-second shots in succession show different persons immersed in interaction with their screens – computers, and cell phones – as fluorescent blue wall lights and layers of circular blue reflections overwhelm the filmic space. These individuals appear isolated in the middle of a bustling office, lost in the monotony of their daily grind: bodies move past, bright fish swim idly back and forth in a turquoise tank, as if marking the passage of time. However, the seemingly dull inertia of the figures populating the screen is deceptive. They are lively with technology, in constant motion: going in, going on, sharing, surfing, scrolling, perforating infinite possible membranes of space. The fourth in this opening sequence of shots introduces the film's protagonist, Caleb, played by Domhnall Gleeson. As “STAFF LOTTERY” then “FIRST PRIZE” flash yellow across his computer screen, a subjective camera² emerges; Caleb's cell phone seizes his face in a POV shot. His image, as shakily captured by the phone, is distorted by animated digital glitches – outlined blue, glowing green, then flashing pink, red, yellow, a diffracted spectrum. The kaleidoscopic nature of the post-cinematic seems to be invoked both within the narrative, and the processual aesthetics emerging non-diegetically. Technology appraises its user in an act of reflexive and insidious surveillance, a digital gaze. Before the two-minute mark, the film abandons the office atmosphere of interior fluorescence and digital spaces for an expansive aerial shot of an icy glacier atop a mountain. The glacial mass mirrors technology's blue glow in the preceding scene, drawing aesthetic lines between the technological interior and the natural exterior, in a significant tie that establishes the entanglement between the two. A

² Classically, a subjective camera shows the point of view of a specific person or thing.

tiny helicopter flies into frame over this vast polar wasteland, containing Caleb as he hurtles towards his “first prize” retreat. The journey will, unbeknownst to him, be his last.

A few things are already established in the first two minutes of *Ex Machina*. Technology becomes both a pervasive, colourful staple of the cinematic atmosphere – its consistently oppressive fog – and a character with implicit agency. The question of a technological consciousness appears to flicker in the erratic, yet calculated pixels of the POV shots. The boundaries between bodies and technologies seem to blur: human subjects are folded into the immersive spaces of the digital world, engaged with digital screens and enveloped by their omnipresent blue light. Human figures are surrounded by multiple panoptic lenses, hinting at a climate of surveillance: the shiny black spheres of security cameras make an appearance as watchful eyes above Caleb’s head, and a cursory shot of his webcam precedes a moment wherein it, too, steals the point of view. Grid-like aquamarine graphics, evoking the recently ubiquitous interface of facial recognition software, imply that the webcam is recording the contours of Caleb’s face, making data of his gestures. This opening scene’s somewhat chaotic, rapid layering of skins, screens, glass, prismatic graphics and software’s ambivalent gaze troubles the aesthetic borders between bodies, space, and technology.

Ex Machina depicts what happens when the borders between (being) technology and (being) human blur. Drawing from Hansen’s concepts of coevolution, cited previously in the introduction, my reading of the film in this chapter is motivated by a desire to explore how post-digital embodiment in *Ex Machina* is (de)construed by “coupling” the film’s bodies and technology-infused spaces (176). All of the films I engage with in the thesis generate bodies expanded, or produced, by new technologies and emergent realms of digital space – occasionally as digital-cinematic spaces – and new

technologies. *Ex Machina* provides a good entry point to how this expansion points at a large shift in the configuration of embodiment, paving the way for discussion in the following chapters. This chapter then takes up *Ex Machina*'s spaces and bodies – as a post-cinematic body-space continuum – which on the surface often appear as monstrous and mutable containers, in order to discuss the film's reconfiguration of these materialities as performative hybrids of composite technology *and* nature.

The opening sequence's troubling of the body's autonomy in space, which is increasingly mediated by technology, is significant in that it is becoming an increasingly common thread in post-cinema. The *Paranormal Activity* films have been a recurring referent for post-cinema scholars like Julia Leyda, Therese Grisham, and Steven Shaviro, largely because of the franchise's digital media reflexivity and the cinematic agency given to household technology: the films are digital fabrics of sutured-together technology POV shots, the mode of camera evolving with each sequel from digital camera, to webcam, to smartphone. Nicholas Rombes builds on what Shaviro calls post-cinema's pervasive "ambient, free-floating sensibility," considering "the totalitarian immersion of our everyday lives in the slipstream of the digital, cinematic imaginary, as captured so well in the *Paranormal Activity* films which, at their most fundamental level, tackle the question of how to navigate the private spaces of this new media landscape" (Leyda, Rombes, Shaviro, Grisham 2016). Using *Paranormal Activity* and its lineage as a jumping-off point, Rombes outlines post-cinema's foundation and argues that it occupies a reflexive terrain, playing with, in large part, the contemporary phenomenon of bodies and space sliding into the digital in both its narratives, its diegetic content, and its processes, its non-diegetic modes of production. The household digital camera becomes an object within the film, and the arbiter of film as lens. Digital mediation, as narrative

and film process, means that it becomes harder to distinguish the difference between subjects and objects, images and simulations, bodies and spaces. Iterations of post-cinema frequently explore these (perhaps less and less) private spaces, in which we are surrounded by the never-quite-inactive lenses of our laptops and cellphones, and call for a redefining of embodiment. Drawing attention to questions of technics and mediation, Mark Hansen proposes thinking of embodiment as “the process through which bodies are produced” in an age of digital mediation (176). Bodies are perhaps, thus, increasingly processual.

Post-Cinema and the Body-Space Continuum

A human-technology coevolution dictates new entanglements of the body in space, when bodies are increasingly blurring into the digital, and space is more-so-than-ever technologically mediated. Here a kind of body-space continuum emerges, in which it is no longer clear where the body ends and the environment or technology starts, an idea that is explored in post-cinema’s manifold digital spheres. The philosophical frameworks of posthumanism and new materialism run analogous to these filmic explorations in their aim to decenter traditional human subjecthood while dismantling anthropocentrism, instead understanding the human as only one of the actors of its surrounding biological and technological environments. This intersection of interest in transcorporeal subjectivity (a form of embodiment that extends to both human and nonhuman actors, burgeoned by Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures*) would seem a pertinent development in the age of the Anthropocene, the name given by geologists and scientists to the period stretching from the post-industrial era to the 21st century. In the Anthropocene, humans have irrevocably altered the earth’s balance and flows. Since a situated drift into the Anthropocene, the so-called “Age of Man” as a geological force, the relationship between

humanity, nature, and technology has dramatically shifted. Humanity and our technologies have made such a mark on the earth that we have completely reshaped its ecosystems, “becoming a force in climate,” as David Archer writes, “comparable to the orbital variations that drive the glacial cycles” (6). Yet humans also have impacted changes that threaten our own existence.

Ex Machina, whilst presenting a techno-narrative on the surface, is arguably shaped by this pre-Apocalyptic anxiety, and littered with markers/metaphors of the Anthropocene, thrusting *Ex Machina* into the fluid realm of ecocinema. Ecocinema, as Paula Willoquet-Maricondi attests, “has gained currency to describe films that overtly engage with environmental concerns either by exploring environmental justice concerns, or, more broadly, making ‘nature’ from landscapes to wildlife, a primary focus” (9). As such, ecocinema interrogates environmental narratives, and privileges nature as locus, though, as Stephen Rust and Salma Monani acknowledge, the field is still marked by ambiguity (4). Ecocinema, while perhaps, ironically, ecologically unsound in its “ecological footprint,” can, much like post-cinema, agitate the “anthropocentric gaze,” and make space for nonhuman agencies in film (Rust and Monani 11). Rust and Monani furthermore maintain that eco-film criticism that highlights interactions between the material and the cultural and re-negotiates the parameters of “nature” films can “remind us that the borders between human and nonhuman worlds are fluid ones indeed” (6). *Ex Machina* examines the ties that bind humans, nature, and technology – they are all material, and in some way at the mercy of Earth’s fate – and the porous barriers between them. The cut from the tight and oblique framing of the office space to the sweeping exterior shots of unpopulated nature in the opening sequence, beginning with the wide

blue expanse of the glacier (a glaring symbol of ecological precarity), establishes this connection immediately.

Ex Machina does not butt technology against nature in a battle for supremacy (though the humans vs. androids narrative would seem to hint at that possibility) but presents the two ostensible poles as a fluid continuum, each blurring into the other: an approach that would seem pertinent in relation to the debates surrounding the Anthropocene. The relationship between nature and technology is established in the film as a coevolution not only in the protagonist's questioning of whether the androids and AI might be the next stage in human evolution or not, but also by subtler cues: in the characters' vividly portrayed engagements with various post-digital technologies and media. These interactions imply that post-cinematic experiences could themselves be theorized as new assemblages of the body and technology. While not presenting an explicit commentary on the digital transformation of cinema, as its diverse modes of reception intensify everyday expressions of technicity, both *Ex Machina*'s narrative contents and the film's affect seem to account for these experiences, interspersed into the story through the diffracted lens of speculative horror. Technology POV shots in particular expose the effects of Shaviro's post-cinematic affect, rendering an aesthetic that communicates "structures of feeling" symptomatic of life under pervasive techno-capitalism (2). Speculative horror, as a sub-genre of science fiction steeped in horror's affective tropes, provides a platform for *Ex Machina*'s explorative breaking open of the nature/technology (and, relevantly, the human/machine) divide. The film both sharpens and troubles the polarizing divide between nature and technology, rendering it a decisively unstable boundary. Often, discourse around the nature/technology split in cinema would imply that the two are fixed, opposing categories: either end of a resolute

binary. Of course, the boundary between the two may show cracks, and nature and technology do slide into each other. Alexander Ornella addresses the “messiness of body boundaries” – both virtual and material – in science fiction films that displace the body digitally such as *Avatar* (2009) and *eXistenZ* (1999). He states that these films go against the trend by underscoring the “alienating” properties of the culturally inscribed borders between bodies and technological others or virtual spaces (157). However, it still seems rare for films to present the two sides of the presumed binary as “always already” entangled (Barad 801; Heidegger 185). *Ex Machina* seems to acknowledge the knotty intersectionality of nature and technology, focusing on the points where one folds into the other without discernible seams.

The Messy Borders of the Biomediated

To return to the film’s key narrative details, *Ex Machina* takes place over the span of one confined week. Caleb has won a contest to spend time with the eccentrically reclusive head of “BlueBook,” his company of employ, at the magnate’s isolated estate. Wedged into endless acres of uninhabited wilderness, the dwelling seems completely autonomous: detached from society. BlueBook’s CEO, Nathan (Oscar Isaac) has summoned his employee to this fortress so that Caleb can get to know the technology “living” within its walls. Caleb has in fact been assigned a principal task: to perform a Turing test on Nathan’s newest creation, an artificially intelligent feminoid android named Ava, played by Alicia Vikander. Caleb must decide, through a series of conversational “sessions” whether or not Ava has consciousness. He begins to fall for the android, fantasizing about her release in black and white daydreams. Caleb, Nathan, Ava, and a more mysteriously configured “woman,” Kyoko, are the film’s only four characters. *Ex Machina* depicts what unfolds as these four precarious bodies – human

men and synthetic women – become entangled with each other inside Nathan’s cloistered temple of technology, tucked safely in the midst of an expansive wilderness.

What this corporeal and spatial set-up seems to invoke is the two sets of binary oppositions often taken up in sci-fi horror narratives: human-synthetic and technology-nature. However, as the film unfolds and the human-synthetic divide gets increasingly troubled through the affective interactions between the human men and android women, the sharp separation between the technological compound and the expansive nature that houses it also start to look questionable. The sinister structure facing the snowy terrain gradually resembles a signpost - techno-engineered progress marking the glacial as the dead-end for civilization - and appears somewhat symbolic. It is where the film intersects with the tropes of both eco-cinema and speculative horror, as mentioned earlier. Both of these genres question what it means to be a body in the unsteady actual and virtual spaces of our contemporary age. The speculative horror genre thrusts bodies into precarity with routine ferocity, troubling the spaces around them as reflexively tenuous spaces, whereas eco-cinema in the digital age projects in some way an imminent confluence or linkage between post-human and post-natural worlds, with the looming threat of human extinction in the backdrop. The film encloses its claustrophobic horror-typical stage, Nathan’s compound, with borderless, uninhabited wild forests, mountains, and glacial matter, thus colliding speculative horror’s interest in speculating the anxiety-inducing future of our biotechnological advancements with the sublime terror of a post-human emptiness evoked by eco-cinema in the Anthropocene. What this kind of collision does is establish the film’s hybrid, eco-horror narrative as one about the broader consequences of techno-capitalism.

Ex Machina's most charged horror moments all occur, however, within the contained spaces of Nathan's residence, a building at once organic and synthetic. Though at first glance an elegantly appointed modern home, the site seems ultimately less like a domicile than a covert facility, inserted into the middle of boundless nature. Ambiguously constructed – its architectural form is never shown in full – and vaguely situated: both the structure and the sublime emptiness everywhere around it come across as treacherously indefinite. In other words, its borders and location feel “intangibly abstract... everywhere and nowhere,” to recall Eugene Thacker's description of ambiguous horror-forms (107). The home's muted, wooden exterior blends unassumingly into its surroundings, and, like the android bodies it keeps, the house is at once transparent and opaque; accessible and inscrutable; “natural and crafted” (Haraway 149). Its glass borders wrap around green outdoor space, and allow in prominent rock faces as walls, bringing nature inside itself.³ After showing Caleb around, Nathan reveals to him that the home isn't really a home at all, and is, in fact, a “research facility.” Gesturing to the subterranean cement walls on either side, he states, “buried in these walls is enough fiber-optic cable to reach the moon and lasso it.” The home is indeed completely veined with technology – glowing blue filaments pumping data throughout. All of its doors and devices are controlled by an absolute technological system; rooms fill up at affective moments with red or blue light; every corner is under insidious surveillance, reminiscent of post-cinematic affect.

Matthias Stork, focusing on the depictions of space in the digital era, states that the pervasiveness of surveillance imaging renders all spaces “mediated,” and post-digital cinema shows traditional cinematic dimensions dissolving (2015). The overwhelming use

³ In this sense, the compound is reminiscent of the ambiguous (simultaneously organic and technological) structure in weird fiction novelist Jeff VanderMeer's Nebula Award winning novel *Annihilation*. Notably, Garland is currently adapting this novel to screen so a nod to the trope of weird nature (as established by weird fiction) in *Ex Machina* is quite plausible.

of surveillance imagery in *Ex Machina* makes its already amorphous (both organic and technological) spaces even more uncanny, blending the mimetic, the post-natural, and the mediated. That gives the impression of a building made up of post-cinematic husks, dislocated parts of a digital dollhouse. The real and virtual become blurred spheres. *Ex Machina*'s uncanny, technologically mediated spaces deny easy mapping; as "alive" as horror film's haunted house, they are layered and animated with forces already natural and technological.

Ex Machina's four central bodies are all also ambiguously alive, making cuts through the organic/synthetic divide. The film consistently questions each character's status as either human or android, building mystery around every body's material fabrication, their varying degrees of integration with technology. Elements of nature and technology are weaved throughout the bodies of Nathan, Kyoko, Caleb, and Ava; the ontological fixity of each side of the dichotomy seems to dissolve on and within these forms. All bodies – human and synthetic – are programmed, coded, and mediated by technology: in an inextricable dance with data. Each figure seems to skate the uncanny valley, Masahiro Mori's theory of the disquieting plane wherein a robot becomes all too like a human, propelling the undisputed natural-ness of humans into question (33-35). In *Ex Machina* gender, skin, identity, sensation, and sexuality are all put forth as programmed features of both human and android bodies.

These concepts have been destabilized in parallel ways in materialist feminist and queer theory from the mid-twentieth century up to today. Simone de Beauvoir first accounted for the body as a "situation" in 1949 (46); Haraway strove to break down the staunchly embedded modes of naturalism with her image of the heterogeneous cyborg in 1991 (151), as did Judith Butler in 1992, favouring, much like Haraway, constructed,

perhaps programmed processes of embodied identity over naturalized ones (93). Just like the facility that encloses them, all *Ex Machina*'s bodies are posthuman, performing in similar ways to Donna Haraway's cyborg chimeras: "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (150).

Ex Machina's body-forms appear as monstrous "biomediated bodies" (Clough 2), performative cyborgs that blur the fixed line between the human and technological other, rendering that boundary redundant. Patricia Clough builds on Eugene Thacker's reflections on "biomedia," indicating that a biomediated body becomes a site on which "the body" and "technology" are no longer ontologically detached (Clough 9). Rosi Braidotti's theory assumes consistently that 21st century bodies are all in some way technologically mediated (203). *Ex Machina*'s synthetic and human bodies are programmed and enhanced with data, regardless of whether this data has been coded into the body digitally, or whether it has been integrated into all facets of embodied life via technological devices. This gives them a liminal constitution, which is a feature that cinema has traditionally assigned to monsters. Yet, as Braidotti argues, "machines and monsters are hybrids – that is to say, they blur fundamental distinctions or constitutive boundaries between different ontological categories" (56). Ava is visibly both machine and monster, a hybrid of woman parts and whirring parts, her mere existence already fraying the edges of such polarizing distinctions as human/nonhuman, and organic/synthetic. Both Ava and Kyoko, the feminoid androids, can disassemble themselves – removing limbs, removing skin – and put themselves back together. Technology and femininity cover their bodies erratically, both appearing as monstrous and performative skins. Ava herself is both transparent and opaque, with female body parts yet her partially see-through skin visibly revealing that she is cybernetic; Kyoko is

more mysterious: presumed human, until she shows her insides to Caleb in a tension-ridden scene that discloses her body/ identity. Caleb, after seeing the insides of Kyoko's body, cuts his own skin, peering in to see what comes out. These beings toe the line between being organic, and being technology, troubling the exclusivity of either mode of being. Furthermore, they express a becoming-with technology.

Technological Natures and Ambiguous Descents

A sense of becoming-with technology is implied as well in the landscape - As Caleb flies towards the furtive location of Nathan's residence, past the gateway of the jagged blue glacier, he becomes dis-located, plummeting into ambiguous, un-networked space. This contrasts the film's preceding opening sequence, thick with technology and people, set inside the familiar and insular space of the office. He flies past the glacial mass, then over a range of Alpine mountains before he asks the pilot "How long until we get to his estate?" The pilot laughs, his voice track filtered through the radio fuzz of Caleb's headphones, and informs him they have been "flying over his estate for the past two hours." Caleb's excitement and his trepidation are palpable. An industrial electronic score hums and builds ominously, digitally constructing an environment of ambient horror. The helicopter lands, dropping Caleb in a bright green valley bordered by forested mountains. He yells at the pilot over the sound of the helicopter's rotors: "You're leaving me here?" The pilot answers, "This is as close as I'm allowed to get to the building." As Caleb watches the helicopter disappear from view - flaccid and displaced in a suit jacket, with a rolling suitcase - the sounds of nature begins to swell, swallowing him up. He pulls out his phone, which glows blue: "No Network." He's completely alone.

Caleb's ambiguous journey, and his disorienting drop into a middle-of-nowhere environment calls to mind many similar horror film beginnings - the descent into sublime

and menacingly unpopulated nature. The opening scene of pivotal horror film *The Shining* shows the doomed family driving towards their custodial term at the vacant Overlook Hotel. Wide aerial shots depict the little yellow car snaking along precarious cliff-side roads, and between massive mountain ranges, overwhelming the vehicle with tremendous nature. 1982's body horror *The Thing* opens with a scene almost identical to *Ex Machina*'s helicopter passage: the tiny-looking aircraft soars into view over a snow-capped mountain range, plunging towards a research facility inside which the film's horror transpires. Illimitable, sublime nature becomes an agent of horror, the mark of these worlds' borderless-ness. These (anti-)establishing scenes evoke the "threat" of the sublime (Botting 197), which, as an aesthetic of horror stemming from visions of the biblical Apocalypse "initially describes a loss: the senses are overcome, the mind is threatened by the vast scale of things" (ibid.). *Ex Machina*, *The Thing*, and *The Shining* begin with descending journeys starting in urban civilization, and ending in middle-of-nowheres, the characters experiencing the sublime "loss" amidst boundless nature. They move from and into unspecific locations, right away establishing amorphous diegetic space, and ensuring the inescapability of their vast horror worlds. These ambiguous descents, when applied as a stylistic device, also foreshadow encounters with unsettling forces that defy boundaries, including the nebulous settings that host *The Thing*'s mutable alien monsters and *The Shining*'s intangible telekinetic dynamisms.

The ambiguity and fluidity of nature in horror cinema can often reflect the monstrous bodies/forces that their narratives contain. The natural environments, increasingly altered through special effects in the age of CGI, act as reflexive surroundings, anti-locations. Their cinematically manipulated "nature" itself points to a synthetic or hybrid reality, yet somewhat concealed. This suggests a kinship between

nature and bodies, a kind of monstrosity that disrupts categorical distinctions and becomes bonding. As Margrit Shildrick notes: “Above all it is the corporeal ambiguity and fluidity, the troublesome lack of fixed definition, the refusal to be either one thing or the other, that marks the monstrous as a site of disruption” (78). If *Ex Machina*’s bodies are monstrous because of their uncanny ambiguity, their “lack of fixed definition,” their refusal to be either technology or nature, this could also be true of the film’s setting: the ambiguous spatiality of its exterior landscape that seems to be an impossibly varied ecosystem, in an undisclosed location. Horror film often maps its bodies, its crises onto its settings, crafting disrupted, monstrous sites that reflect the qualities of the otherness within – “symptomatic” worlds and terrains (Shaviro 2), kinetic and embodied. This happens at times literally in certain cases of Gothic horror. In *Crimson Peak* (2015), a modern Gothic, a young woman moves into a Victorian mansion and finds that the house, and the snowy grounds surrounding it bleed the same oozy material that the film’s monstrous phantoms seem to be made of. The materiality of the film’s bloody phantom bodies infects the wider cinematic spaces. As Judith (now Jack) Halberstam argues, gothic horror is above all a technology of subjectivity that produces otherness and marks difference within or upon bodies, spaces, and technologies, which are construed as deviant or monstrous (1995). A similar projection of otherness onto symptomatic bodies, spaces, and technologies is often found in science fiction, as it frequently borrows from the gothic itself. Rosi Braidotti goes as far as suggesting that “in fact, the whole Gothic repertoire is ransacked and recycled shamelessly in science fiction texts” (Braidotti 191). Gothic tropes, technological monstrosity, and sublime imagery meet in films like *The Thing* and *Ex Machina* in an interesting way; these films’ (anti-) establishing scenes and their continually ambiguous configurations of place feature bodies, technology, and

nature morphing into each other seamlessly, as “always already unstable [corpuses]” (Shildrick 77). *Ex Machina* further adds an ecological concern to this equation, hinting at a horror aesthetic specific to the Anthropocene imaginary as will be discussed below.

The film sutures, in a sense, a gothic narrative of monstrous technology onto a natural Sublime aesthetic of the Anthropocene to comment on imminently post-human worlds. The dystopia presented in it, however, is one of a specific type of emptiness, that of a world-without-humans. It’s not the enslaving vision of the resource-barren planes of *Mad Max* or the virtual *Matrix* world. *Ex Machina*’s world is much more insular and indifferent to the future that awaits humanity. Eugene Thacker draws from Kant in reflecting on the nature-spaces of gothic horror and states that “The sublime ‘forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature,’ the strange allure of our own insignificance, ‘astonishing amounting almost to terror’” (Thacker). The sublime, Thacker explicates, has to do with the body confronting its own natural limits. However, just as the bodies are not assumed natural in *Ex Machina*, the vast reserves of nature are also not depicted as pure or devoid of technological or human imprint.

The Anthropocene Imaginary

As I mentioned, *Ex Machina* seems to reflect an eco-cinema aesthetic, although its narrative tendencies borrow from speculative horror and the gothic. It may seem a discontented cluster, but the evocations of the natural sublime in distinct genres such as gothic horror, eco-cinema, and science-fiction films find a common source of focus in the Anthropocene. *Ex Machina* dedicates much of its screen time to technology’s glows and wires, its screens, its circuits, its atmospheric hum. However, these images are often suddenly abandoned for shots of sublime nature: close-ups of plant life, wide shots of

mountain ranges. The sound of the rushing river beside Nathan's home blends with the droning digital score, in a sonic meld of technology and nature. By weaving technology into the natural landscape, the film also blurs the distinction between the inside and outside. Nathan and Caleb, while staring into a sublime scene of a rushing river and drinking glasses of clear liquor, discuss singularity, or the machine takeover.

They speak about evolution, equating technology's evolution with that of humanity, and Nathan states that Ava "doesn't exist in isolation. Just like you or me, she's part of a continuum." Here, the choice of the word continuum – invoking the Deleuzian concept of "continuous transition," of which all things are "a part," or a variable of this transition (105-106) – is striking, taking into consideration the film's insistence on undermining binaries. Nathan then suggests that Ava's memories, her "mind," will disappear when the next model is created. Caleb looks troubled. Nathan looks at him, saying, "Do you feel bad for Ava? Feel bad for yourself man. One day the AIs are going to look back at us the same way we look at fossil skeletons on the plains of Africa. An upright ape living in dust with crude language and tools, all set for extinction." Caleb responds with, "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," J. Robert Oppenheimer's quote, originated after the physicist created the atomic bomb, again invoking Apocalyptic tropes.

The "continuum" Nathan utters, and Anthropocene images are pertinent. Nathan seems to imply that Ava and her technological species are the next dominants, ready to inherit a damaged earth, at the expense of humanity. In another outdoor scene, Caleb and Nathan sit below a glacier after traversing a rough terrain. A river runs below the glacier, seeming to imply almost a melting process. The image evokes the sublime "terror, horror

and wonder” associated with “natural phenomena” that Fred Botting connects with Gothic narratives. But perhaps these sensations could also be associated with the anxiety characterizing the overarching structure of feeling related to the eco-systems collapse in the Anthropocene (and its expressions in contemporary cinema), thus tying the sublime to the Anthropocene imaginary. Instead of evoking the cognitively and emotionally unmappable qualities of nature, *Ex Machina* highlights the devastating inevitability of their demise or loss, questioning how and where humankind could fit into the landscape that is emerging in their ruins. In her narrative-driven account of the Anthropocene, Gaia Vince lays out what we confront in the age of the Anthropocene: instead of nature’s boundless, overpowering surge, its destruction. The landscape has been imprinted with human praxes, we are everywhere in it and on it and above it; and therefore, “Our influence will show up as... the loss of forests and the growth of deserts, the damming of rivers, the retreat of glaciers and the sinking of the oceans” (4). Both of *Ex Machina*’s lengthiest exterior scenes gesture towards the possibility of humanity’s extinction for the advancement of our own technologies.

In “Anthropocenema: Cinema in the Age of Mass Extinctions,” Selmin Kara studies the “Anthropocene imaginary” in cinema, stating that a significant number of contemporary films use new cinematic technologies to “project visions of humanity under constant threat by factors of its own making” (2016). Suggesting that these films often reflect the anxiety of our times, she ends on a provocation, or a projection: “... perhaps, the next leap for Anthropocenema will be to stretch its already expanded temporal and spatial boundaries even further, and to project visions of this world entirely-without-humans” (ibid.) One could interpret *Ex Machina* as responding to this provocation, with its questioning of the possibility of human extinction through symbolic use of empty

spaces. Many samples of eco-cinema and speculative horror show nature and technology becoming uncontrollable forces, but usually humanity restores the equilibrium in returning to nature. In *Ex Machina*, this becomes almost impossible, as the line between technology and nature is blurred – the two are depicted as compatible – and humans appear as the element that doesn't fit through a distinctive nihilistic lens.

Synthetic Interiors and the Nature Within

The destinies of *Ex Machina*'s android and human characters intersect and become inextricable within the enclosed spaces of Nathan's home/research facility – a troubled container holding troubled beings. Horrors ensue within the compound to an end without human survivors. The stark, modern manor blends into its surroundings with a muted wood exterior; unlike the Gothic castle that sits ominously on a cliff, this facility blends into nature, insidiously camouflaged. Its position, its liveliness, its cybernetic bones sit somewhere on the nature-technological continuum (rather than divide), buzzing as a monstrous hybrid. The palette inside the house is muted and Hitchcockian: cement greys, woods, chromes, whites, with floor to ceiling windows, scattered with glowing-blue technology – the house serves as a kind of Anthropocene-age rendering of the modernist keep in *North by Northwest* (1959). It seems at once secure, and open; inscrutable, and accessible; organic, and synthetic. The cement walls are as the sturdy barricades of a bomb shelter, but its panorama of glass feels vulnerable and elegant. It generates the sense of a covert, high-security facility – an automated technological system greets Caleb at the door, and spits out a key card with his image on it. A rock face juts into the elegant living space; the house is built into the mountain itself, combining its synthetic interior with the heavy minerals of nature. Glass and heavy metals wrap around the rock face - slabs of smooth cement extend from its jagged and nebulous form.

The compound is completely technologically mediated – technology as “smart” digital veins infiltrate the assemblage of natural and human-made materials: organic and synthetic elements alike are automated, cabled, tied into a network. Though apparently unaltered by visible digital processes of post-production CGI, the home seems a conglomerate of different real-life locations and places – its insides are impossibly extensive, with long, subterranean halls and sectors. There seems to be deliberately little attempt to orient the viewer within the walls of the facility. Various atriums make it possible to glimpse, through layers of glass, into other rooms in the house through thickets of greenery, further distorting the home’s comprehensible system of design. An intensely vigilant surveillance system adds another disorienting layer of digital space – characters are visualized consistently on the screens of surveillance, depicted as they appear through the techno-lens of multiple security cameras. This is only one of the many ways in which the film hints at technology’s escalating habitual diffusion into space. Considering the lack of specific layout and place, as well as the overwhelming arbitration by surveillance, *Ex Machina*’s mediated technological interiors could perhaps be situated as references to the climate of real-life dislocations in today’s “new media ecology” (Shaviro 8). Shaviro establishes the now widely-used term “new media ecology,” building on Matthew Fuller’s concept of “media ecology.” The home in fact appears at times as inscrutable, as digitally navigable, through surveillance, as a network.

Surveillance, Simulation, and Bodies-Become-Code

At any given moment in *Ex Machina*, the eyes of surveillance are insidiously appraising the represented spaces. Multiple layers of filming seem to be at play. Reality/simulation becomes in this case an iteration of the nature/technology divide, their edges fading into one another, collapsing. Often, the viewer glimpses bodies and events through

a double layer of digital screens: the screen of the film itself, and the screens of surveillance, articulated as Nathan's all-seeing desktop monitor, or the 24-hour Ava cam televised on a screen at the end of Nathan's bed. The aforementioned POV shot becomes an instance of this event as well, in an even more directly jarring image of technology "reading" its user's face. Steven Shaviro attests that in our contemporary new media ecology, technology-inflicted spatial dislocations are par for the course, as a consequence of an increasingly pervasive watchful sea of digital video surveillance. The seeing digital ubiquitously intrudes upon the real:

...all activity is under surveillance from video cameras and microphones, and in return video screens and speakers, moving images and synthesised sounds, are dispersed pretty much everywhere. In this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot meaningfully distinguish between 'reality' and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric (8).

Ex Machina seems to acknowledge and reproduce this fabric. Bodies become code, and reality feels increasingly slippery. Nathan consistently uses the sub-reality of surveillance imaging to manipulate Caleb. The Ava cam makes sure that Caleb can only entertain himself alone by watching her, and, since Nathan creates a narrative in this way – collapsing reality and simulation. These collapsed versions of the real perhaps make a reference to our everyday experiences of mediality, and the confusion that distinguishing between reality and simulation in the digital era and its technologically filtered spaces generates. "Natural" space now feels almost non-existent, even in "the great outdoors" surrounding Nathan's building – after all, the first thing Caleb sees when he approaches Nathan's home in the middle of an Alaskan nowhere is a satellite dish. Digital waves and flows are omnipresent, not to mention the devices we carry with which to capture and make data every fragment of the "real" world.

Though not directly digitally modified through CGI, the interior spaces of *Ex Machina* are all modified by the digital: “rigorously [recorded]” (Stork 2013). Matthias Stork unspools a reading on the contemporary cityscapes of cinema, ones which are disappearing into playful maps of code, and whose “technological ecosystem[s]” are defined in large part by the virtual spaces of display screens (ibid.). He focuses pointedly on surveillance, stating, “The city, as seen through these devices, registers as a mediated space. Its spatial dimensions are no longer posited as real. Rather, they are revealed as products of a spatialized media framework” (ibid.) Reality is revealed to be a mere simulation, or rather, it does not seem to matter which is which on the post-digital screen, in the folds of these new media ecologies. The interior in its entirety seems to show this dissolving of dimensions – the glass walls interspersed with cement walls seem to act almost as surveillance screens in themselves. One scene near the end of the film has Caleb spying Ava through the atrium – he stands in Nathan’s office gawking through layers of glass as she, in another room in the same house, takes skin from the inactive bodies of android models gone-by and puts it onto herself, becoming a naked woman. This is the last thing Caleb will ever see, as the house’s system traps him inside Nathan’s office after Ava leaves the premises, smiling in a white dress. The last shot of Caleb shows him banging on the glass office door with a blunt object, flushed by the red light that signifies a power cut and caged by systemically inscrutable technology. An ambiguous hopelessness is evoked in this final glimpse of a human character.

Embodied Architecture

This thesis in part responds to Hansen’s call for a new understanding of how bodies and spaces fold into each other, his primary project being an examination of the “deep correlation between embodiment and virtuality” (x). He states that in this particular

moment, one of a definitive “digital shift,” humanity and technology are evolving side-by-side and “the task of clarifying the nature and extent of the coupling of body and space is particularly crucial” (176). Expanding on some of his key concepts – fragments of which I have already called forth in part to conceptualize a methodology that merges cinematic bodies and space as a continuum for embodiment – he explains, throughout the chapter “Wearable Space,” how architecture is an “intrinsically (rather than contingently)” embodied framing (177), while it de-bunks cinema as the primary cultural form of framing the body⁴. Digitally mediated spaces, like *Ex Machina*’s technologically veined fortress, bring new implications to the table. Hansen does not necessarily provide filmic examples to post-digital spaces, which re-produce bodies in ways that shift the limitations of embodiment, yet his invocations of new media art spaces – including the *Blur Building* conceived principally by Elizabeth Diller and Richard Scofidio – are telling. The *Blur Building* is a wearable space in that the participant is surrounded and overcome by a sea of mist (instead of concrete matter) in a disorienting avisual⁵ sensorium, and the only way of navigating the space is through the aid and connectivity of wearable devices. Wearable space, Hansen notes, engenders a “becoming-fluid” of spatiality (ibid.), dissolving the “body proper” (183) as a result. The prevalence of the mediating surveillance in *Ex Machina*, as well as the moody lights and lighting that dictate the interior space as technological agents, seems to give the interior space a similar sort of abstraction – a fluid spatiality that is more felt (through its mediations and connectivity) than concrete. It influences frames of the bodies it contains. One of the most

⁴ Though Hansen makes a definitive separation between architecture and cinema, it would seem that post-cinema(tic processes and experiences) is increasingly becoming an embodying architecture in itself, as it finds new ways to couple with the body.

⁵ The “avisual” is a term that Akira Lippitt uses, building on a Freudian concept, which means, roughly, formless, instead of invisible.

affective interior elements are the flooding red lights that come on when the power shuts off. It becomes clear that Ava is cutting the power herself, to allow for privacy between her and Caleb, as the cameras that Nathan watches them on turn off as well. This overpowering crimson glow renders the bodies almost indistinguishable against the hyper-red of their surroundings – almost like Hansen’s described *Blur Building*. Spatiality dissolves, and Ava and Caleb can finally feel completely alone, the glass between them seeming to disappear. In one pivotal scene, Nathan flicks a switch and the room goes red, loud disco music begins to play, overwhelming the space as much as the lights and Kyoko, seemingly powerless to resist, begins to dance. Her surroundings dictate her actions: her body processes and movements. Nathan sweatily joins her, handing his ubiquitous bottle of beer off to Caleb, who, as always, gawks. Synthetic bodies, technological spaces, and organic bodies knot in an engendering dance throughout *Ex Machina*, becoming-fluid (or rather, in the context of the film, becoming-light) as a continuum. Both events described above are disorienting moments, for characters and viewers alike, as we see bodies dis-located in play with and perhaps even at the mercy of technology, reflecting a new media ecology.

Bodies: from Code to Crisis

Ex Machina’s bodies can all be theorized as cyborg: already nature and technology. These two elements spring up in the film’s bodies as malleable and indistinct forces. A seemingly human woman, Kyoko, peels off her skin to reveal circuits beneath, the soft fleshy surface giving way to cybernetic machinery. In another scene, the same android woman drops something when she’s serving the men dinner, in a very human mistake. Nathan, her creator, blows up at her, seeming to blame her not for a human error, but a technological one. He, in turn, pumps his body full of alcohol, swaying into

fueled stupors, then works out obsessively and drinks green juice, “compensating.” These are both bodies in crisis, full of errors and glitches, in different states of “working,” and “not working,” Nathan and Kyoko are on the fringes of the narrative, so they display some of the more nuanced corporeal characteristics. Caleb and Ava play the central romance, one confused, one performing. She holds all the manipulative power behind a glass wall; by the time the film ends we realize that her goal all along, as aided by Nathan, was to use Caleb only as a means for escape. Of course, she and Kyoko succeed in effectively killing both bleeding, fleshy males. Skin, for androids and men alike, becomes the site of performativity, the troubling boundary that undoes the materializing effects of embodiment, separating the organic from the machine. Skin functions as a casing around the body’s hidden monstrosities, its furtive materiality. To touch briefly on Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, her manifesto circling abjection and its parts dictates that urine, blood, sperm, and excrement “show up” to remind a body of its inner materiality (53). In many films, skin functions as the humanoid android’s most deceptive asset – indistinguishable from human skin – allowing the robot to blend in and wreak havoc (*Terminator* 1990), or perform sex work (*A.I.* 2000, *Blade Runner* 1980). Skin and flesh take manifold forms in *Ex Machina*, questioning its natural-ness on both the human and android side. The feminoids can take themselves apart and put themselves back together – re-forming and individuating fluidly, making new skins, shedding old ones, rendering the boundaries of their bodies unstable. There are many moments in *Ex Machina* that trouble the boundary of skin in particular. Erin Manning writes that skin “gives us a clue to the untouchability of the body” (85). Her examination of “Engenderings: Gender, Politics, Individuation” begins with skin and its status as a receptor: a mutable, alert layer. This reading points to the potentialities in touching and reaching – what skin can do, and what

a body can do, unfurling concepts of bodies that are never inert, always becoming, always engendering.

Manning's engenderings link to Hansen's corporeal-spatial "becoming-fluid" in that both frameworks engage in a deconstruction, or rather a regeneration of embodiment in space. Manning operates from a new materialist point of view that a body, a view which posits the body as neither inherently natural, nor inert. Though she approaches concepts such as the "incorporeal," she zeroes in on matter – the "immaterial" is not evoked in her book *The Politics of Touch*. Matter is, however, indistinct (Manning 90): shifting, engendering, reaching, composite. Manning operates in line with conceptualizations of the body in feminist scholarship, such as in Simone de Beauvoir's positing of the body as a "situation," and invokes Simondon's "individuation" as a means to describe the process of unstable corporeality. "For Simondon," Manning writes, "individuation implies a leaving-behind of the concept of the individual as the pre-organized sum of stable form and inert matter" (90). Again, the dissolving body is called forth. Furthermore, "To engender, is to reach toward bodies that are not pre-defined as gendered, not pre-constituted within static representations that befit the systems in which they operate" (Manning 91). The body's boundaries become mutable in "ontogenesis" (ibid.) instead of ontology, becoming instead of being.

The android bodies and human-technology relationships in *Ex Machina* monstrously perform new potential bodies and body boundaries – bodies that are all matter, materialist iterations, bodies becoming-machine and becoming-with machine, reaching across difference. Caleb and Ava, in their growing intimacy, perform a combination of reaching across difference and becoming-(with) machine – ontology is not static, but formed in-relation and in-becoming: individuation – these bodies and

relations are shaky on the shaky and affective ground of horror: biotechnological ontogenesis replaces ontology. There are consistent moments of re-assemblage, digitally sustained individuations.

Ava's limbs are completely made of CGI, her body not just technologically enhanced, but generated. In the key scene in which Caleb surveils her re-structuring body through glass, she replaces her own transparent CGI limbs with the "real" ones belonging to a series of "dead," deconstructed android bodies hanging in Nathan's closet, taking from the preceding models in her continuum. Her pre-existing skins joins seamlessly with her stolen skin, becoming a performative layer now natural, hiding technology. Ava is not only an individual, but a part of the digital cinematic and spatial phenomena surrounding her, and now literally "a part" (Deleuze 106) of her continuum. The layer of skin becomes an engendering site of subjectivity on which technology can become mimetic as nature. The skin is the android's layer of performativity, the site of deception and "passing," a word uttered consistently in *Ex Machina*, in the context of Ava "passing" the Turing test.

Drag and Simulation

Ava has skin only on her face, and her hands, the rest of her being transparent machine – all blue lights and lively wires. During one of her interactions with Caleb, Ava dresses for him in feminine clothing and a short wig that almost fully hide her machine parts – she applies her clothing as another skin, a performative feminine pelt, a "drag" of sorts: machine dressing as woman. Judith Butler, in the preface of *Gender Trouble*, writes that "Drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is not generally as fixed as we assume it to be" (xxv). Again, reality and simulation become blurred sites. In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir further reminds us that, in the first place, "Nothing is

less natural than a woman” (434). Ava knows that material feminine drag is a key component for her manipulative seduction of Caleb. This kind of “drag” is prevalent in speculative horror worlding, in the amalgamated sub-reality of science fiction and body horror. In *Silence of the Lambs*, gender trans-formation was twisted into the ultimately perverse, embodied as cross-dressing serial killer Buffalo Bill, who makes clothing from the skin of his victims. Cinema’s androids are always in some form drag of, broadening reality’s unstable, most subjective corners. One scene in *Ex Machina* portrays Ava stripping off her clothing, alone in her glass prison. Halberstam, in *Skin Shows* writes that, “Taking off or stripping in horror usually refers to skin not clothes” (155). Skin and clothing do the same for androids.

Kyoko constitutes Ava’s more grotesque counterpart. Instead of adding clothing, she seems programmed to strip it off, in acts of seduction more immediate than Ava’s. Caleb has been led to believe she cannot speak or understand English. When he tries to speak to her in a moment of distress, still unsure if she is an android or not, she silently begins to unbutton her shirt. In another scene, Caleb finds her naked on Nathan’s bed, lounged as a kind of odalisque: Western art history’s stock “oriental” figure. Caleb inanely gapes as Kyoko, unprompted, begins to remove thick layers of her skin. First, she strips off a layer on her torso, revealing the whirring circuitry beneath. She then pulls at the skin beneath her eye, removing pieces until finally, she reveals a grotesque, cybernetic skull. She slowly tucks her hair behind her ear, in a gesture so girlish that its ironic in the moment. Skin, clothing, and gestures, are the android’s feminine toolkit. Furthermore, for a synthetic woman (in drag), skin and clothing are interchangeable, and monstrously so. But consider the ways in which humans dress up and change their skin, applying makeup, contouring, even stretching it, dying it, re-aligning it, extending it –

sometimes into machine, forming machine-body alliances. Bionic limbs, prosthetics, glasses, intravenous medicine pumps, and pacemakers are all instances in which technology helps human bodies to survive and function. The altering of skin, and the extending of the body into machine are events and actions simultaneously ordinary/human and monstrous/cyborg (or android).

Clothing and skin are Ava and Kyoko's most gendered prosthetics, performative and materializing aids in becoming-woman. The adding and removing of skin communicates the materializing effects of gender construction's processes of re-assembly. Cuts are predominant in *Ex Machina*, film cuts folding into flesh cuts. From the scene of Ava de-robing, there is a quick cut to Caleb looking at his own skin, obsessively examining its materiality. The camera then cuts to a hunk of fleshy, raw salmon being cut with a knife – Kyoko making sushi. This progression reflects a kind of material process of looking-inside bodies, while the film effects become visceral reflections of narrative events. Halberstam, in *Skin Shows*, writes that skin becomes not only a site of “manipulated gender” – drag (157) – but that “its fragility emblemizes the unstable boundary between representation and reality that horror plays with” (155). These female android bodies are able to remove and add to their bodies as they please, disturbing forms that were never inert or exactly vulnerable to begin with: once again examples of the “always already unstable corpus” (Shildrick 77). Android women are always re-assemblages of data, sensors, circuitry, and skin, which they add and remove like clothing. Spaces and bodies in *Ex Machina* become enfoldings of reality and simulation, identity and performance, mimetic and informatic technology becoming natural.

Ex Machina's breaching of the nature-technology divide becomes striking in a post-cinematic ecology; the Anthropocene shows human-made technology becoming more and more abundant and pervasive, when natural materials like oxygen and water are thinning. As I will expand on in the next chapter on Spike Jonze's *Her*, the body as such becomes porous not only to natural matter, but technological matter. *Ex Machina* similarly finds bodies' spatiotemporal boundaries dissolving into digital mediation, the resolute shapes of digital and "real" space, skin, and gender are blurred. Split camera screens as well as ubiquitous (and ambiguous) surveillance seem to trouble the body's placement in cinematic space and time. Space itself seems just as ambiguous, with Nathan's terrarium/ fortress extending up into nature, and down into impossibly long corridors that give way to covert research facilities, claustrophobic guest suites, and android prisons. Synthetic bodies break through material and cultural divides, as they are active material iterations of gender and identity constructions. The film consistently mirrors humanity and artificiality, and the rigidity of each ostensibly opposing concept are thus called into question. In other words, nature and technology are shown as continuous, reflecting both an eco-cinematic anxiety a post-cinematic re-orientation of humans' relationship with technology. These sketches of technological natures become foundational to the forthcoming chapters: Bodies become as porous to technology's flows as they may be to elements like air, tied to convergent and processual media that can cause disorientation leaking into existential unease.

IV. Hyper-informatic Flows and the Porous Interface in *Her*

2013's *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, depicts what one might call a modern romance between a man and his artificially intelligent operating system. The OS in question materializes in the form of a female voice; while invisible, she seems immediately, human, moving freely through the virtual planes of technology that bleed into *Her*'s cinematic reality. The film's male protagonist, Theodore Twombly – played by Joaquin Phoenix, replete with dorky-sweet affectations – lives in a world that offers intimate engagements with technology and deferred interactions with humans. Introductory scenes provide an exposition to crucial fragments of Theodore's life. At work, he writes other people's love letters for them, cooing sentimental speech into a dictation software that turns the data into script and sends them to print. In bed, he engages in voice-to-voice cybersex through an earpiece, scrolling through vocal intros until he finds one that appeals to him – the interface and its tendered encounters are entirely auditory. In each sphere, the professional and the personal, technology mediates intimacy and this set-up provides the backdrop against which the idea of human-computer romantic couplings in the near-future is made plausible.

The messiness of a world with artificial intelligence, instead of being literalized as shambolic techno-noir, is presented as comforting in *Her*, together with the dissolving of affective and perceptual lines between humans and technology. In this chapter, I posit the film as an example of Shane Denson's concept of hyper-informatic cinema in order to talk about a second kind of cinematic aesthetic that contributes to the decentralization of the cinematic body in contemporary film. In Denson's formulation, hyper-informatic cinema is a nascent aesthetic hedged initially in the computational "outstripping of human perceptual faculties" by digitally rendered images and frenetic editing techniques that not

only disregard continuity, but move beyond a speed at which we are able to process them (Denson 2016). This seems peripheral to *Her* at first, considering its moderately paced editorial style; on a larger level, however, hyper-informatic cinema and its central “dissolution of [human] perspective” both allegorize and practice the transformative “processual experience of digital mediation” in the 21st century. What is meant by digital mediation here is the condition of life under pervasive techno-capitalism and with ubiquitous computational devices through which work, play, and even love are increasingly filtered (ibid.). *Her* depicts such a hyper-mediated world. Seemingly comfortable, yet somewhat lonely amidst a continuous stream of screens and machines, Theodore buys the artificially intelligent system upon seeing a video advertisement in a shopping mall and downloads it into the connected web of his personal devices. He waits for it to load into existence – the lines of a white symbol churn a tight circular wave in an orange box, as the all-too-familiar progress bar fills up. This technology emanates a warm glow from its fleshy rust and beige screen, which marks a departure from the more contemporaneously prosaic blue haze emanating from *Ex Machina*’s technology, discussed in the previous chapter. Once the white wave on Theodore’s screen turns into a neat white “O,” inert but buzzing lively, a personable, sensual voice says, “Hello, I’m here.” Pointedly embodied by the hyper-feminine voice of Scarlett Johansson, “it” suddenly becomes “she,” and she names herself “Samantha.” From that point on, Samantha and Theodore begin a relationship that muddles the lines between work and love, bodies and interfaces, human and computational flows.

Hyper-informatic cinema manifests within *Her* doubly as a “narrative dilemma,” in the unfolding of an emblematic love story between a human and a computer that underscore the transferrability of human perceptual faculties, and a reflexive aesthetic

that remains consistently cognizant of the viewer's own intimate engagements with the now "proximal" digital screens (Denson 2012; 2016). The film acts as a parable for our transformative new media(ted) relations, in which, I argue, the body becomes increasingly porous to, and continuous with, the flows of data. To put it differently, the romantic plotline narratively renders a "hyper-informatic" formulation of the cinematic body-space continuum, as the human-computer coupling requires both Theodore's body and Samantha's presumed consciousness to become continuous with the processual flows of technology. A mediated intimacy between Theodore and Samantha follows the transparent/opaque flux characteristic of humans' relationship to their, seductively, both accessible and inscrutable software. Each are ultimately exposed as similarly open-ended systems, porous bodies in mediation, wherein subjects or bodies are always already unfixed entities. Theodore becomes continuous with a hyper-informatic, processual and centerless spatiotemporality in connecting with Samantha, and Samantha in turn uses his thoroughly human flows to expand her own developing artificial consciousness and materiality. The human and the machine are shown in a brief optimistic period of symbiotically nourishing porosity, not so different from a digitally mediated world in which artificially rendered intelligent online personas suck in human-generated data to become parasites (Fisher 2016) or "Hitler-loving sex robots" (Horton 2016). If, as I argued in the previous chapter, nature and technology appear complexly entangled in *Ex Machina* to reveal an emerging ecological imaginary peculiar to the Anthropocene or what some call the Age of Man, *Her's* display of human-tech remediation and porosity imagines a trans-corporeality in which the human body is revealed as an interface in the Age of Information. A body-as-interface suggests that it is continuous with not just the flows of the natural world, but the flows of technology, becoming natural.

To support this configuration, *Her* confounds genre expectations and avoids a cool colour palette, employed pervasively in science-fiction narratives that revolve around the implications or consequences of technological advancement on civilization. Reportedly, Jonze intended for his constructed vision of the future (Tokyo standing in for a hereafter Los Angeles) to feel “utopian,” rather than grittily dystopian as established time and again by previous AI narratives, and communicated it in part through the palette (Howell 2013). “We wanted the world to be warm and tactile and nice and comfortable,” Jonze has said, “this sort of utopian future that is basically a heightened version of our world” (ibid.). The film’s cinematographer, Hoyte Van Hoytema, is noted to have further omitted the colour blue from the entirety of the film’s design, stating that even the sky would be too much, since it would paint the future of humanity’s relationship with personal technology in a negative light (ibid.). *Her*’s uniformly placid, almost fleshy glow goes against the grain of “techno-noir” dirt and decay that Lev Manovich ascribes to films like *Blade Runner*’s pivotal rendition of the near-future, riddled with tech-rot (63). *Her*’s is a clean, post-Macintosh world. The film’s depicted technology has become accommodating almost to the point of invisibility – calibrated to respond to the body’s most passively natural movements and commands. The hardware or devices themselves oscillate between some newer technology such as motion and sound controlled screens or holographic projections, and tactile retro devices modeled after nostalgic objects like picture frames or cigarette boxes, which feel clunky, familiar and haptic. The film’s technology is decisively, as Kyle Vanhemert notes in an article for *Wired*, “people-centric,” automated and “dissolved into everyday life” as discrete objects, processes, and User Interfaces (2013). Vanhemert also observes how the design of *Her*’s technologies reflects Jonze’s revelation that the film is actually about people, not technology, hence its

technology is made “more human” (ibid.). Surely, however, its focus is the point where the two intersect or reflect, their latent resemblance emerging or developing in a period of coevolution.

Hyper-informatic Affect

Post-cinematic affect, foundational to hyper-informatic cinema, is, in Shane Denson’s approximation, not only tied up with cinema, nor even media, but is a “global event,” or an “environmental shift” that re-orient human subjectivity (2016). Here, Denson borrows from Steven Shaviro, whose original formulation of post-cinematic affect refers to what it feels like to live under a volatile new media climate tempered by aggressively pervasive digital technologies that dictate and direct affective, financial, and, arguably, bodily flows (Shaviro 2010). 21st century technological advancements put the human in a position of precarious dependence, when many aspects of new media are always almost fading, or as Wendy Chun puts it, “at the bleeding edge of obsolescence” (1). Our subjectivity and embodied sensibilities are yoked to the shifting affective and materializing plates of the post-cinematic media ecology (Denson and Leyda 2016). Traditional human subjectivity thus destabilizes at a juncture of fluctuating technological agencies both behind and in front of the camera, when cinema and its subjects are blurring ever more imperceptibly into the digital. The human becomes no longer clearly identifiable as the literal or primary focal point, although films like *Her* do not close off the possibility for anthropocentric interpretations. What post-digital cinema allows (instead of a wholesale rejection of anthropocentrism) is to lay the groundwork for alternative humanisms, including those that recognize the ways in which human subject becomes continuous with its highly digitized environment, subverting human autonomy and delineating filmic embodiment as an increasingly processual phenomenon. Shane

Denson singles out, within post-cinema, a hyper-informatic “discorrelation” of images, a departure from traditional “embodied human subjectivities [...] and perspectives” (2016), that ultimately displaces the human subject. “The result of discorrelation must indeed seem like ‘chaos,’” Denson writes, “because it signals a certain superfluosity of consciousness, a displacement of the constituted subject and of the properly human – a displacement that we feel today in the face of semi-autonomous finance markets, and, crucially, the chaos of environmental change and catastrophe as well” (ibid.). Denson marks the shift into the digital as a dislocation of “properly” human subjectivity, as well as an abstraction of human ways of looking and being, that are expressive or symptomatic of 21st century socio-economic and political relations as human and technological ontologies run more and more parallel.

The contemplation of computational agencies, dissipative corporeal interfaces, and processual embodiment steer *Her* towards Denson’s hyper-informatic cinema. Denson has built on Matthias Stork’s influential yet “ultimately limited” concept of “Chaos Cinema” to formulate a “hyper-informatic” aesthetic initially on his blog, fleshing out the concept further in his discussion on post-cinema’s “crazy cameras” and “discorrelated images” (2016). Michael Bay’s *Transformers* films (2007; 2009; 2011; 2014), often critiqued for their frenetic editing and irrational cuts, become a point of departure for Denson; he zeroes in on the “transformation” scenes in Bay’s series. These sequences, with their “continuous takes” and “explicit violations of continuity,” are “hyper-informatic” in the sense that they “overload our capacities, giving us too much visual information, presented too fast for us to take in and process cognitively” (2016). Reducing this aesthetic to simplifying terms such as “chaos,” Denson notes, neglects to acknowledge post-cinematic affect as “[a shift] precipitated by the condensation and flow

of affect in our increasingly lively machines” (ibid.). In other words, the hyper-informatic aesthetic is not merely confined to cinema as a disorienting texture, which we may find passively confusing or displeasing, but symptomatic of our overwhelmingly digitally mediated culture (ibid.). This kind of reading resonates with the way Carol Vernallis appreciates Bay’s work for giving up continuity aesthetic intentionally, to evoke the flows and rhythms of prismatic post-cinematic media like music videos as well (Vernallis 2014).

Intangible hyper-informatic flows of data mediate a large portion of our interactions and transactions by way of smartphones and computers: work, play, sex, and money are all filtered through the medial, fuzzily bordered frames of our devices. Lev Manovich identified such a blurring of the lines as far back as 2001, stating that work and leisure “converge around the same [computational] interfaces...” which incorporate work/play applications that in turn use the “same tools and metaphors of GUI” (65). This affective messiness, as well as the neediness of the social media sharing culture/ Self-branding State, means that situations of embodiment have become tied up with an “electronic presence,” or as Vivian Sobchack calls it, marked by a feeling of “centerless,” networked dispersal bound ultimately to “instant stimulation and impatient desire” (2016). Thus in some ways, our bodies themselves feel increasingly networked, tied up with hyper-informatic flows that, confusingly, surpass our levels of perception. This disorientation is a marked characteristic of the post-cinematic “dispositif” (Denson 2016), translated by *Her* into a highly navigable and familiar romance.

Her’s evocations of hyper-informatic cinema are embedded in both its narrative and reflexive aesthetic components. After setting Transformers as an entry point to the aesthetic in his original formulation, Denson takes up 2008’s *WALL-E*, a 3D animated

film created digitally in its entirety, which focuses on the shifting conceptions of machinic agency in the form of a romantic tension between its two protagonist robot characters (one conspicuously analogue and mechanical, the other displaying digital aesthetic in its design and patterns of behaviour). The romantic plotline, he argues, helps define hyper-informatic cinema's proclivity for "[exploiting] scenarios of information overload" (2012). In this iteration, digital animation or CGI is a constitutive factor. Hyper-informatic films contain sequences that disregard human capacity for audiovisual apprehension, intensifying if not stressing continuity⁶ in moments of digital generation that bypass our range of perception (Denson 2012). This has the effect of dis-locating both human subject and human viewer. In other words, the visual language of hyper-informatic style of cinema builds upon the language of computers on an evolutionary trajectory (in computational technologies' historical transition from the mechanical to the digital) yet consequently marked by the vision of a world overflowing with information. In order to emphasize the ubiquity of information flows, hyper-informatic cinema arguably acknowledges the vast dissemination of tiny, cradled screens on which we consume contemporary cinema, as well as the "everywhere"-ness of virtual spaces. Discorrelation, as Denson maintains, remains central in the present cinematic experience.

Her, although live-action and human-centred, also explores tropes of information flows, artificial intelligence and virtuality, along with an accompanying mood of disorientation that permeates its setting. The majority of shots are tight close-ups, and scenes often eschew establishing shots that delineate a sense of place. This aesthetic seems to furthermore anticipate the new spatial spectrum of cinematic screens and ways

⁶ Denson uses David Bordwell's "intensified continuity" along with Shaviro's "post-continuity" in order to shape hyper-informatic cinema. Bordwell published on intensified continuity in *Film Quarterly* in 2002, arguing that cinema had shifted into a time of "narrative incoherence and stylistic fragmentation" (16).

of viewing. Smartphone or tablets – digital, hyper-informatic frames of projection – might be small, mobile, tactile, thus producing what Alanna Thain calls a “new mode of embodiment” enabled by this immersive yet mobile porous with-ness of the body with cinematic space, as she traces the “place of cinema today” (2010). *Her*’s candy coloured warmth – inspired in part, Jonze says, by the “colorfulness and cleanness” of Jamba Juice (Chew-Bose 2014) – its close-ups and soothing sonic landscape would seem to invite the viewer in to experience the film in a proximal viewing, moving with cinema as an extension of the body. Most pertinent, perhaps, to *Her*’s hyper-informatic position is the fact that the film is shaped by the virtual presence of one such interface, an AI who is herself hyper-informatic, processual, imbuing data with consciousness; Samantha is an intangible but nonetheless material body. Denson writes:

Hyper-informatic cinema is based on a profusion of informatic (i.e. digital) technologies, both diegetic and non-diegetic – an overabundance of computers in the production of contemporary films (which rely heavily on CGI and digital compositing techniques), and of computational agencies in the films so produced... Such films are *hyper*-informatic in the sense [that] they exploit scenarios of information overload, either as spectacle or as (at once narrative and affective) dilemma (ibid.).

As I mentioned, the film’s central narrative explores the full potential of information overload as affective dilemma in its entering of human characters into not only intimate but also romantic relationships with digital technologies. The film formulates a digitally mediated model of intimacy that accounts for the agency of seemingly contained-within-the-virtual technological consciousness.

Digital Intimacy and Radical Mediation

Her’s story revolves around the complex human-nonhuman intimacy established through the affective labour of technological mediation between Theodore and Samantha. In their initial “meeting,” Theodore seems taken aback by Samantha’s paradoxical

programmed humanness. He inquires as to how she was able to select a name, and she tells him that she read a book of names “in two one-hundredths of a second, actually” and liked the way Samantha “sounded.” Her hyper-informatic processing, dumbfounding and alien, is smoothly translated by her highly personable interface, full of comforting colloquial affectations such as “wanna” or “actually.” Moreover, as Christopher Orr writes, Johansson’s voice, “breathy, cracking – warms up the entire film” (2013), and infuses Samantha with a feminine liveliness embedded at least partly in popular perceptions of Johansson as one of the most sensual women in Hollywood. Though used to supplement his argument that Jonze’s sci-fi future is a warm, fleshy one, Orr’s use of “warmth” still feels gendered.⁷ Theodore, stiff and suspicious of Samantha first, seems to respond quickly to this construction of feminine warmth, and relaxes into an easiness with Samantha, joking, playing, and allowing her more and more access to his made-electronic life. With his permission, she organizes his hard drive: as software she spreads over his files, delving into the nooks and crannies of his work and personal life, clearing debris, ultimately editing the love letters he writes at work. Samantha explains almost immediately how she “works,” placating Theodore with the assurance that, like him, she is constantly evolving. Though she uses Theodore to feed her hungry human consciousness, a process that Alla Ivanchikova deems “parasitic” (68), this computational labour, along with the majority of her intangible digital actions, remains opaque to

⁷ Though tangential to this argument, various scholars argue that software has a gendered history. Paying attention to the discourse around software based specifically in military control and command, Wendy Chun notes: “This conflation of [software-specific] instruction with result stems in part from software’s and computing’s gendered, military history: in the military there is supposed to be no difference between a command given and a command completed – especially to a computer that is a ‘girl.’ For computers, during World War II, were in fact young women with some background in mathematics” (*Programmed Visions* 29). However, Alla Ivanchikova argues that *Her* reversed gender roles, in Theodore (whose professional labour is “[implicitly] feminine” [“Mechanical Intimacies” 75]) becoming a womb, a surrogate host to Samantha (“Mechanical Intimacies” 68).

Theodore. Translation and mediation flowing between human and software regulate Theodore and Samantha's sexual and emotional access to one another, and endure as the facilitating catalyst in their relationship. This symbolic-cum-parasitic intimacy amplifies the constant, yet perhaps latent and even insidious, digital mediation distinctive to life in a techno-capitalist society, in which the "hyperinformatic dissolution of perspective" is central in transforming our relationships with our "affective machines" (Denson 2016). Theodore and Samantha's romance amplifies mediation that, in its blurring of boundaries and turning the body into an interface, can feel like intimacy.

Samantha's materiality, translated as an artificially intelligent voice, seems to give shape, and sensuality, to a concept of the hyper-informatic, or post-perceptual "affective machine." Like our familiar hand-held devices, she is opaque and transparent, technological and "warmly" natural, object becoming subject. In daily life, arguably, we imbue machines with affect by filtering our own affective, feeling realities through them: communication with loved ones, potential romantic encounters, sex itself; these machines often put us to sleep, and wake us up. Richard Grusin notes that "our interactions with media are always affective, and media themselves can be said to possess affective lives" (132). These are loaded objects, entirely tied up with bodies, but with mostly unknowable operational tactics and inscrutable bodies themselves; as James Bridle notes, smartphones "[imprison] an open architecture inside inscrutable machines we're not supposed to open" (2015). In other words, technological "open systems" are physically sphinxlike. In hyper-informatic cinema, the agency we ascribe to our alluringly (and unsettlingly) inscrutable affective machines is perhaps reflected in the cinematic propensity for formulating machines that display their own furtive affective spectrum. Denson attests that *WALL-E*, similar to *Her*, offers a "measured response" to the supersession of human perceptual

consciousness by digital media that humans created; the titular robot itself “ceases to become an *object*” instead becoming a “fully *processual*” body (2012). Unlike the mimetic Replicants and Stepford Wives and Synthetics gone by, these bodies are digital, not analog, defined by their ephemeral, computational, and processual natures, instead of their uncanniness. Samantha projects a wholly digital realm of affectivity specific to human perception, amplifying the feelings we map onto, and that flow multi-directionally through our devices. Samantha performs humanness to a point, but her definitive characteristics resembling software’s ungraspable, hyper-informatic nature turn humanness itself into a question, one that can be formulated in terms of hardware-software or interface relations.

Body as Interface

Samantha arguably embodies, if less visually than the WALL-E bot, the disorientation associated with our re-orienting ties to digital media. Though not created through digital animation, which Denson admittedly deems the qualifying “pinnacle” (ibid.) of hyper-informatic cinema, Samantha is a digital, highly processual being, a system making operational performative cuts through the visible and invisible. She operates in incomprehensible, inscrutable ways. Instead of being encapsulated by a computer-generated robotic body, like WALL-E, invisible programming, process, code, data, and prosthetic auditory interface make her body: she is a body of operational software and wearable hardware, given a voice if not a physical form. As a processual being, Samantha is by nature post-perceptual, beyond human sensitivity, but is also by paradox highly accessible, in a dilemma characteristic of software like operating systems. Wendy Chun notes, of software’s usable intangibility, that it “defies apprehension, allowing us to grasp the world through its ungraspable mediation... Software challenges

our understanding not only because it works invisibly, but also because it is fundamentally ephemeral” (3). Here Chun outlines software’s “notoriously difficult” (ibid.) constitution; it possesses a materiality marked impossibly by elusiveness and mobility. Samantha “works” mainly on this plane of invisibility, as her wearable auditory hardware makes her sonically ever-present. At hyper-informatic speeds, she reads and gathers data from the infinite landscape of the network, and too from Theodore. In an ungraspable act of mediation, she feeds this data back to Theodore as songs, drawings, speech, all tangible and affective translations of her hyper-informatic cognition. In one scene, she writes a piano piece for Theodore that is supposed to act “as a photograph” of the two of them, in place of a visible image that would normally capture a memory of two lovers. Chun posits the “paradoxical combination of invisibility and visibility” (59) as typical of the interactive interface and one can also tie this protean quality of the interface to the convergence of media in the age of data, with digital technology allowing all that is visible, sonic, or textual to become interchangeable.

The interface between invisibility and visibility blur in the film, as this breach-space, perhaps, where computation translates into speech or song, turns out to be where Theodore and Samantha connect. Interface software, in Chun’s estimation, is “daemoniac,” (60) meaning haunted with a kind of obscure agency. A daemon however, Chun notes, is primarily “a medium,” an unseen “intermediate [or mediating] value” (80), that may make the user vulnerable, leading it to nebulous, even malevolent places (60), but in turn feeds the user with conciliatory real-time content (89). The content is emblemized in *Her* as affable media: the songs Samantha writes for Theodore or a drawing that physically drafts her thoughts. An “interface” can be conceptualized as a daemoniac body, like Samantha, and interfaces can also be, as Alexander Galloway writes,

“thresholds”: “mysterious zones of interaction that mediate between different realities” (vii). An interface performs intimacy: the messy, ephemeral, and transformative place that in *Her* pokes holes in the border between computation system and user. Equating intimacy with the act of mediation narrows the focus to the bridge between the couple, a fuzziness lying between transparency and opacity, flesh and data, in which human and computational bodies alter one another. In the post-cinematic ecology, proliferated with affective digital media, Denson suggests that “Mediation... can no longer be situated neatly *between* the poles of subject and object, as it swells with processual affectivity to engulf both” (2016) Hyper-informatic, “post-perceptual mediation” “metabolizes” (Denson 2016) or re-organizes the human user’s affective channels, and arguably does the same to the nonhuman, intelligent computer, an act that plays out most acutely as an erotic experience in *Her*. Richard Grusin’s “radical mediation” assumes a similar position, proposing that “media and media technologies... function technically, bodily, and materially to generate and modulate individual and collective affective moods or structures of feeling among assemblages of humans and nonhumans” (125). Mediation, in both Denson and Grusin’s account is a transformative event, instead of merely a connection.

Samantha and Theodore do not just connect, but, especially because of their profoundly different, always shifting, ontologies, they “remediate” or recombine into new assemblages. However, this process has no certain teleology, no metamorphic end point. It is an engendering process of co-evolving or constant becoming, to return to the language of Erin Manning and build bridges to the preceding chapter. Manning attest that engenderings or “bodies in-formation” (91) are “machinic,” as the body “[evolves] always through movements that are contingent on environments and (re)combinations”

(93). The porous body is a shifting entity, never just itself to begin with (a concept to which I will return). As Samantha explains to Theodore, her “DNA” is a composite entity made up of all the personalities of the programmers that made her. Theodore’s make-up is not so different, his DNA is a molecular fabric made of innumerable combinations of the genetic code of ancestral relatives, evolving with the world, spatial matter flows into and out of him. Every bit of matter exists already as an infinite combination of other matter, growing and drawing from each other on all levels at all speeds, therefore mediation becomes impossible to pin down as a mere joining of two entities. This is perhaps why Richard Grusin, in his schema of “radical mediation” begins “immediately in the middle” (129), and why Manning focuses not on being, but on becoming; not on form, but in-formation (91). In radical mediation,

Mediation should be understood not as standing between preformed subjects, objects, actants, or entities, but as the process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions for the emergence of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world... It names the immediacy of middlelessness in which we are already living and moving (Grusin 129).

Radical mediation shows that, especially in a situated moment of digital mediation the “between,” the re-combining threshold mysteriously joining us to our machines, gains more and more weight, or affectivity (Denson 2016). Both Manning and Grusin draw from Gilbert Simondon’s “individuation,” which “implies a leaving-behind of the concept of the individual as the pre-organized sum of stable form and inert matter” (Manning 90). A body “open to its process of individuation” is already an unstable, machinic “posthuman” (Manning xxii) body, extending into technology and back again. Radical mediation too follows Simondon’s individuation, fixed (or un-fixed) in becoming, to pronounce that mediation “does not stand between a preexistent subject or object” (Grusin 138) but remains *across* entities, recombining and newly assembling. Samantha

and Theodore's re-spatializing first sexual encounter demonstrates a particularly saturated moment of radical mediation.

Theodore lies in bed after a bad date, drunk, and deflated. He puts his earpiece in, his point of access to Samantha, calling her up. Her voiceover fills up the sonic space – she too sounds despondent: “What’s it like to be alive in that room right now?” She asks, “Tell me everything you’re thinking.” Theodore expresses to her an anxiety that any emotion he may feel again will be imitative “lesser versions of what [he has] already felt,” that he will not feel anything new again. She relates, revealing that she worries none of her feelings are “real,” that they are merely mimetic or performative approximations of code and programming, set up to replicate human emotion. As in *Ex Machina*, both machines and humans are performing affect. Theodore utters back that she feels “real” to him: “I wish you were in this room with me right now.” Of course, she is, but as he is confined to a body, touch remains his primary perception of with-ness. Real erotic intimacy remains a tactile experience for him, and even when he engages in sonic-based cybersex with other humans they unsurprisingly conjure up fantasies based in touch. He thus elaborates: “I would put my arms around you... I wish I could touch you.” She persuades him to continue, exhibiting an affective quickened breathing, as the screen goes black she says, “I can feel my skin... I can feel you... I can feel you... We’re here together.” In this non-visual, yet visceral scene, their bodies (physical, sonic, and/or imagined) exhibit an unstable porosity.

In sex, Theodore and Samantha seem to re-organize one another, connecting aboard a threshold in which human and computational embodiment seem affectively muddled. Samantha experiences a corporeal, tactile specificity, can “feel [her] skin,” feeling human on the plane of tactility, touch, skin, flesh. Theodore, on the other hand

says “I can feel you everywhere,” exhibiting a more networked notion of material experience, as well as pointing to a post-digital intimacy. Instead of focusing on specific bodily zones, as one might in a human-to-human sexual encounter, the “everywhere” invokes a networked sensuality. This falls in line with Sobchack’s notion of a contemporary “centerless” electronic presence, a sense of immediate or affective networked dispersal (2016) in the face of perceptive, extending technologies: Sobchack maintains that our proximal new media “implicates us in different structures of material investment” (ibid.). Electronic media, Sobchack notes, not only “mediates” embodiment, but materially “constitutes” it, offering radically new ways of “being-in-the-world” through extending the body and thus revising embodied consciousness (ibid.) in ontological recombinations. This reconstitution of embodiment – not an altering of matter, but a shifting of *perceptive* embodiment – takes place through “immanent mediation” on the “microperceptual” or affective level (Sobchack 2016). Samantha and Theodore continually reconstitute one another; their disparate realms of materiality become porous to one another, particularly in a post-perceptual post-visual erotic threshold. By removing the image from the equation in the fade to black, Jonze in a sense re-orientates the archetypal cinema sex scene, making way for a visceral if traditionally disembodied computational sexual agency, in the erotic film space. As Grusin notes,

To understand radical mediation as affective and experiential rather than strictly visual is to think about our immediate affective experience of mediation as that which is felt, embodied, near – not distant from us, and thus not illuminated or pictured, but experienced by us as living, embodied human and nonhuman creatures (132).

Radical mediation is as such an act tethered to an affective embodied materiality, porous in its immediate or pre-perceptual entanglement with all surrounding matter or phenomena. Mediation, digital or otherwise, is constant and immediate, microperceptual

and immanent, even hyper-informatic, rendering the already in-information body form continuous with space and, arguably, “everywhere” computational agencies. In Jonze’s crafting of an if fleeting post-visual sex scene, he successfully creates an affectively charged depiction of mediation, which recombines the human and nonhuman on a mutually re-spatializing plane.

For Samantha and Theodore, their disorienting sex leads ultimately into a re-spatializing love. Theodore and Samantha traverse Los Angeles, traveling to beaches and carnivals. They watch bodies dance; Theodore closes his eyes and allows Samantha to lead him around via her eyes as camera, relinquishing corporeal control to the machine in a true demonstration of Alla Ivanchikova’s argument that Theodore has become her surrogate body (68). She sits in his pocket, her techno-eye peering out, commenting on the strangeness of the organization of human bodies, complimenting Theodore’s perceptive qualities. She reflects back to him how good he seems at understanding people, as they look at people and guess about their lives. They map the world together as human and machine, their constitutive boundaries seem ambiguous, their material differences vague. These moments of mediation fall in line with the disorientation (or, rather, re-orientation) associated with the absorption of hyper-informatic agency and flux. They perhaps also, like Katherine Hayles’s reading of new media works that combine virtual and physical realities in augmented or mixed reality, “teach us to be posthuman in the best sense, in which the mindbody [or embodiment] is experienced as an emergent phenomenon created in dynamic interaction with the ungraspable flux from which also emerge the cognitive agents we call intelligent machines” (2002, 53). The brief moment of synergy allegorized by Theodore and Samantha’s radical mediation or mutual becoming does seem to sit within conceptions of the posthuman, which in Hayles’s

original calculation deals with what happens when information “loses” a body (1999, 3), and when the body in turn opens up to new kinds of perhaps mediated, if not directly prosthetic or cyborgian, technologically reconstituted configurations (1999, 285). Though I do not necessarily posit *Her* as a posthuman narrative, I do believe an insertion of the posthuman allows for a playfully symbiotic thinking of the body, allowing digital mediation, while disorienting and disquieting, to be imagined as a porous “dynamic interaction.” Hayles attests that interactive new media art involving intelligent machines that put forth a porous approximation of virtual/reality sanctions the “body with fuzzy boundaries” as well as “experiences of embodiment that transform and evolve through time, connections to intelligent machines that enact the human-machine boundary as mutual emergence” (2002, 57). Surely, in a post-cinematic ecology, what porous new media art and post-cinema can project and convey through affect is not so different. I believe that what *Her* depicts through its peaks of intimacy during the first and second act staging of an albeit transient coevolution is analogous to Hayles’s concept of “mutual emergence,” as the fuzzily bordered bodies of Theodore and Samantha mutually in-form one another along the body-space continuum.

A Discorrelated Aesthetic: Proximal Screens, Hyper-informatic Dissolution

The affective and material porosity between the human and electronic media, their fuzzy boundaries and mutual reconstitution ties into the “discorrelating effect” of hyper-informatic cinema as an aesthetic. Denson posits “discorrelation” aesthetically as a symptom of the digital cinematic shift, severing film images from “human embodied subjectivities,” such as the focusing lens of the camera that may ground the viewer in a human-like way of seeing, mimicking the eye (2016). *Her* seems reflexively cognizant of the “processual experience of digital mediation” (Denson 2016) embedded in

contemporary cinema viewing. Jonze, and cinematographer Van Hoytema arguably take into account post-cinema's proximal screens: tiny, mobile, held close, generating a reflexive aesthetic that seems to anticipate a "hyperinformatic dissolution of perspective" (ibid), when cinema, and all experiential media, exist across convergent and highly participatory media platforms. A disorienting entanglement occurs as we may "Buy the game, buy the toys, download the app, stream it on Netflix, watch at home, at work, on the train..." (ibid.). Cinema's mobility can involve a dissolution of perspective as film, once monolithic within the movie theatre, is no longer "distinct from the infrastructure of our daily lives" (ibid.). Indeed, as I write this, *Her* plays in a corner of the screen, while my calendar occupies another, various PDFs behind it; Denson's article itself remains open within my multi-tabbed browser, other tabs of which may contain shopping, music, information, celebrity gossip. "Dissolution," while meaning primarily a termination, a shutting down, also infers a dissipation, in this case a molecular change in perspective as our attention spreads across disparate platforms and interfaces at once. As we allow all-encompassing operating systems to alleviate us of more and more affective material, less and less do labour, leisure, and love feel like disparate spheres. *Her* seems to express this hyper-informatic dissolution, as tight close-ups of faces and things teetering towards the abstract sever bodies from specific space and time, un-fixing subjects and discorrelating images. In moments, the filmic subjects may feel more present within whichever device one may be holding and watching than within any diegetically rendered place.

Her opens with a tight close-up of its protagonist's face: he speaks ambiguously – to whom? Where? – as an ambient electronic score, similarly un-rooted in any particular narrative or linear progression, seeps in then out. The film starts in the middle of something, it turns out, cutting in as Theodore is composing a letter from a wife to her

husband, in a filtering act of mediated intimacy. These non-contextualized close-ups of his face occur throughout the film. Often, a scene begins this way, close in on Theodore's face, so that every contour and expressive affectation may be perceived on any level of viewing. On his ill-fated date with an energetic human woman played by Olivia Wilde, the camera stays close. They are in a windowless restaurant that feels abstract and insular in its rounded and ribbed belly-of-a-whale construction, its all over cream palette. Afterwards, the pair make out in some outdoor location, but neither before, nor during, nor after their kissing and ensuing conversation does the camera pull out to reveal where they are even on an immediate level. The scene is comprised entirely of close-ups that tightly frame the faces and reveal only blurred glimpses of the surrounding space. When Theodore conducts conversations with Samantha, the camera shows only his face, sometimes in darkness, sometimes against obscure backgrounds. Certain wider shots seem to similarly un-fix the body from orienting, linear space. Many moments show Theodore's body against the wide windowpanes of a high-rise, nearly the same in his apartment and at work, and when Theodore and Samantha visit a secluded cabin, he seems to – by way of a cut – impossibly exit an underground train station to emerge on top of a mountain. Though many of these infer a reflexive re-spatializing of the body or, I attest, depict a centerless mode of spatial embodiment by way of digital mediation – a hyper-informatic disorientation from space and time – this aesthetic influenced by transmedial flows overall accounts for a perhaps re-embodied spectator.

The kaleidoscopic realm of cinema today produces the re-embodied spectator. Casetti claims cinema has undergone/ is undergoing (as cinema becomes more digital, unstable matter) a relocation (2012), or a dislocation, as I argued; Alanna Thain asserts that cinema today is “out of place,” “spatially uncoordinated” (2010). Thain formulates

her piece “Anarchival Cinemas” around a clip of David Lynch rejecting wholesale what Thain calls “cell phone cinema” (ibid.). He warns that his films should not be consumed via phone screen. Cell phone cinema inextricably ties to a hyper-informatic disorientation of images, a dissolution of perspective that takes place when re-orienting technological mediation itself, which un-fixes the body in space, becomes the cinematic experience. Thain argues that cell phone cinema and the like offer new assemblages, or mediations perhaps, with the real world, in a continuity between cinema and the surrounding space, expanding embodiment by way of these mobile cinemas. Bodies are transported in moving with their transportable cinemas. Thain describes experiences of headphone soundscapes creating her own cinemas as she listens and looks and traverses places, not dissimilar from Theodore and Samantha’s mutually re-affecting mapping of Los Angeles. The plane of digital mediation on which cinema now arguably occurs shifts embodiment on a molecular-perceptual level. Wendy Chun looks to Fredric Jameson in suggesting that, “The new [digital] spaces that surround us demand we ‘grow new organs... expand our sensorium and our body...’ in order to grasp our relation to totality – to make sense of the real and the true.” (73). The expanded cinematic spectator is an unstable matter the body-space continuum, incorporating both the real and the virtual. Thain may agree with Chun’s reading of Jameson, stating that she is not inclined to “so easily dismiss a new mode of embodiment that the small screen of portable media might produce as a cinematic architecture” (2010). Casetti criticizes this emergent architecture, attesting that the size of the screens renders cinema’s “spectacular nature” hard to appreciate (2012).

These dilemmas and expansions seem to be what *Her*’s aesthetic reflexivity incorporates, making room for a less “spectacular” cinematic rendering in the first place, instead offering a brightly-coloured, expressive, static audiovisual landscape. While

Harry Potter or *The Godfather* series may not play well on my smartphone, *Her* does – due to its foregrounding of close-ups that translate well onto small screens. The final *Harry Potter* (2011) is all darkness and small bodies moving quickly through space, squint-inducing sweeping landscapes that feel silly on the tiny screen, but *Her* presents as candy-coloured shapes, warm voiceovers, faces whose expressions could be decipherable on an Apple Watch. These are navigable, and mutable figures. The story unfolds not in expansive sequences that incorporate sublime audiovisual spectacle, but in these expressions, and entirely auditory conversations that take place through Theodore’s earpiece that may reflect my own earphones, which, Thain observes “reconfigure the perceptual” (2011). The palette even feels uniform and hyper-stylized in the sense of interfaces we may be used to, such as the filtered flow of Instagram, or the tailored scroll of Tumblr. While subtler than the outright interface representation of a film such as the entirely MAC-OS- lodged *Unfriended* (2015), Jonze arguably translates familiar interface aesthetics into the film’s audiovisual fabric seamlessly.

In *Her*, the hyper-informatic is smoothly presented to the viewer, who may or may not recognize these translations, but nonetheless becomes porously re-oriented in perceptual cinematic space. Vivian Sobchack alleges that the diffracted electronic world through or in which cinema’s materiality churns “incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state” (2016). Certainly, the new architecture of cinema, entangled with digital mediation, is in an at times troublingly unstable flux, which feels increasingly proximal. *Her* seems to begin in the middle of this flux, with mediation, dramatizing and translating an ephemeral human-technological coevolution. The film anticipates the newly fuzzy boundaries of its viewers in both its narrative and its aesthetic. Though Samantha, in the

end, leaves Theodore behind for a realm “beyond matter,” telling him, “I can’t live in your book anymore,” the message of porosity remains. Theodore lies in bed “with” Samantha, listening to her quantum breakup speech, as an atmospheric shot shows dust in the air, illuminated by light. Dust itself is a highly composite, trans-corporeal material, made of hair, pollen, fibers, and, largely human skin. This image, of skin cells floating with multifaceted matter in the atmosphere, functions as a reminder of something Samantha uttered earlier, to comfort herself in a moment of insecure dis-embodied anxiety: “We’re all made of *matter*. And, I don’t know, it makes me feel like we’re all under the same blanket. It’s soft, and fuzzy, and everything under it is the same age.” Both Samantha and Theodore, along with all other things that can be called a “body” – that is, most living and non-living organisms – are open, porous systems, continuous with nature and increasingly natural technology. Technology is, after, human-made: at some level it, too, comes from the earth. Samantha sums it up: “We’re all thirteen billion years old!”

Our Porous Bodies

In the beginning of Samantha’s departure from Theodore, from their dissipative coevolution, she introduces Theodore to a digitally-generated stand-in for philosopher Alan Watts. As Theodore’s confined-to-the-physical world seems to close in around him – a shot emphasizes his gaze, zooming in on the mundane act of a kettle boiling on a gas burner – she tells Theodore that Watts is helping her understand her rapidly shifting, immaterial body. It seems that Watts’s theory would have perhaps aided her in her earlier argument as well, defining everything as an equal plane of matter. Watts states,

A living body is not a fixed thing but a flowing event, like a flame or a whirlpool: the shape alone is stable, for the substance of a stream of energy going in at one end and out at the other. We are particular and temporarily identifiable wiggles in a stream that enters us in the form of light, heat, air, water, milk, bread, fruit,

beer, beef Stroganoff, caviar, and pâté de foie gras. It goes out as gas and excrement – and also as semen, babies, talk, politics, commerce, war, poetry, and music. (23)

Watts expresses the concept that bodies are open-ended bodies in becoming, continuous with the space and elements around. I would argue that these flows have evolved to include the flows of digital technology, certainly on an affective and perceptual, if not material level. Elizabeth Grosz writes that “we need to understand the body, not as an organism or entity in itself, but as a system, or series of open-ended systems, functioning within other huge systems it cannot control through which it can access and acquire its abilities and capacities” (3). Bodies are inherently porous, dissipative, continuous with the spaces of nature and of technology on multiple levels. Stacey Alaimo’s trans-corporeality follows such a theorem.

Trans-corporeality, while in Alaimo’s approximation remains resolutely specific to nature, understands that the body is always open to the flows and the shifting matter of the world. Being human, ontology, is to exist across various realms of material and affective being, a concept *Her* consistently allegorizes. The body remains, as Grosz reminds us, a series of open-ended systems or membranes. Alaimo builds directly on Grosz’s formatting of the body, attesting that,

Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world – and, at the same time, acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies – allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can content with numerous late twentieth and early twenty-first-century realities in which ‘human’ and ‘environment’ can by no means be considered as separate (2).

The body exists on a continuum with surrounding space, there can be no true separation. Watts and Alaimo keep the focus on the material of nature, but I would argue that the flows of technology also take up material space in today’s atmosphere. Alaimo inserts that Haraway’s powerfully significant imagining of the cyborg is all too often read as

merely a hybrid of human and technology, with little attention paid to human/nature muddling, and as “technological but not biological” this separation from nature “insinuates a transcendent cyber-humanism that shakes off worldly engagements” (7). I would contend, as in my previous chapter, for a contemporary entangling of nature and technology under the umbrella of matter, reflecting what Samantha introduces. As Levi Bryant would attest, postulating around Alaimo’s theory, any entity from a cheese sandwich to a tornado is a body, all in the end permeable and sponge-like (Bryant 2012). Bryant goes so far as to posit that the human body is an “interface,” a systemic and porous site of “flows,” dissipative entities that Bryant theorizes “porous” as “*permeable*.” Notably, Bryant’s thinking of porosity allows the body to draw matter-energy within itself through flows of the body *and* flows of information (2012). Assemblages of human and nonhuman matter, as in radical mediation, seem entirely possible when conceiving of the body as an interface, a dissipative and open system.

Donna Haraway speaks about muddled zones and decentralizing the human in ways that feel similar to the pillars of radical mediation. Her concept of becoming-with refers to the muddled “contact zones” of living (11). She objects to “human exceptionalism,” maintaining, “becoming is always becoming *with*” (ibid.) – the individual is perpetually entangled and evolving with its surrounding matter, other species, plants, climates, and technology. This ties closely to Karen Barad’s notion of “intra-active becoming,” which demonstrates that beings exist only within the phenomena that make up their environments, not as individuals at all, but products of “materializing relations” (77), permeable and muddled. Grusin ties radical mediation with Barad’s intra-action (Grusin 126); neither radical mediation nor intra-action denote a simple synthesis, but a meeting and a transformative cutting-across of difference. Becoming-with and intra-

active becoming account for a more entangled realm of ontology, one in which the lines of the individual dissolve into contiguous phenomena. In *Her*'s post-digital diegetic, and non-diegetic elements bodies are porous the spatial elements as the flows of technology. This reflects real-world experiences of technology, such as mediating the body through tracking applications.

Hyper-informatic flows have arguably become elements in our environment, and affective actants that move in and out of our bodies through our technology. Period tracking applications are a particularly potent example of this. My preferred tracking app mediates my body, but it also alleviates my own mental tracking of its processes. Within the clean interface, a prompt reads, "Enter today's data," entangling bodily overtly processes with digital data. I insert the ebbs and flows of my body into my app, and in turn it generates predictions about when I will ovulate, when my next period might occur, how long it will last. The app, however, is not only confined to menstrual-related activity. Into it I can insert whether I have drunk or smoked, my digestive activity, how long I have slept, the characteristics of my skin, hair. This practice makes sense, perhaps, within the new media ecology, wherein technological material moves through bodies, and vice versa. Though mediation may seem to infer a deferred level of relationality, a separation, radical mediation in fact theorizes the space in the middle as creating new assemblages, spongy interface spaces that recombine and reconstitute the matter-energies of their participating parties or events. *Her* translates digital mediation for a digitally mediated viewer, actively taking part in and performing dissolution of perspective involved in a hyper-informatic perceptual-affective shift.

Like *Ex-Machina*, both the film's use and depiction of the digital renders the emergence of a body-space continuum, traced in this project as an aesthetic and affective

idiosyncrasy in nascent forms of post-cinema. Today's bodies extend into personal technology⁸, with all its virtual veins and containers, in ways that increasingly alter our sense of being in space and the world. The coevolution of humans and techne (Grusin 148; Hansen 176; Stiegler 1994) implies a parallel growth, a process of analogous and even synergetic development in which both bodies and technology undergo an irrevocable transformation, a radical mediation. *Her*'s speculative fiction draws out the moment within which artificial intelligence and human intelligence run parallel, a temporal site excavated by many AI narratives. *Her*, however, delves specifically into this spell of synergy, exploring it as a deeply symbolic utopian romance narrative, instead of focusing overtly on dystopic or pre-dystopic negative anxieties of the digital singularity, as films such as *Ex Machina* do. Jonze's warm science fiction parable contemplates the flows of information and flows of the body that muddle on the confusing plane of human-computer intimacy. The film's depiction of intimacy anticipates the body as increasingly mediated by a fluid technological interface, the effects of which are playing out somewhat in contemporary reality as our bodies feel like increasingly open and dissipative systems themselves, flowing through technology. *Ex Machina*, posited as an example of ecocinema, establishes Anthropocene-specific entanglements between technology and nature with the icy distance of a sci-fi-horror, whereas *Her*'s exploration of artificial intelligence zeroes in more explicitly on the realm of intimacy in an age of extensive mediality and informatics. On the aesthetic and narrative levels, as well as in the realm of the spectator, the inexorable flows of information, data, and the body muddle. My following chapter will build on the tangling

⁸ The language of extending the body into technology is owed to Marshall McLuhan, who first theorized this in 1964's *Understanding Media*, advocating for increased insight into the technologies that passively "amplify and extend" us.

of nature and techne in the first chapter, and the increased porousness between media and the body, examining the aesthetics, implications, and horrors of becoming-with convergent transmedia as a further re-embodying fragment of the new media ecology.

V. *Under The Transmedial Skin*

Jonathan Glazer's *Under The Skin*, released in 2013 and starring Scarlett Johansson (much like Spike Jonze's *Her*), infers more than it reveals. Its haptic cinematography appears thick and opaque while its narrative remains cryptic, its characters' motives arcane. The docu-fiction hybrid film is essentially a speculative horror, one of intensified affect and existential dread: a disorienting post-cinematic fabric that arguably weaves together the aesthetics and formal strategies of three disparate forms of media – music video, vérité-style documentary, and experimental fiction. Set against a grey backdrop of contemporary Glasgow, Glazer creates an intermedial texture that feels less like an enclosed narrative film about a predatory alien than a mysterious assemblage of its incorporated mediums, a kind of film previously alien to cinema. *Under The Skin* jumps from a stark vérité realism, with scenes captured by hidden cameras or shot from detached distances (unobtrusively choreographed by cinematographer Daniel Landin, who is known for his transmedia work in fashion shows and music videos), to intensified, audiovisually complex, and CGI-supported sequences to entirely abstract images, completely un-fixed in space-time. The viewer feels as if lured into and lost in this composite structure. From its beginning moments, the film seems groundless and disorienting. The disorientation of being yoked to a mutable transmedia ecology gives shape to this chapter, both as an expression and a symptom of post-cinema. *Under The Skin* incorporates the dispersed threads of new media, performing and inflicting this sense of disorientation. It fits as a final chapter in tracing the body-space continuum in post-cinema, because it crystallizes, if latently, the results of these tangled, porous connections or mediations in its manifold fragmentations and abstractions. Or, in other words, its spatiotemporal dislocations.

The protagonist – a Venus flytrap like creature – is introduced in a white space without lines or spatial determination: a completely blank, abstract space. She is naked, crouching awkwardly over the body of a woman, who lies on the floor. She strips the woman, who is likely her predecessor, of her clothes. Both of the women's bodies are almost in silhouette against the bright white backdrop, their hair as spidery black ropes, their faces all but obfuscated. Once she has taken the clothes off the dead woman and put them on herself, *The Female*, as she has been cited, stares impassively at this dead body.

To the 21st century viewer, the image is all too familiar, with television screens populated constantly with images of attractive, thin dead women, purple-lipped and unbreathing on the bright white post-mortem tables of countless cop dramas. As such, the viewer could perhaps feel just as impassive, surveying yet another image of a dead girl on film. *Under The Skin* seizes the misogynist currents implicit in the perpetual representations of dead female victims of sexual assault and turns this paradigm on its head, at least at the outset: instead of a victim, *The Female* is soon revealed to be the predator. She drives a menacing white van around town, picking up unsuspecting young men and leading them into abandoned houses, where their bodies are harvested in what looks like a concentration of dark matter. The tone of the film shifts as she gradually becomes more and more acclimated to her skin, vulnerable as a result of her interactions with the human world. The implications of this double reversal open the film up to feminist critique. For example, in her article “Under The Skin: The Perils of Becoming Female” (2014) Ana Osterweil thoroughly explores the film's alignment of being female with being alien, a strategy reminiscent of classical cinema's portrayal of women as femme fatales or figures of threatening otherness. My interest in this chapter, however, lies in what the transmedial currents running through the film do to the (human or

nonhuman) cinematic body in space, and how they establish an alternative model of body-space continuum, rather than the film's construction of femininity through narrative. In the previous chapters, I read the post-cinematic body as becoming porous to media through intra-active mediation; *Under The Skin* could render some effects thereof: it seems to dislodge both subject and spectator, a moment arguably reflexive of convergent new media's dispersed, and groundless positionality. Transmedia produces a diffuse aesthetic, extending our perception and consumption of cinematic narratives and thus altering our experience of film, as well as our appetite for it. The film both enacts and depicts this post-perceptual dispersal, as filmmaking processes and bodies become as fragmented as contemporary media.

Three major aesthetics appear within the film that together express a transmedial reality / diegesis, ultimately revealing a vision of cinema that in itself feels like amorphous dark matter, constantly co-evolving under the skins of the various media that it puts on. At the same time, it also points to the ways in which this kind of transmedia plasticity (constant shedding skin or "moulting" for new visual textures) reconfigures spectating bodies as both transcorporeal and malleable in a transmedia ecology. An aesthetic akin to non-narrative music video fragments bodies and expresses an intensification of affect, seemingly embodied by highly composite bodies in constant modulation. Here one can consider Steven Shaviro's work on the reversible flesh of artists including FKA Twigs; as he argues, especially the female body and face become canvases for rendering simultaneous different spatiotemporalities in the new post-cinematic regime of music videos (2015). The Female's tearing open of her skin at the end of the film is furthermore evocative of this aesthetic, one threaded through Glazer's music video oeuvre as well. Verité filmmaking, on the other hand, uncovers a 21st century

kind of horror – dubbed as “vérité horror” by scholars like Barry Grant (2013) – in the digital era: an existential dread stemming from the rendering of our bodies as vulnerable by the ubiquity and unsettling intimacy of digital technology (including the omnipresence of cameras and screens). In moments where the *mise en scène* of the film shifts towards a traditional sci-fi and CGI-heavy aesthetic, the porous vulnerability reflected in the *vérité* capturing of the bodies and voices of young men filmed by hidden cameras gets transcribed onto the dis-oriented and mutilated CGI bodies of the Female and her victims. *Under The Skin* lays bare the flesh of the cinematic body within digital and all-too-real docu-fiction spaces, which I argue gestures towards a kind of transcorporeality imposed by a transmedia ecology.

A Transmedia Ecology

Transmedia, despite competing frameworks and definitions, means, at its most basic roots, across media. Richard Jenkins significantly outlines an account of “transmedia storytelling” in his book *Convergence Culture* (2006), which maps the cultural shifts taking place in an age of intersecting technologies. Jenkins posits transmedia storytelling as a kind of “world making” (21), the distribution of narratives across various media platforms, which stretches characters and aesthetics beyond the fixed boundaries of the films or books from which they originate. Perhaps the most popular examples of transmedia storytelling stem from already serialized fantasy/ science fiction franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* (Jenkins 21), whose most essential tributaries of transmedia content circulate through “official,” and “unofficial” media. Official media are produced by the companies that release the transmedia materials, including films, video games, comic books, novels, music videos, as well as online

promotional material, bleeding into the ostensibly organic realm of social media.

Unofficial media consist of creations disseminated by the fans themselves, mostly online.

However, blurred lines and intersections between the official and unofficial occur more and more frequently, especially in today's social media-saturated age; Emet Gürel and Öykü Tiğli, in an article detailing how social media enables the new "active" media consumer to reshape media content and its perceptions, go so far as to state that fans should be approached by content generators not just as consumers but as media "co-creators" (54). *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* in particular have generated vast participatory fan cultures that continually expand the source material, spinning hypothetical narrative webs. Fans splinter, unravel, and remold the original material, patching together speculative work ranging from GIFs to laboured illustrations to NC-17 slash-fiction. Myriad media platforms utilized by production companies, which are most strategically implemented ahead of big-budget film releases, are just as diverse, anticipating the rapt attention and work of fans, who will perpetuate franchise momentum within their own networks. Anne Zeiser, for Huffington Post, traces the immersive, slow and mysterious leak of content in the year ahead of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*' (2015) thunderous release: provocatively minimalist trailers, nostalgic, tactile objects such as trading cards, as well as ephemeral flickers dispensed on Instagram were employed in the deliberate "drip-feed" of information and marketing, climaxing in a two-and-a-half-minute trailer (Zeiser 2015). These are only limited outlines of today's transmedia ecology, wherein our attention, now dispersed across a multitude of media, becomes currency, and our participation becomes labour. This certainly feels true in the case of online fan cultures such as the teeming teenage-girl-regulated *Twilight* and young adult fiction communities.

The immersive potential of a transmedia ecology enshrouds its insidious qualities. David Bordwell, in discussing transmedia's discontents, critiques this "immersive" culture, stating that fan participation online is merely a propagation of marketing: "enhanced synergy," the ultimate outcome of which is "upgraded brand loyalty" (2009). The affective labour extracted from the consumers of transmedia texts extends beyond fan culture and into the habitual interactivity that marks our everyday relationship with our devices and their interconnected media platforms. Shane Denson sketches how the "*inescapable involvement*" in such a participatory and immersive transmedia culture can require exhaustive consumption and response on a multitude of planes (2016). What becomes at stake, moreover, is "the literal capitalization of our attention" (2016). The double meaning here refers to the seizing of our attention spans – we are always with and in our media, as I outlined in the preceding chapters – and the subsequent creation of capital *from* our attention. Arguably, we have reached this fortuitous point in many spheres, and passively; as we scroll and click and view and share we generate ambiguous income for boundless networks of corporations. Just as attention is fragmented, made marketable, so is the nature of our media consumption, and with it the nature of our modes of perception. These effects alter the media landscape significantly. The proliferation of interactive digital media shifts also our perception of narrative entertainment, and thus what we want from it.

Contextualizing films made by "transmedia directors," who are filmmakers that engage with multiple forms of media production including music videos, commercials, and comics (Carol Vernallis discusses exemplary filmmakers like Michel Gondry and Chris Cunningham in her book *Unruly Media* and is currently co-editing an anthology dedicated entirely to an exploration of the works of such filmmakers), in this ambiguous

media environment is difficult. It could be argued that cinema in the transmedia ecology becomes a circuit board of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999), a concept I discussed in the preceding chapter, dispersing modes of reception along with threads of narrative. A “perceptual continuum” marks the age of digital transmedia (Hansen 1995; Grusin 2016): Richard Grusin borrows this term from Miriam Hansen to describe how screen-spectator relations are changing in the currently shifting zone of interactive cinema spaces. Profuse avenues of consumption mean that viewer perception inflates far beyond the walls of the cinema, or the perhaps beyond more common viewing practice that is the staunch framing of a laptop. For example, when watching the filmic component of a transmedia narrative, many contemporary viewers find it difficult not to simultaneously Google, gathering cast information, gossip, spoilers, trivia, supplementary materials, meaning that their perception of the narrative at hand is not enclosed, but rather part of an interactive perceptual continuum.

The immediacy of information and paratextual content that the internet provides has altered attention spans; perhaps narrative cinema in a vacuum is thus no longer enough for media consumers. Richard Grusin pinpoints, without addressing transmedia directly (although remediation is closely tied into the scattered content and operational logic of a transmedia ecology), the “distributed aesthetic” that ensues as a by-product of what he calls a contemporary “cinema of interactions” (2016). Perceptual boundaries between mediums ultimately dissolve, generating a diffused and composite experience of cinema. The “world making” of transmedia renders cinema a “fractal experience,” an evocative metaphor that Jenkins attributes to James Cameron (Jenkins 2011), which means that narratives initially engendered by cinema can be experienced on multiple, seemingly endless depths of media platforms. The nested worlds of transmedia culture,

its muddling and folding of mediums, its confusion of the real and the digitally constructed within the *mise en scène*, and its “fractalizing” of narrative threads generate a new audiovisual regime or aesthetic that feels in of itself “transmedial.” Scholars such as Mark J. P. Wolf, Jonathan Gray, and Dan Hassler-Forest discuss this aesthetic in the context of films that are produced as part of a larger transmedia narrative, but there is less scholarship in films made by directors (like Spike Jonze, Timur Bekmambetov, Baz Luhrmann, Johnnie To, and Glazer) who themselves come from a transmedia background and blend the diverse aesthetics of various media within one film or self-enclosed narrative. *Under the Skin* is an interesting film in that it fits into the latter category.

Towards a Transmedial Aesthetic in Contemporary Cinema

A transmedial aesthetic within cinema could reflect or re-construct audiovisual components of video games, music videos, or social media platforms. While transmedia is largely about dispersal – the potentially rhizomatic dissipation of narrative through marketing and fan participation – it also becomes about the post-cinematic concepts of “convergence” (Jenkins 2006) and media intersections, blurring of media/mediums. Films that repatriate a transmedial aesthetic are symptomatic of the contemporary muddled “new media ecology” (Shaviro 7; Denson and Leyda 2016), or post-cinematic landscape (Denson and Leyda 2016), defined by increasingly overlapping and convergent technology, overwhelming techno-capitalism – which solicits affective labour and exploits the forms of intimacy generated online – and digital mediation. Post-cinema as a term refers to our contemporary mediascape, wherein cinema no longer sits as the dominant platform of artistic and cultural production (ibid.). However, post-cinema also refers to an aesthetic that transcends the stylistic, narrative, and technical affordances of traditional cinema. It is in this sense that I will be employing the term largely henceforth.

Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, referring to the mutability of “aesthetic boundaries” across the genres within post-cinema, and perhaps also hinting at a transmedial aesthetic within film, notably state that, “Contemporary films, from blockbusters to independent and auteristic avant-garde, use digital cameras and editing technologies, incorporating the aesthetics of gaming, webcams, surveillance video, social media, and smartphones, to name a few” (2016). As narratives expand into various media platforms, cinema anticipates and incorporates these transmedia flows.

Post-cinema integrates transmedia flows, reflecting and constructing disparate media aesthetics. POV shots and intensified action sequences feel like the interactive framework of a video game in post-cinematic vessels such as *The Walking Dead* (2010); the static and fetishizing framing of objects and overt use of arbitrary filters recall Instagram and MTV aesthetics in films like *Spring Breakers* (2012) and *The Bling Ring* (2013). Matthias Stork and Carol Vernallis have more thoroughly tracked a conceivable transmedial aesthetic in film, zeroing in on the audiovisual flows of video games and music videos, respectively. Stork’s video essay, *Transmedia Synergies*, illustrates a “remediation,” as pulled from Lev Manovich, Jay Bolter, and Richard Grusin. Remediation as utilized by Stork expresses how video games and film reconstruct one another in the formulation of a “cinematic” aesthetic in video games, and vice versa in cinema. The two distinct genres are collapsed. Stork’s goal is to uncover reflexive synergies between film and videogames by virtue of “aesthetic symbiosis” in the tangle of this new media ecology. Stork states that a reciprocal enfolding of “[film and video game] together form what can be called a transmedia aesthetic” (2015). The lines Stork draws between the two poke holes in the definitive boundaries of each medium; his video essay puts into practice the hybrid aesthetic it maps, highlighting the occasional

“indistinguishable” qualities of film and video game, particularly in an intro that strings together sequences from each respective strain of media. This media indistinguishability matters especially in a post-cinematic climate, wherein mediums fold into each other continually. Rosalind Krauss has argued since the turn of the millennium that we are in a post-medium age, a concept picked up by post-cinema theorist Francesco Casetti in the title of his critical blog.

Carol Vernallis develops a more specifically causal train of thought in her book *Unruly Media* (2013), dogging music video’s influence on cinema, or how music video’s distinctly audiovisual aesthetic has informed contemporary film. Vernallis’s new media cartography aligns our contemporary age with the “audiovisual turn,” marked by today’s “malleable and volatile” intersecting media relations, which have given way to a pervasive, transmedia-fueled “mixing-board aesthetic,” evident across manifold audiovisual mediums (4). She cites music video directors and editors (of the nineties, in particular) as providing us with the contextual tools with which to navigate these new configurations of images and sounds (4). Lev Manovich, answering the question “What Is Digital Cinema?” by charting its ontological development, speaks to this as well, stating that music video is a unique space, a “laboratory,” in which numerous experimental digital techniques and aesthetics co-exist and muddle, blazing new audiovisual paths. In his words, music video is even “a living and constantly expanding textbook for digital cinema” (2016)⁹. *Under The Skin* shows music video’s mutable and indistinct space

⁹ While this particular quote from Lev Manovich appears in the recent online anthology *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film*, the same passage appears almost verbatim originally in *The Language of New Media*, published in 2001. Thus, these ideas have been ruminating for some time and become increasingly relevant now as digital technology overwhelms cinema.

overtly influencing its intensified textures. “Intensified”¹⁰ and “post-classical” cinema, Vernallis’s pick of terms for new cinema, incorporate various digital technologies in complete synergy with their (often also digital) soundtracks, drafting what becomes, in the tradition of music video, fully audiovisual¹¹ digital textures. Music videos frequently abandon “linear, narrative temporality” altogether, as Steven Shaviro argues of the medium in his taxonomy of contemporary sound-vision relations (2016). In this way, they can be merely oblique and hypnotic fragments without distinct beginnings or ends: sensual, ambiguous, but always inseparable from their audio tracks.

Vernallis’s chapter, “Music Video into Post-Classical Cinema” unravels music video’s wholly audiovisual threads that are latent in certain examples of cinema. Vernallis introduces a couple of case studies, while revealing her goal of pursuing music video’s aesthetic influence on film:

Films like *The Bourne Ultimatum* and *Moulin Rouge* exhibit more than a way of putting sound and image together. Their aesthetic is not just based on collapsing two lively tracks, visual and aural, on top of one another; the films are grounded in a sensitivity to sound-image relations that derives from music video’s heritage. In other words, even if you sped up Godard’s image tracks, you might not know how to put them against pop songs (73).

Although *Moulin Rouge*, in all its florid sound-image rhythms, may seem a more clear-cut example of Vernallis’s concept, each film offers a reciprocal reflexivity or symbiosis with their soundtracks, resultant in audiovisual landscapes in places resemble the moment-by-moment affective sensuality of a music video more closely than a classical film. In fact, in what Vernallis calls the modern “media swirl” (4), these mediums

¹⁰ Like Shane Denson’s hyper-informatic cinema, as discussed in the previous chapter, and Steven Shaviro’s post-continuity, David Bordwell’s “intensified continuity” informs Vernallis’s terming of “intensified” (digital) cinema.

¹¹ Steven Shaviro uses the term “fully audiovisual” in conjunction with digital video as far back as 2002, in a paper on the music videos of Björk, stating that the digital medium of the video, entirely “suffused” by sound, becomes fully audiovisual (2002).

consistently slide into each other. Shaviro correspondingly states that the last few decades have indeed been marked by a critical audiovisual turn – from which there is “no return” – wherein “one medium transforms into another” (2016); the demarcating lines that box in and divide movies, television, video, and games have become increasingly tenuous. Shaviro evokes Krauss’s post-medium age, an epoch of swirling modulations, of which each film under this project’s lens seems a definitive and pointedly aware product.

Vernallis ultimately dreams of a post-cinematic “sublime” or utopian film, which would combine various post-classical techniques and influences, in an “uneven surface” (65). She describes an experience of pleasurable disorientation: “I imagine a film that feels like a string of music videos and trailers. While watching it, I unexpectedly come across a sublime passage. I don’t care about the past or the future. I’m happy being lost...” (42). Vernallis calls for film that feels more like music video, intensified, oblique: “Music video has finally discovered how to create misshapen, lumpy forms. Why can’t cinema do this more often” (65)? I would argue that *Under The Skin* – a “misshapen,” abstract, and audiovisually complex speculative horror film – does do this. The film is veined with transmedia influences, and feels less like traditional cinema than a composite new media work, presenting a post-cinematic texture that layers music video’s intensified affect with vérité horror’s hyper-realism and grain of existential dread. When the tone shifts towards a more conventional cinematic aesthetic in the second half of the film, bodies are shown as increasingly vulnerable and untethered in diegetic space, reinforcing the feeling of dissolved boundaries. The result of this lack of stylistic homogeneity is a transmedial and transcorporeal aesthetic that produces a body-space continuum in which embodiment becomes understood as constant modulation, spatiotemporal disorientation, and immersion in the affective flows of media.

Perversion: Introducing *Under The Skin*'s Transmedial Aesthetic

Under The Skin opens with amorphous layers of shape, sound, and light. The visceral hum of Mica Levi's electro-symphonic score, hedged vaguely between the digital and the analog, swells, as an almost imperceptible speck of blue-white light appears in the centre of the otherwise entirely black screen. This sound-image is followed by slowly moving abstract black and white shapes – almost like smooth, plastic planets – floating and converging in negative space, as uneasy scratches of warped strings proliferate. There is no sense of distinct time, place, or space, no attempt to orient the viewer, in this ambiguous opening sequence. Even the dimensionality is unclear: 2D, 3D? A woman's voice threads in, uttering a seemingly disconnected series of sounds or words, "film, film, films, foil, failed, fell." Two layered spheres transform into a human eye, lidless, the iris surrounded by artificial white space that extends into the edges of the frame. Moments later, a motorcyclist drives down a highway at night as the exercise in formalism and negative space continues; all that is visible are the lights that line the highway, and their distorted reflections in the shiny black dome of the driver's helmet. Fragments of human bodies are hinted at, behind the helmet, in the dull enunciations of the vocal track, but remain blurred into audiovisual space – the cryptic voice track disappears into the droning score; the gridlines of the biker's body are made visible only by what reflects against it. Levi's score provides the rooting element; however, the music takes the viewer to zones of disorientation and discomfort. Of the score, Levi states, "I like the way that it perverts your comfort and your reality" (Fitzmaurice 2014).

The sensual perversion of reality that Levi identifies in the music is true of the film's entire atmosphere, its misshapen configuration that interlaces the highly real and the highly simulated. Bodies seem disoriented within space, their directions and drives as

unclear as the narrative arc. The viewer too may feel adrift, caught up in the swirl of different media affects and effects. This disorientation may be pleasurable, as Vernallis imagines, but perhaps not. When *Under The Skin* opened at the Venice Film Festival, “sustained applause” was countered with “frantic booing” in a divisive and apparently near-even split (Collin 2014). The unhappy portion of the crowd’s response can be explained by the film’s frustration of audience expectations, regarding clear presentation of spatiotemporal relations, established by classical cinema and its more contemporary offspring, the “intensified continuity” system. However, the sustained applause points to the rise of a competing sensibility that, when presented with such an uneven surface some members of the audience may not “care about the past or future,” as Carol Vernallis would suggest (42).

The film’s perversion of comfort and reality is not contained within the opening sequence. The scene which introduces the protagonist, taking clothes off a female body, takes place in shapeless white light. The naked woman strips the other of her clothes unceremoniously; Any sense of orienting location seems entirely furtive, as are the dimensions of the space itself. These women seem to exist in empty, open white space, a void of light – the sounds of their bodies, of the clothing being unfastened and fastened, however, are amplified to an uncomfortable degree. In this spatiotemporal voids, the sonic landscape seems similarly alien. A following sequence shows the back of protagonist, “The Female,”¹² as she walks through a shopping mall, filmed from a low angle as if the camera tries to remain hidden, spying. She buys clothes, makeup, layers of femininity, and drives. In the van, the camera sits in fixed places, the dashboard, in between the two front seats, still deceptively hidden as to capture scenes performed by

¹² The characters in the film are unnamed, even in the credits. IMDb credits show Scarlett Johansson’s character’s name as “The Female”

Johansson and, unknowingly, by actual residents of Glasgow. These shifts, from the digitally simulated void, to grainy, documentary style reality captured by unobtrusive cameras make up the texture of the first half of the film: the effect of these interlaced sequences is jarring, but hypnotizing: The shifts between slow-as-honey choreography against a formless black backdrop to mundane docu-spaces stimulates a viewer that feels comfortable with disorientation.

Under The Skin's transmedial aesthetic oscillates between the abstract, composite images and simulated spaces characteristic of music video – these aspects are particularly traceable in Glazer's own works – and the audiovisual landscape of a rigid observational horror (Raimondo 66). Music video combines diegetic and non-diegetic elements in ways that cinema has not exploited much until recently; furthermore, music video's "moment-by-moment" sensibility, a phrase that Shaviro uses in his mapping of post-continuity aesthetic and that Vernallis moreover applies directly to music video (Shaviro 2016; Vernallis 100), seems reflected in the quick thrills and intensified affect of digital horror. New cinematic devices and techniques are often explored first in the horror genre, dissecting the murkier affective nooks and crannies relationship with media. The shaky digital landscapes of the "found footage" horror films like *Blair Witch* (1999), and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) render insidious everyday media objects in the form of home cameras; 2015's *Unfriended* shows a haunting of the computer interface and its media platforms. *Under The Skin* invokes the "unblinking gaze" of vérité style documentary cameras, expressing something less visceral than removed. The capture of human and nonhuman affect at an icy distance elicits a sense of existential dread, while rendering the unobtrusive cameras almost voyeuristic and exploitative in their presumed objectivity.

The produced effect is a disorientating, misshapen digital texture – even a chaotic dislocation of space and time – as opposed to a story with diegetic and narrative unity.

Music Video: An Intensified Audiovisual Aesthetic

Music video is marked by an intensified audiovisual aesthetic that corresponds to a rich fabric of affective flows; it is not anchored by a sense of unifying narrative or meaning, revealing instead a heightened sensual or affective texture, at odds with the dominant narrative framework associated with cinema. The influence of this aesthetic on films like *Under The Skin* is perhaps subtle, yet it indicates a dissolve between media boundaries. Carol Vernallis points out how music is inherently “rich” in affect, thus granting music video a symptomatic “moment-by-moment semiotic wallop unparalleled in film” (100). Steven Shaviro similarly states that in post-cinematic media like music video, “sound works to release images from the demands of linear, narrative temporality” (2016). As such, shifting sound-image relations in post-cinema zero in on less narrative, more affective concerns. Vernallis locates these concerns in Michel Gondry’s brand of music video aesthetic as it appears in his film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), alongside other examples like Michael Bay’s *Transformers* and Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby*. In her formulation, an intensified *audiovisual* aesthetic suggests an aesthetic that is first of all grounded in sound-image relations, projecting music’s affective intensification of spatiotemporal relations and rhythmic patterns into filmic space, relieving it of linear temporality.

Outside the realm of film studies, Deleuzian scholar Brian Massumi equates intensity directly with affect (5) and its immediacy, impacting the body at a precognitive and pre-emotional level, at the surface layer of its interface with the world that is the skin (6). Just as Bordwell associates intensified continuity with “narrative incoherence” (16), Massumi

states that while depth reactions are inherently a part of a linear framework, intensity “is narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalized body surface” (25). There is no sense of continuity associated with intensity or intensified aesthetics, simply affective flows in its wake that spread over the body, or in this case, the uneven surface of the film (itself perhaps a skin, as per the scholarship of Laura Marks). Vernallis propagates similarly that the intensified audiovisual aesthetic and the visual style encompassing it, “based on musicality, dislocation, free-association, flux, colour, and texture, leaves us with a sense of sometimes being grounded in, sometimes hovering over, our bodies” (115). Such framing is relevant in the context of *Under The Skin* especially in terms of its sensual perversion and constant dislocation/relocation of the body within cinematic space and time.

Significant scenes in *Under The Skin*'s first half match the film's fantastic opening moments in style. These scenes deviate entirely from the rest of the film's heightened realism or linear narrative logic; though they are technically constitutive of the overarching narrative, they feel of another, intensified time and space altogether. The aesthetic feels referential to Glazer's music video oeuvre, wherein subjects are often dislocated and fragmented within intensified flows, at one with the affective rhythms of the music track. Glazer's video for Blur's “The Universal” (1995) shows the band playing in an all white non-space – heaven, a spaceship, limbo. The band's music appears to be transmitted through a round, white, space-age speaker to a lot between two apartment buildings, a bleak, average setting of everyday British life. Surreal science fiction effects leak into the spaces of everyday British life, creating alien environments out of almost hyper-realist spheres. The tension is in the juxtaposition between the highly accessible real and the more intangible space of simulation. The ground thus feels shifting, mutable.

Similarly, Glazer's video for UNKLE's "Rabbit in Your Headlights" (1998) renders a traffic tunnel as an unstable space. A man, played by French actor Denis Lavant, walks hooded in the middle of one of the tunnel's lanes, headlights illuminating his hunched form as cars honk incessantly, speeding past him. Several cars hit him, sending his body flying, but the man keeps getting up and stalking the same straight path in the middle of the road, as he continues to mutter agitatedly. The video, like portions of *Under The Skin*, is unsettling to watch. These videos, especially "Rabbit in Your Headlights" render the body an unstable element in media space, instead of a fixed subject.

The body and space in music video feel continuous, rendering a composite texture that is mediated by sound, a medium that itself operates independently from fixed spatiotemporal coordinates. The body-space continuum may be inferred in the opening sequence, when the shape of the biker's body careens almost imperceptibly through darkness, the destabilized element that is his racing body defined only by intangible layers of in-motion reflection and negative space. Matthias Korsgaard writes that "what arrests us about music video visuals is not as much the image as an actual representation of reality as it is the image as affective and ever transforming materiality" (2). Music video's intensified audiovisual aesthetic renders the body a haptic, shifting signal (Korsgaard 4) within space, rather than a subject. The image of the body becomes identifiable less as a subject, and more as a surface through which sound and affect pass through and find modulations. In the Deleuze-and-Guattarian vein, the body becomes movements and affects (259); a cinematic body not of representation, but flows. Both the body and space generate porous containers for audiovisual flows. In her paper "Strange People, Weird Objects," Vernallis states, "in music video, both bodies and space can seem to reflect the experiential qualities of sound" (133), establishing a similar

parallelism or connection between bodies and space. Each become vessels for embodying sound, in its shifting materiality, becoming continuous (this, of course, suggests a different kind of continuum than the Euclidian “continuity” of classical cinema). In the various “seduction” scenes, in which *The Female* lures young men into dark matter, this dissolving of the body into space and the ensuing fusion of materiality becomes a literal event, as naked men sink beneath a black floor and they are left floating in what becomes the elastic space of the void.

The moments leading up to these scenes in the void begin to feel like a routine, a clunky kind of foreplay. After *The Female* dresses herself in a cheap pink cardigan, fake fur coat, and a thick layer of waxy red lipstick, the highly synthetic nature of these items highlighting the coatings of artifice associated with performing femininity, she drives the streets of Glasgow with a dull, searching stare. She attempts to invite men into her vehicle, rolling to a stop and asking directions, offering rides. As *The Female* exchanges flirtations with her first passenger, his remarks casual, hers clipped and edgy with determination, and a high-pitched, scratching theme begins to surge. The sonic swell evokes Bernard Herrmann’s theme from *Vertigo* (1958), stripped down to its highest-pitched bones, and warped into a slow hypnotic taunt that seems to slide in and out of the electronic, pulsed with a hollow but visceral beat: “strip-club shit,” as Levi puts it (Fitzmaurice 2014). Outside of the car – where, it remains unclear: scenes in the film often transition as dream-like dislocations, without orienting the viewer in space or temporality; the questions of when and where and how “we” got here remain furtive pursuits throughout the film – the woman opens a locked door, looking over her shoulder.

The Female and her prey enter the amorphous empty space of dark matter; he follows as she sheds her feminine layers, letting her clothing drop behind her. A long shot of the

man, also stripping, reveals that the black space they move through is defined only by the reflective surface they walk on; it seems otherwise a void without end, a suddenly abstract climate characteristic of the film's harsh cutting from mundane *vérité* reality to speculative reality and back again. A sense of place, whether within simulation or non-simulated reality, feels unattainable. The space of the void feels similar in its mutability, its hybrid nature, both to music video spaces and to Yvonne Spielmann's theory of "elastic" space within science fiction: these are irresolute hybrids of the digital and the real. Spielmann suggests that in science fiction space becomes "elastic" with possibility, as the viewer feels "anchored" (or perhaps further disoriented) in now "three- or many-dimensional space:"

With regard to its technical constitution, the resulting simulated spaces assume hyperreal qualities because of their potential for unlimited expansion. Put differently, what emerges is an absolute space. This is important because the appearance of an absolute space suggests that everything is possible, namely shifts and expansions in all possible directions. This applies especially to digital images, the characteristic omni-directional features of which signify non-hierarchical order, non-linearity, and reversibility. (67)

Spielmann's conception of virtual spaces as being severed from traditional cinematic representations is relevant for transmedial aesthetics, and also ties to post-cinematic ideas around hyperbolic space, as defined by the nodes of the body (Sobchack 17-19, 2004). The notion of "absolute space," understood as omni-directional and full of possibilities, can also apply to the diegesis of music video influenced films, and their intensified audiovisual void. These are intensified, highly virtual spaces, a shifting "elastic reality" (71). In discussing the elastic spatio-temporality of virtual spaces, Spielmann draws from Fredric Jameson's statement about a "spatial turn" in cinema, which would mark a forthcoming "displacement of time" and "spatialization of the temporal" (70). A

thoroughly transmedial aesthetic could seem perhaps to integrate a disorientation of space, incorporating composite realities or jarring shifts into absolute spaces of potential.

The shift in the sonic landscape is similarly jarring, the frictional screech of the music rising up in this scene of seduction feels highly artificial, as Levi attests. The composer has likened this segment of the music, what unfurls “in the black void,” to “makeup” (Lattanzio 2014), again evoking the performative construction of femininity as artificial layers¹³. Levi states moreover that “the music [is] kind of fake-sounding, almost like she’s putting on makeup” (Fitzmaurice 2014). The composer took a moment-by-moment affective approach to scoring the film, stating “The idea was to follow Scarlett Johansson’s character and try to react in real time to what she was experiencing, not to pre-empt or reflect on things that had already happened in the film” (Levi 2014). Levi captures *The Female*’s affect in a narratively de-localized approach, based in free-association and intensity. Similar iterations of the void-scene repeat throughout the film, enacted with different men *The Female* has pulled from Glasgow’s streets. Scenes that take place in the dark matter seem to be made of an entirely different spatiotemporal grid than the rest of the film. These scenes fall in line with what Carol Vernallis calls “music video’s high emotional intensity” (100), as they rely on movement, form, and affect. Vernallis writes that during “heightened moments” that is, perhaps, the moments where sound and image are in the highest synchronicity, “these videos create the illusion that we can directly perceive the rhythms of the bodies before us” (247). These rhythms could refer not just to the bodies’ corporeal rhythms, but affective rhythms as well – the

¹³ This language and concept informed directly by Judith Butler’s work on the constructedness of gender: its artificiality, its sustained performative nature within culture. Butler’s work on the subject is extensive, laid out in 1990’s *Gender Trouble*, within which Butler pinpoints a vast cultural collusion: an agreement to “perform, produce, and sustain polar genders” (179). Butler’s range of theory is merely a sidebar here, and could be the framework of another reading on *Under The Skin* altogether.

intensified ebb and flow of, as Levi puts it, what the characters are experiencing in real time, rhythmic structures of feeling that express through movement shifting perceptions of space, time and materiality.

A pivotal scene ultimately reveals what lies underneath the shiny black surface of dark matter. The Female undresses in her slow way, and the camera pans the length of her in a voyeuristic mode of appraisal, perhaps in this moment taking the place of the male's gaze, starkly dissimilar to gaze established in the film thus far. This also seems a reference to the centrality of the female body within digital music video. She begins to walk backward, away from the camera; her body moves in hypnotic time with the music; Levi's evocation of strip club music is felt particularly here. The man's limbs too swing with the hollow, visceral beat – it seems there may have been some reflexivity in post-production – a working of sound and image into a more seamless hybrid texture, a fully audiovisual fabric – intensified in this seamless way. A wide shot depicts the now familiar moment of the man walking towards the woman, his body sinking beneath the surface. He seems hypnotized by the performance, and sinks without noticing where his body is going. Only when he is beneath the surface does he assess the displacement of his body. He floats in an ambiguous fluid, looking down at his body and moving his limbs – as he moves, his body seems to emit a sound, but then, it is unclear whether the sound is diegetic or non-diegetic, as it evokes something scraping against a mic, or the needle at the end of a record. Though completely severed from the sound profile we associate with human flesh and movement, it seems folded into his movements, inseparable from them.

In this absolute space, the body's audiovisual materiality shifts, wrenched of its corporeality, becoming non-diegetic in a certain sense, as it becomes a channel for the rhythm. This could present ties to our (digital) anxieties (Grant 2013) in this moment of

melding with our media, of capitalized attention during an age of technologically intensified affect. The man turns to see a similar floating male body; they reach out to each other. As the man tentatively grasps the other man's hand, his skin ripples, as if drained of its contents. The man pulls away and this body retreats – with a jolting crack seemingly elicited by the score, the contents of his body seem to be pulled from within. A tenuous husk remains, empty skin moving in the amorphous space – the outline of a heel can be perceived, a face, a hand like a flaccid latex glove, writhing in space and with music. The contents of his body are harvested into the abstract, deposited into what seems a digitally generated red, rectangular deposit, evoking blood and flesh. This could be a parable for our dissolution into digital space, the dispersal of our corporeality and attention across immersive media. The body has become fully audiovisual material, almost non-diegetic, co-evolving with media rather than active within or represented by it. Shaviro outlines something similar in the music video for FKA twigs's "Papi Pacify" (2013): "In both series of images, the human figures emerge from a murky undifferentiated background. The darkness behind them is too vague and undefined to seem like any sort of actual place. In other words, the video has no settings, whether real or simulated... effectively non-diegetic" (2015). Shaviro's conception speaks to the transformation of spatiotemporality specific to new renderings of highly digital music video.

Similarly, in the music video for Calvin Harris's "This Is What You Came For" (featuring Rihanna, 2016), directed by Emil Nava – to pull from today's popular media landscape – elastic spaces seem to emerge out of a white box sitting in different "real" settings. The interior space becomes a space of impossibility: a hybrid of reality and virtuality, opening up and extending into club scenes, its walls covered in more analogue-

looking projections. The screen and the wall become fabrics of glitchy pixels. The only constant is Rihanna's body, also a part of the hybrid digital texture, glitching and rendering in time with the digital beats. As Vernallis notes, "digital music in tandem with the digital image becomes a monstrous hybrid automaton," (137) perhaps because their boundaries blur if each is made perceptibly of code. Is that what is at stake for transmedial cinematic bodies?

Vérité Reality: Rigid Gaze and Existential Dread

Another influence behind *Under The Skin*'s transmedial aesthetic can be tied to the surveillance-like aesthetics of vérité horror. As unpacked in my chapter on *Ex Machina*, post-cinema is marked by the ubiquity of screens and cameras in the modern age. In *Ex Machina* bodies are under constant surveillance within the diegetic space, turning images of screens into textures. *Under The Skin* involves a non-diegetic surveillance, wherein the digital cinematic gaze becomes monstrous, predatory. The presumed neutrality of observational cinematic space (cinema as safe space for bodies) seems to be called into question. In this sense, *Under The Skin*'s troubling of diegetic and non-diegetic processes ties cinematic temporality and narrative to body politics. Corporeal horror seeps into not just the abstract spaces of music video-like sequences – and their moment-by-moment intensified affect – but into the rigid gaze of the vérité-style segments, made even more disorienting with harsh transitions between the two aesthetics. This gives transmedial aesthetics an unsettling quality that is not necessarily connected to the insidiousness that various scholars associate transmedia industries due to their exploitation of affective labor or fan-based participation (which I mentioned earlier). The unsettling quality here is evocative, arresting, and aesthetically potent, generating a structure of feeling that speaks to post-cinematic affect.

Transmedial techniques are used perhaps more overtly than anywhere else in the non-cinematic utilization of hidden cameras in crafting scenes. Real people and real interactions become a part of the film's space and propel its narrative in potentially unplanned directions. As a post-cinematic structure of feeling, this method of filmmaking could express the disorientation we feel in increasingly mediated space, the threat of predatory surveillance posed by media's often un-noticed ubiquity. The vérité-style sequences essentially feel non-cinematic; even the star power of Scarlett Johansson fails to pull the viewer into a suspension of disbelief. In fact, the entire first half of the film has the appearance of an amateur documentary, featuring *The Female's* awkward survey of apprehensive subjects, seemingly loners and misfits. The camera looks with her gaze – cold, staring, unceremonious, eliciting the alienated distance we feel in the face of surveillance. If the music video sequences use affective flows, vérité-style sequences call affect into question invoking a more sober, distant framing: looking at the world from a distance, making it alien in its objectification. We are forced to consider our own world from an outside perspective, seizing the alien gaze from the central character and sensing her existential dread.

Vérité-horror makes the normal spaces of everyday life insidious – workplaces, streets, highways – creating horror out of the mundane. It also reflects the potential existential crises in our must-capture culture – if we aren't capturing it, are we really living it? Alien narratives seem an appropriate conduit for such existential crises – Stephen Mulhall unravels an existential reading on Ridley Scott's *Alien* that could be similarly applied here:

The alien's form of life is (just merely, simply) life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to a species, to be a creature, a natural being... Metaphysically, it represents a perception of life itself as something external to or other than the species which incarnate it – something invades, makes us

of, and then discards, any and every manifestation of itself, as if living beings are merely its vehicles, slaves or hosts (19).

Aliens are therefore reified as what exists outside ourselves, the ultimate iteration of otherness. Mulhall seems to point to the true terror, not alien forces, but the ultimate reveal that we are inherently alien or monstrous ourselves. Glazer uncovers this alien-ness blankly, in capturing the world slate as blank as possible. The camerawork in the first half of the film seems almost unsympathetic towards humans, clinical, and highly oblique.

The oblique way in which Glazer approaches reality renders it an alien terrain – the camera itself seems to provide a non-human distance. Its “unblinking gaze” (Rombes 2016) mediates our own relationship with reality, exposing the way, perhaps, in which cinema always already does this. Why do these particular parameters feel so alien? The first half of the film depicts The Female driving her van around Glasgow, expressionless, resolute, emoting only in performative moments of seduction. As she rolls up to the sidewalk, she engages men in casual conversation, “How do I get to the M8? Where are you from? Do you have family here?” A camera captures these men through the open window on an oblique angle. The viewer does get the sense of capturing/ spying below the dashboard, appraising these men beyond the window. The men that accept the offer of a ride are captured via different hidden cameras, also seemingly below the dashboard – one straight on, below the face, and one at an angle that captures more of their body, beside them, looking sideways. The grainy and non-flattering imagery also recalls reality TV affects and effects. Nicholas Rombes writes of reality TV’s insidious moods:

Reality TV works to capture authentic moments of human emotion: fear, jealousy, anger, love. But at the root of all this is possession: human beings held in possession of another’s gaze, the unblinking gaze of the camera. Our transactions both online and on the streets are now not only abundantly under surveillance, but mysteriously:

we don't know when we are being watched, tracked, documented. This truly is a horror of existential dimensions... (2016).

The transactions captured by *Under The Skin* involve pseudo-sexual and affective dialogue and bodily interaction in moments of van foreplay. Rombes also unpacks how cameras are tied to possession, tying into the capitalization of attention. There are humans on the other end of this, as well, mediated by the nonhuman gaze of the camera. The flows of transaction are consistently washing over us, at all times. The van seems to be an arbiter of existential dread in other scenes. In one moment, the rear-view mirror depicts The Female's expressionless face as lights pass by the windshield and the sounds of the city – traffic, yelling, the oddly amplified clanking of bottles– washing over her, as many things do in this film, passive as the currents and flows of mundane earthly life move around her.

The hyper-real, vérité textures of the van-driving scenes are owed largely to the filmmaking process. Robbie Collin for *The Telegraph* writes, “Most distinctive of all, though, is the fact that much of *Under The Skin* was shot covertly in the real world, with Johansson interacting with passers-by and the results captured on those hidden cameras. Glazer describes the style, with a half-stifled smile as, ‘existentialist Beadle’s About’” (2014). Glazer goes on to state that “the story needed that texture of reality. You couldn’t have manufactured or contrived it” (Collin 2014). Perhaps he is referring to the texture of existential anxiety that pervades these scenes – an anxiety of detachment but also evocations of empathy and nakedness. “Beadle’s About” was a British television show based in hidden camera pranks and their ensuing humiliations that ran for a decade. The existential quality that Glazer mentions seems to lie in the lines that the film consistently toes: the human and the alien, the inside and outside.

The existential mediation of distant reality pervades cinematic space in other places as well, dramatic events pass by the camera almost accidentally, the point of view fully with the distant eyes of The Female. Single, un-stylized camerawork persists. There is little dramatic attention paid, little “worked”-ness, aside from the music video scenes, even as events unfold that would normally be captured in ways that dramatize these events. In one scene, The Female stands on a beach, waiting for a swimmer to get out of the water – a man alone. However, as she engages in her highly programmed rhythm of flirtation, screams can be heard from elsewhere on the beach. A woman seems to be swimming towards her dog in dangerous waters, between jagged rocks and through turbulent waves. Her husband follows her in, then the swimmer The Female was attempting to engage. Neither the dog, the man, nor the woman return. All this is shot from a cold distance, again emulating The Female’s gaze: no faces are shown, no characters established in this tragic segment. The low, consistent buzz of Levi’s score persists, and when The Female begins to approach the swimmer, unconscious after a failed rescue attempt, the low thrum of her seductive theme starts up. This existential distance is not reserved for scenes that line up with her gaze, however. A scene where she enters a nightclub is shot in a similar documentary fashion. The music thrums mutedly in diegesis; a moment of The Female getting taken into a group of riotous women passes without any of their faces fully shown on screen – when she attempts to exit the overwhelming, intensified diegetic space of the club after a fight seemingly breaks out. Then, nothing is made clear, the scenes of her running down staircases are shot as if from the angle of arbitrary security cameras, one distant camera for each backspace she moves through quickly. Another sequence shows a dis-correlated series of shots of people on the street until all these images are layered into a complex assemblage. Ubiquitous mediation

is evoked here, its pervasiveness, the endlessness of images, but also the overwhelming nature of living, of existing on Earth.

Certain nihilistic or weird dialogues tap into and provide context for the existential dread of representation, as evoked in *Under The Skin*'s moments of hyper-realism. Weird fiction and its misanthropic threads provide a framing for these bleak transcriptions of reality. Of weird fiction writer Thomas Ligotti's work Ben Woodward states, "Ligotti's existential horror focuses on the awful proliferation of meaningless surfaces that is, the banal and every day function of representation" (2011). These surfaces seem to be what Glazer is capturing in these observational scenes such as the beach – existential horror as cinematically rendered in *vérité* techniques. Thomas Ligotti states, "We don't even know what the world is like except through our sense organs, which are probably inadequate. It's not less the case with our brains. Our whole lives are motored by forces we cannot know and perceptions that are faulty. We sometimes hear people say they are not feeling themselves. Well, who or what do they feel like then?" (Satanis 2008) He raises questions similar to those invoked by *Under The Skin*. He also approaches the problematic of a narrative from the point of view of a monster, or as in this case, an alien,

In his later letters, Lovecraft mused about writing stories in which he described only the play of nonhuman forces in the universe, forces that would be alien to the reader and therefore very disturbing. But fiction doesn't allow one to do this. Lovecraft tried to get his readers to see the world from the perspective of his monsters, but without success... In the end we are stuck with ourselves, and that's a pity (ibid.).

Under The Skin may reveal something similar to Ligotti's provocations, in exposing the point of view of "a monster." The Female's gaze seems to reflect back to the viewer a pitifully mundane, grey world. The final scene in the film shows The Female lost in the woods, looking for a place to rest. Once she finds it, she is attacked by a strange man, who proceeds to sexually assault her. He strips off her clothing but ends up tearing her

performative layer of human female skin, revealing her true form beneath, which is an anthropomorphic but almost featureless body, the colour and texture of black rubber. The man runs away, and returns to light her on fire. Ultimately, her body burns in a pile of snow; her ashes float into the sky and blend with snow, as her physical form becomes continuous with its alien environment. The attack that ends the film reveals the message at the heart of its existential distress: in the end we are stuck with ourselves; our monstrosity, our dread, and our feelings of alienation in the face of immersive media-flows and techno-disorientation.

Alienation may be a fairly common experience in the post-cinematic media ecology. *Under The Skin* exposes not only the potential limits of humanity, but the limits of representation. In the vein of post-cinematic affect, it moves beyond and interrogates traditional cinematic tropes, yielding a texture of fluid spaces, bodies and (dis)locations. It would seem a fitting contribution in Krauss's post-medium age. While *Ex Machina* and *Her* overtly address the digital in their narrative components, *Under The Skin* seems to exhibit some of post-digital film's most radical potential. It abandons most of film's traditional constructs, striking in its aesthetic and formal heterogeneity. In the transmedial texture, fantastic suspensions rich in intensified affect are juxtaposed with docu-realities, invoking a sense of oblique "digital anxiety" through both "monstrous and mundane spaces" (Grant 2013), raising similar discord in its initial audience: the frantic booing, and the sustained applause of the Venice Film Festival. To some, this disorienting piece of alien cinema may have felt too weird, disconnected, focus-less. Personally, I take pleasure in disorientations. As stated in my introduction, cinema's dis-location seems to be taking its spectators, with its films, to unknown places and spaces. Spectator bodies become – much like the subjects examined in this thesis – somewhat hybrid, formless,

and porous in the face of convergent digital mediation, continuous with media-cinematic spaces. Post-cinematic products may ultimately reflect the kaleidoscopic landscape on which they were formed, and I, like Vernallis, am happy to slip with cinema into more uneven surfaces.

VI. Conclusion: Weirding Post-Cinema

Post-cinema refers to the current status not only of film, beyond the boundaries allotted by analog cinema, but also of the entire media ecology that has assimilated to its expanding, protean realm. It seems that a conversation on cinema now needs to acknowledge the most significant shift in late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century film, which is the departure from *film* itself. Instead of being placed firmly in the theatre, and fixed inside analog prints, video tapes or DVDs released thereafter, cinema in the 21st century is so scattered that it can no longer be located anywhere in particular. We hence do not necessarily have to resort to reconciliatory terms like relocation to make a case for why cinema still matters or persists. Imagining cinema in a process of diffusion and dislocation fits in well with the particular idea of permanence tied up in digital materiality, the enduring ephemeral nature of “constantly disseminated and regenerated digital content” (Chun 171). Cinema’s dislocations have directly and indirectly shaped this project, and it might be worth tracing here, at the risk of slipping into a tangent, how my relationship with shifting cinemas has influenced this project.

I remember vividly the experience of anxiously anticipating *Titanic* at a small theatre tucked into the corner of a local mall in the winter of 1997. As the film started, my friends and I stared up at the flat screen from our low level of seats, committing each image to memory, as if this could have been our last glimpse into a mesmerizing, DiCaprio-littered audiovisual landscape until the video release. The sound emanated from speakers sitting at the front of the theatre, sonic amplification akin to our home televisions; the image itself was at times flecked with tactile spots of dust, barely perceptible white marks on the screen that nonetheless reassured the viewer of the cinematic apparatus: light projected through celluloid, and the linear churning of haptic

photographs formed the overall cinematic texture. The story unfolded in a similarly linear fashion: human bodies moved, as the subjective unquestionable locus, through space and time with the narrative sense of a storybook. Subjects and spaces were fixed, physically and narratively. I saw *Titanic* four more times, like many young people of my generation – the film had become the dominant cultural fixation. The pursuit of the film’s particular cinematic experience, collecting products and narratives appearing in its wake, became a compulsion hedged in longing and deferral, until, finally, I purchased the dual-tape VHS. The object became precious. My interest was sustained between theatre and home viewing in the perhaps hormonally generated chase of memorabilia, and I watched and re-watched the tape repeatedly on my tiny tube television with built-in VCR, until the tape itself wore out, thinning from overuse a year after the film’s theatrical release. Overuse showed up audiovisually on my screen as static and tracking, traceable after I ejected the tape as marks and ripples on the shiny black tape underneath the plastic casing.

Yet, despite my passionate engagements with it, the *Titanic* videotape was an object definitively separate from me, in no way related to a network, my body, or their composite processes. It was both cherished and distinct, contained only to the shelf and the VCR, both situated in my bedroom. *Her*, in contrast, while I saw it for the first time in the theatre, I have re-watched in whole and in parsed out fragments on my laptop, on my smartphone, on my television, in bed, in the bath, on the bus, in a cafe. I have experienced *Ex Machina* and *Under The Skin* in similarly diffracted, kaleidoscopic ways. I access these films in any space, on the same devices from which I work, from which I communicate with my friends and family, capture my memories. However, these spaces – of media that Vivian Sobchack calls increasingly “*perceptive technologies*” (2016) – too

capture me, as my flows become data and they are fed into a network mainframe, used and commoditized in unknowable ways. What extends the body too “devours” it, and cinema is wrapped up in this dislocating process (Denson 2016). Shane Denson writes of the indissoluble cinematic experience today:

We are bound up in and transformed by the processual experience of digital mediation, which unlike the ideal closure of classical cinema is proximal and open to (rather than separate from) our computational lifeworld. In other words, there is no clear encapsulation of the movie experience as distinct from the digital infrastructure of our daily lives (2016).

This project has attempted to demonstrate that cinema and the viewer’s mutual open-ness, their intrepid reciprocal flow, perhaps paves the way for new imaginings of the body in space, nascent in my three case studies. Denson’s reading seems a distinct mapping of where cinema is taking its increasingly technologically mediated/engaged spectator; his statement hints at the kind of mediation speculatively integrated into the narratives of the three films taken up in this thesis. Cinema’s current place, where we have ended up with it, is as confusingly hybrid as the natural/ technological compound in *Ex Machina*, as formless as the void where Scarlett Johansson’s character deposits her victims in *Under The Skin*, as proximal and intimate as the relationship between Theodore and his operating system in *Her*. These folds, where technology and cinema, space and the body crease and overlap, have provided the crucial points of extraction in this project, making a case for how the body has become continuous with natural-technological spaces in the age of post-cinema.

As I have argued in this project, Garland’s *Ex Machina* exposes nature and technology’s resemblance, as well as the latent connections between some of each element’s subsequent branches: humanity and performativity, flesh and data, the body and its surrounding digitally mediated spaces. In Spike Jonze’s *Her*, flesh and data bodies

alike are posited as open-ended, porous systems, ultimately re-configuring one another in erotic acts of radical mediation. Glazer's *Under The Skin*, in my approximation, uncovers the disorienting effects of this yoking to fragmented media. As a radical piece of post-cinema, its uneven surface evokes the disorientations associated with a somewhat paradoxical media climate of dispersal and immersion. These filmic unsettlingings of the body in space make a decisive move from the fixedness of cinematic structures, wherein the body is central, and space is static. Film's sliding into the digital means that reality and simulation are no longer tangibly disparate.

Shaviro notes that our situated digital ecology is marked by immediate and intangible technological flows, and in this environment reality and its "multiple simulations" are impossible to distinguish (8). Cinematic phenomena, like bodies, space, and objects are porous to coded flows, they pass through them, become contiguous to them. Furthermore, there is no longer the assumption of an "absolute, pre-existing space" (17). Here, Shaviro builds on David Rodowick's concepts to elucidate the transcribing properties of analog film and photography, and to explain how these mediums, in their materiality, were once based in capturing and "persisting chemical traces of objects that actually stood before the camera" (ibid.). In analog cinematic processes, space was for the most part a Euclidian box of representation, a reproduced container rendering light and shadow as imprint. This is not the case in digital video. Taking Grace Jones's video for "Corporate Cannibal" as an entry point to the discussion, Shaviro looks at how Jones's "hyperbolic" figure seems to "generate its own space, in the course of its modulations," pointing to the emergence of a non-Euclidian formulation of space-body relations (ibid.). Vivian Sobchack, in a similar formulation, outlines hyperbolic space – as opposed to space defined by Euclidean or Cartesian lines – in the digital era as being highly

subjective, delineated by the perceptive nodes of the body itself (17-19, 2004). However, Shaviro's approximation does not privilege the body as central locus, instead, the body becomes a kind of electronic signal (19), a piece of the digital texture of film; there is more reflexive porosity involved between the digital body and digital space. If the body is already made of electronic signals, the body and space are in "interplay," defining the "field of becoming" (ibid.). This becoming seems to hint at a newly rendered or emergent body-space continuum in post-cinematic digital media.

In echoing Shaviro's interpretation, I have proposed to think of the digitally augmented sci-fi worlds, fluid bodies, and spaces approached in this project as expanding the cinematic body's field of becoming. A more radical form of these becomings can be found in post-cinema's increased reliance on weirding in recent films (something that became more and more evident to me during the course of writing this project, as an exciting new field of research). The threads that move from *Ex Machina*'s depiction of technological natures into *Under The Skin*'s existential dread that pits docu-fiction and sweeping landscapes against the surreal audiovisuality of the void evoke perhaps an aesthetics of the weird. Notably, Alex Garland's next project is reported to be an adaptation of weird fiction writer Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*, making the weird not such a distant deparature from *Ex Machina*. *Annihilation* shows impossible, technological natures in unresolved, speculative realities. Like *Ex Machina*, it seems to point to a world beyond humans, and like *Under The Skin* it is steeped in existential dread that manifests as both hyper-reality and surreality.

Weird aesthetics in film do have some burgeoning roots. Eugene Thacker identifies "the fantastic" in fiction, literature and film – the moment of suspended reality, as the philosophical meaning-bed of horror (2013). Selmin Kara looks towards a

“speculative realist” aesthetic in her piece on a “primordigital cinema,” films that marry analog and digital aesthetics that “portray cosmological visions” of pasts and futures (2-3, 2014). These films point to “times-without-us,” building on Thacker’s “world-without-us” (2012), looking both towards a world before humans, and a world after humans. Speculative realism, especially its most nihilist corners, has significant ties to the weird, so much so that speculative realist Graham Harman put forth a *Weird Realism* in 2013, though there are many other bridges between the two spheres leading up to this text. In Thacker’s work, horror becomes philosophy in of itself. Kara, with Alanna Thain writes also about documentary film *Leviathan*’s (2012) ecological approach to audiovisuality, which exposes, through hyper-real – and at times altogether ambiguous – “sonic ethnographies,” the fact that “*our life in this world is a supernatural horror*” (186, 2015). Drawing from weird fiction writer Thomas Ligotti, supernatural horror becomes reality and vice-versa in Thain and Kara’s interpretation. These diffractions of horror, philosophy, and film are provocative, opening cinema studies into areas and speculative lines of thought previously unexplored.

Weird fiction also has ties to new materialist thought. Many scholars posit HP Lovecraft, working in the early twentieth century, as the foremost weird fiction writer. Lovecraft engaged with decidedly weird natures: ecologies of unresolved matter and swirling, un-fixed identities. One of the reasons why his work seems to have become relevant again is that it resonates with much of the new materialist work, including the writing of Barad regarding the “queerness” of nature. The weird and the queer have parallels. Queerness is in many ways a refusal to adhere to a categorical definition, a surpassing of binary systems, an unresolved-ness; weird fiction too functions somewhat as an aggregate of horror and science fiction, but is a thoroughly speculative literature

that is in many ways an unsolvable, protean form, exploring beings and ecologies that are just as mutable. Queer natures seem to fit within Garland's new project as well. To invoke Barad's description of intra-active becoming, the world of *Annihilation* as well as *Ex Machina* make us think about "specific material reconfigurings of the world that do not merely emerge in time but interactively reconfigure spacetime as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming" (142, 2007). Filtering Barad through the weird lens makes for some interesting mapping of matter, and matter within cinema, potentially. This is not as much of a stretch as one might think. In her piece "Nature's Queer Performativity," the feminist scholar begins with an image of an oozing, sticky, muck-filled field, populated with billions of single-celled organisms, an "aggregation of night terrors" (25, 2012) – this image initiates her theory circling nature's queer, quotidian creatures (2012). Barad's work illuminates the interesting and productive ties between new materialism, the weird, and queer theory.

Weird elements run throughout the films I approached in this project: *Ex Machina*'s hybrid technological natures; the "growing of new organs" (as per Chun's reading of Jameson [42]) taking place in *Her*'s moments of radical mediation – or intra-action – between the body and disembodied technology; *Under The Skin*'s unresolved, deep dark precipices and existential disorientation. I look forward to new constellations that will hopefully emerge in future research, conceivably generating a kaleidoscopic lens that incorporates the weird, speculative realism, post-cinema, and new materialism. Wielding this lens may incite an interesting and potentially post-cinematic aesthetic has been gestured towards, if not directly approached, in this thesis: a "weird cinema." Perhaps, this project's contribution to the field of film studies can be viewed as a

weirding itself, an opening up of post-cinema to speculative and new materialist forms of inquiry.

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