

**Abstraction is ethical:
The ecstatic and erotic in Patricia MacCormack's *Cinesexuality***

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In his editorial preface to Patricia MacCormack's *Cinesexuality* (2008), Michael O'Rourke aligns the book with Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*: like Lyotard's work, MacCormack's text has a "performative effect" upon the reader; it moves giddily "from one concept to another, making unnatural alliances between ideas and thinkers."⁽¹⁾ *Cinesexuality* offers a brilliantly argued thesis on affectivity and the physical pleasure of cinema and although *Cinesexuality* maintains a deep affinity for the horror film – with references that range from Murnau through to Fulci – the tropes of gothic, grotesque and guignol serve to reveal a trenchant critique of subjectivist theories of cinema. Indeed, MacCormack's dizzying dive into conceptual philosophical thought is central to the argumentative technique. MacCormack's book is a powerful and assured exploration of the erotic and subversive haptics of spectatorship. Throughout we are offered insightful theses regarding the cinephile viewer's love and the corporeal convolutions in which the viewer finds herself.

To perform my own unnatural alliance I will turn back to a phenomenological source in order to read the ethics of spectatorship offered in *Cinesexuality* against the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas. Whilst Lévinas is somewhat inexplicably absent from the argument, *Cinesexuality* can nonetheless be read as a response to Lévinas' 1948 essay 'Reality and its shadow'.

Where cinema studies – including philosophical theorising of the filmic spectator and subject – might encourage one to chart a course between a structuralist phenomenology on the one side and psychoanalytic readings on the other, *Cinesexuality* determines an innovative route. MacCormack is conversant with Anna Powell's critique of 'cinepsychoanalysis' as a theoretical approach that "ignores the ways in which film energises and mobilises an affect that is both psychical and material at once" whilst nonetheless asserting submission to film, as opposed to understanding terror as affect.⁽²⁾ In its opening pages, the arguments of *Cinesexuality* teeter toward Gilles Deleuze's cinema books before performing a remarkable volte-face as MacCormack thrusts both hands wrist-deep into the corpus of 'Continental' philosophy. To ask why a work should torturously seek to occupy such a vertiginous and fractal terrain throws the reader up against MacCormack's chthonian thesis: the egress of an ethics of spectatorship. The ethical, the erotic and the abstract: this essay will address the mutually imbricated implications of these terms through our engagement with horror films and thereby endeavour to flesh out an account of philosophic desire.

A weird play of sound and light

In MacCormack's conception of cinema the spectator is not present before the screen as an isolable and determined marker. The cinematic images do not follow a process of returning to the viewer, carrying back in a vector from the screen. For MacCormack the spectator must become other than the subject of the cinematic image. Such would be the subject of content-orientated cinema studies, where to every image-event there is a spectator-relation, to be subsequently analysed and discussed on the psychological, subject-orientated or group level. Put otherwise, the spectator here stands for the subject within the place of cinema; a place MacCormack abandons without nostalgia. The imperative that the viewer must become other underlines the ethical terrain that *Cinesexuality* seeks to develop. For all that cinesexuality is concerned with nothing more or less than the seduction of the cinematic image, it is also a thesis about desire. And from the suggestions that MacCormack's book makes, suggestions concerning our

responsibility to become ‘assigned and asemiotic’, we can see the ethical accountability latent in the pleasurable touching of our fantasies.

MacCormack asserts the space of cinema to be a ‘philosophical and actual territory’.(3) When describing what those desirous of cinema do behind this open and inviting door, one claim can repeatedly be marked out: *Cinesexuality* does not do dialectics – largely because, for MacCormack, dialectics just won’t do. Though the book is unflinching in its approach to and engagement with messy dialectical fusion, it resolutely refuses to sanction a retrenchment of subject-hood + image-bearing screen. Central to MacCormack’s analyses of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s various writings is a deployment of their term *becomings*. From this we can understand a movement of self, life, thought and material outside of reified positions. Modern European philosophy has frequently tackled the notion of subjectivity through critiques that displace Enlightenment ideals in an antihumanist melee, wherein objectivity is contested and causal relations are scoured. In taking up these themes, MacCormack’s work seeks to articulate the expressive force(s) of desire in order to consider corporeality. As she puts it,

Cinesexuality describes subjectivity at most as a necessary impossible in reference to modes of activism and accountability, but because aberrant molecules which rupture reified paradigms are sought, subject positions and inclusions cannot be present.(4)

Necessarily her argument is abstract; not obtuse or obfuscating, but an articulate abstraction. Time and again *Cinesexuality* promotes a case for difficult thought and painful thinking that shares a relation both metaphorical and metonymical with difficult watching; painful viewing. Watching Argento’s *Susperia* grates the optic nerves; no less perhaps should reading Guattari’s *Chaosmosis*.(5) *Cinesexuality* comes at the touch of the image; an idea of bodies opening on a ‘libidinal plateau’ having shed an objectivised skin. Concomitantly, neither does the ethic pertaining to the situation within which the spectator unfolds itself remain party to containment by essentialist, politically conservative or reified demarcations: as MacCormack remarks, “Cinesexuality is an anomalous sexuality.”(6) These issues will remain of relevance throughout the present paper: cinesexuality concerns the strangeness of sexed bodies as thought; it concerns the abstraction of cinema’s matter which as the unique form of desire is to be understood as the turbulence of asemiosis.

Such an approach could sail wide of abstraction and steer toward obscurity. MacCormack could merely chart the knotting of sensory affectivities, the sonorities and saturations that invade the spectator, but such would surely be to remain in the domain of subject and screen where the image-machine overwhelms the subjected spectator. Not so this thesis, these theories: *Cinesexuality* does far more than detach the subject from a film theory dyad only to install that same subjectivity in the (hidden) heart of the spectator as the recipient of an affective tumult. In every way, MacCormack’s tactual thinking probes deep in the tenebrous corners of Lyotard, Serres and Guattari and thereby augments the turns in her own thesis with measured pricking of their philosophical skin. As mentioned above, one name perpetually absent from the discourse is Emmanuel Lévinas: so much of what MacCormack has to say approaches the same outward lip, the same inner coil as Lévinas’ own works on aesthetics, ethics and the openings in the subjective skin that he appears almost consciously avoided. It is to Lévinas’ ethical charge against aesthetics that I will return below in order to offer a reading of MacCormack’s benevolent, if painful, notion of abstraction.

‘These intensities we desire horrify us’

Spectatorship, as MacCormack observes, is a process which “inflects with social reality” but that is not to say that it operates through a comfortable apparatus.(7) In his work *Nerve Scales (Pèse-nerfs)*, Antonin Artaud wrote of

Finding oneself in a state of extreme shock, enlightened by unreality, with fragments of the real world in a corner of oneself.(8)

I will take it that Artaud’s traumatic *mis-en-scène* serves as a provocative recapitulation of the cinesexual encounter which is presented in MacCormack’s work. The spectator is eviscerated by the cinematic image, thrown into shocked by the weight of her affects. As boundaries shift, unreality bears reason and shattered reality is consigned to the margins. *Cinesexuality* presents a certain culmination of MacCormack’s writings on sexuality, horror films and modern European philosophy. Central to her work has been a concern with the “emphatic presence of the spectacle of flesh and desire”(9), a presence recurring through images of extreme bodily corruption and in the possibilities for embodied development. Such concerns are exemplified in her earlier essay on Barbara Steele’s face: here the same emphatic presence serves as “an intersection ... where our attraction and corporeal dispersion connect with the viewed.”(10) This concern – and MacCormack’s self-conscious choice of material through which to pursue it – exposes the reader and the viewer to uncomfortable and (frequently) unpleasant images. Horror on and in film brings significant questions and challenges to purveyors and spectators alike; the socio-political, if not starkly moral, choices attending an appetite for ‘death images’ are not shirked lightly. As MacCormack has said elsewhere “Perversion involves both risk and accountability.”(11) And it is this question of *involvement* with horror cinema as a source of pain and (dis)pleasure which this paper is exploring.

MacCormack’s cinematic terrain is marked by a double movement whereby there is both a division and an infection of the spectator. The former serves to expel theories of image-meaning from a position of privilege; the latter is better known through the term *affect*. Opening on to any account of cinematic affect, one must surely look to the sense of embodiment that is involved. To do so need neither overlook Deleuze & Guattari’s differentiation between affect and affection nor disregard their definition of the body by treating it other than as “a set of nonsubjectified affects.” (12) The necessity of this movement appears twofold: ‘spectator’ must not become a mere placeholder, a designator as empty as the image is meaningfully saturated. Secondly, a theoretically rich account of cinema, horror and affectivity would do well not to throw the phenomenological body out with the philosophical bathwater. In part thanks to (but by no means exclusively due to) the work of contemporary writers with phenomenological leanings, the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s work on embodiment (13) need not be ejected in a repudiation of Metzian analyses.(14)

That said, MacCormack is evidently more inclined to draw her arguments toward a field populated by Guattari and Blanchot than she is to augment her account of libidinal ecstasy with phenomenological analyses. Indeed, in her essay on Barbara Steele, MacCormack offers a vivid account of the embodied spectatorial event of witnessing Steele’s cinematic phantasm reconstitute her corpse-form with creeping flesh before concluding that this is “Less a phenomenological experience than a redistribution of our corporeal intensities, the phyllic libidinality of this experience is the cinema of *this* moment through *this* medium”.(15) One sometimes wonders quite where the line of delineation between the libidinality of the phenomenologically strange and that of the corporeally intense falls.

Either way, what is significant to note is that the division in the spectator is not between the body parts of the subject of affect and the spectator’s subsequent reorganising thoughts on the cinematic experience. It

is a division within the spectator through the connections – natural and unnatural – with their libidinal hither side. A corollary of this fact is that the cinesexual relation *cannot* be traced back to an account of desire where the object-body (however spliced into the imaginary or the Lacanian Real) is the repository for the libidinal aspirations of a normative body: such a blunt reading would fail to grasp the wider mechanics of cinesexual praxis.

‘Vibrations suggesting nothing on this globe’

In ‘Reality and its shadow’ Lévinas challenges art as being but a ‘dimension of evasions’. More than merely disengaged or uncommitted (in a sense opposing the commitment which Sartre developed in *What is Literature?*), art fails to achieve “the quality of the living instant which is open to the salvation of becoming”.(16) This is perhaps not so very far from a Deleuzian notion of becoming, for it concerns a sense of the temporal, and existence within it, that is predicated upon identity’s coupling with a motility or flux. Where the second order creation of criticism can always say more and say again, the primacy of art is tied to its completion: the artwork is fixed and ‘indelibly’ sealed. For Lévinas knowledge has its domain: it is all reaching, capable of migration anywhere through the rigour of thought. Knowledge involves a process whereby the *other* (the new; the as-yet-unknown) is returned to the *same* in cognition. In the Lévinasian depiction, where knowledge expands it does little more than extend the parameters of the already-known and thus involves a process of assumption: we can always assume new knowledge. Such is the claustrophobia of Western thought. In keeping with this account he writes contrastingly, in ‘Reality and its shadows’, of the fogging dissimulations that artistic images bring to bear,

Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow.(17)

Lévinas speaks of the basis of aesthetic production being the substitution for the object of its image. In a second term echoing Deleuze, but again with radically divergent meaning, Lévinas distances the image from the concept; the latter is “the object *grasped*, the intelligible object”.(18) Unlike the concepts of Deleuze & Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?*, that arise in the frission between irreconcilable ideas, Lévinas’ concept is grasped and manipulated and is very much in the cognitive grip rather than touching the thinker’s thought. Far from being assumed, as with the knowledge-concept unit, the image is troubling and troublesome: “An image marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity”.(19) And it is from this contention that Lévinas develops an interesting account of the image as inherently rhythmic: rhythm is “the way the poetic order affects us”.(20)

From the image as the complete element which the viewer substitutes for its object, precisely because she cannot grasp the image *qua* concept (the painterly image par excellence), there is an imperceptible slide to the rhythms of the poetic order which substitute their atypical reality for the real. As Lévinas puts it,

Our consenting [to images] is inverted into a participation. Their entry into us is one with our entry into them. Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom because the subject is caught up and carried away by it.(21)

If the regimes of knowledge that Lévinas critiques – while never wholly disavowing – pertain to *power* [*pouvoir*], the structure of aesthetic experience pertains to *participation*. And it is this participation, this lurch into sterility or the infertile, that Lévinas excoriates, likening artistic enjoyment to “feasting during a plague.”(22) To an ethically defensible project such as MacCormack’s this might smack of a savage challenge. Yet I would argue that far from posing a dilemma, Lévinas’ reason for condemning participatory aesthetic pleasure presents a position that can support *Cinesexuality*’s undertaking. For what

MacCormack is doing is to call for an impossible ethical turn: a becoming toward grace. It is important that I now clearly define how the contour of Lévinas' ethics is foreclosed against the image in order to explicate the account of aspectival folding that leads to grace in desire which is given in *Cinesexuality*.

Turn, and turn again

What Lévinas understands by the aesthetic participation is an exteriority to the self that is “not that of a body ... Here we have really an exteriority of the inward.”(23) What might at first glance appear to be the depth of rhythmic reverie is in fact far deeper: participation is the vacuum howl of the bodiless. The sensual glut that is participation is said to elude introspection; sensibility is realised by imagination. Thus one must leave the body behind because there is no return to self in one's centre: the disincarnation invoked by the image invokes what Lévinas has elsewhere called *dénucléation* (coring out).(24)

In avoiding a reductive Platonism, Lévinas marks out the doubling of the image. Where the transparent sign gives way to the object it refers to, the image has opacity. Resemblance is thus a key term here, for insofar as the image is real (and not some looser phantasm) it is said that reality bears its own shadow. In opposition to some haeccectically stuffed presence of the self-assured, each person is in a relationship of resemblance to them-self. The frontal aspect (this image as a face) cannot contain the plenitude of being which escapes out and behind.(25) This comet-tail of richness makes each a Daedelus in descent. For Lévinas this doubling is not image making per se: the image represents that part of the (original) object which it resembles.(26)

Being (for Lévinas speaks of ontology) is at a lag behind itself. It is as though the original were ‘at a distance’ from itself, thereby introducing temporal registers (the before and the later). Indeed, plasticity has an intrinsic relation to duration. Hence for Lévinas there is the instructive example of pictures, the phenomenology of which can lead us to understand the “alteration of the very being of the object”.(27) The assembled daubs of colour that in a still life make us see the bowl of fruit suffice to insist on the absence of the object: the opacity of the fruit cannot yet yield to the fruit now gone: each daub will “occupy its place fully to mark its removal”.(28) As a consequence the daubs are the whole of the fruit. It is not that the splashes and marks of paint coerce the absent fruit back to being. Instead they can suffice for it, precisely because the object (the fruit) always, in Lévinas' account, bore this image in the fruit as its shadow, its image. Yet the problem Lévinas finds is that through this sufficiency the link between reality and its shadow is broken.

In a recent exhibition, the artist Lucy Willow exemplified Lévinas' concern in her works *Memento Mori*. Here, manipulated digital- and paint-works convey the lush decay of transitory still life ‘paintings’ (the rotting fruits and melting candles that Willow takes from *vanitas* paintings).(29) The very plenitude in which the image represents its object signals the passing of the object:

as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its reflection.(30)

Shortly afterwards in his essay, Lévinas speaks of ‘the general economy of being’, by which he means the manifold trades and exchanges that occur where the object and its sensible form have simultaneity. These are what Lévinas refers to, first with Romantic and then with Hellenic intonation, as Art and nature or truth and image. The doubling – Lévinas' shadow – should accommodate the economy of resemblance *within* the general economy of being. The shadow is another means of seeing something true – it is the sensible character of something that has ontological weight, even if that which it reflects in balance cannot coincide with it any more that it already does (remembering that the representational aspect of the

image is drawn from that part of the object which it already resembles.) Consequently, though there is nothing identical between reality and its shadow, these two limbs must maintain – whilst perpetually hiding – their point of juncture. There is here something like a curved vanishing point, disappearing over a spherical horizon. In contrast the fully marked image is unitary, rendered singular upon its degradation: in place of the perspectival we have the aspectival. In order to be just like its object, the image held its breath too long. And as its death spasm sufficiency jolts itself into surfeit.

Having thus captured the suffocation of sensation, Lévinas' essay proceeds to articulate two further cessations. As every image is 'a statue', its time is arrested and the image sinks into perpetual duration. Secondly, the semblance of existing that a statue-image bears leaves it locked in an atemporal torment; imprisoned. All images are then like Mark Samuels' 'mannequins in aspects of terror'.(31)

In a curious move peculiar to what he calls the non-plastic arts (better understood as narrative arts), Lévinas then has a semblance of simultaneity return into the image. The frozen image can still have its own time: Phèdre will always become 'drunk on an infallible poison'; Medea's carriage bear small corpses inside. And that is because, in a Bergsonian conceit, both (external) narrative iteration and (internal) narrative duration allow for the movement of the image against itself, creating anticipations and recollections. This return of resemblance signals a bifurcation in the image, permitting a passage between image/shadow (the economy of resemblance) whilst not manifesting a true return to the two limbs of reality and its shadow (the general economy of being).

Lévinas readily exploits the horror of the frozen instant, durational abstractions from temporal life that sublimate death by deflecting its power of interruption. In Poe Lévinas finds the empty interval captured in an anticipated approach; in the fear of interment and the holding over of the once-living. Where Poe loathed sleep, as slices of death, so Lévinas loathes the interval, the slices of life which he terms "the *meanwhile*".(32) An understanding of this question of time is crucial to understanding the passage and the place from which MacCormack's ethics makes its egression.(33)

'the huge time-wound/ We lived inside'

The passage of time contains within itself the capacity for interruption; the continuous bearing the capacity for discontinuity. The instant – that nick in time – is traversed by being. As existing mortals we endure across time by traversing the continuity of time's passage. (And death is the particular interruption of time that would coincide with our travel too soon.) Too readily is this passage understood as duration but, insofar as it is, art – the artistic image – serves to constitute duration in the interval. The surfeit of resemblance traps the shadow and distances it from its object. Such inert images are locked in their internal duration: in lieu of the vital instant art has ushered in the immobilised/immobilising interval. (What has resulted is less 'time out of joint' than 'shadows out of time'.)

And this demonstrates Lévinas' notion of becoming, for it is only the instant, as a moment in the temporal passage proper to reality and its shadows, that can, in Lévinas' words "go toward the *better*".(34) Except this is not really Lévinas' phase: it is Plato's. The merit and the measure of the becoming in the instant is that it assists one in striving toward the Platonic 'good beyond being'. For all the upward aspiration, Lévinasian becoming also works at the level of bare life. Existence, this manner of existing that we are, is chained to itself inescapably. Brute being is oppressive and all around us in its undifferentiated manner of existing. Thus a facet of who we are (at the level of ontology, not as a level of species or 'character') is the particular manner in which we self assert – in what Lévinas calls hypostasis. From a raw *ur*-life we rise up, passing from existence into (being an) existent.

Thus, although invited late to the feast, the spectator or participant duly returns at the end of Lévinas' essay. Works of art *constitute* duration and install it into doubled life, thereby killing the object by saturation, as the image gluts and gorges on its resemblance. These rhythms so produced, the dry infertile rubbings of image against resemblance, nonetheless seduce and carry the viewer away. And the intimation is that it is our complicity with this participation that Lévinas so abhors. (The return of the participating spectator at this juncture is somewhat crucial, in order to forestall Lévinas' ire remaining squarely and exclusively levied at the 'death' of the shadow. As such it might seem but a pedant's pique: the very worst of a philosopher's anger at the diminution of Being/*Sein/Etre*.....)

Of course, I would note that 'Reality and its shadows' is careful not to reject art outright: Lévinas appreciates that art might just need to be – and arguably should then remain – merely a source of pleasure. But what the artistic image cannot do is contribute any source or seam to the 'world to be built'.(35) Its deviation from the general economy of being ensures that this is so. Yet for all Lévinas' closing fire, he offers some stepping stones out of this wreck. For criticism can help in that it "detaches [art] from its irresponsibility by envisaging its technique."(36) Criticism reintroduces the mortified world into the intelligible world; it guides the blinded participant back to the land of the living. And onward from here: philosophy can read back from the binary of life (reality/shadow) to the unitary image (image-resemblance) and thereby trace the elusive passage of the real for, as I noted above, Lévinas does allow a semblance of the original simultaneity back into the image, like a return to an old haunt. Philosophical exegesis can thus seek out "an event which eludes cognition, which goes from being to being by skipping over the intervals in the meanwhile."(37)

Walking the cooper's wife's walk

Through this reading of Lévinas' essay I have determined an account of aesthetics that draws the individual out of a cognitive and conceptual terrain temporally buoyed on the passage of instants. What remains in its place is the complicit participant, sustained on the interval-life of the frozen arts. MacCormack's *Cinesexuality* offers an exploration of haptics as subversive and an involvement in the cine-viscera of film that is both erotic and ethical. Her account is such as to turn the blade of the Lévinasian critique. The bridge bringing together these determinations from Lévinas and this reading of MacCormack are the (semiotic) rhythms and seductions that are presented in both their work. Activism and activity proceeds from the spectator: it is the spectator that comes to images and so the spectator who enters willingly into a relation with the affective. What is this but desire? Desire for the cinesexual event, the fluid seep and enervating shock that proximity to the cinematic invokes.

In the third chapter of *Cinesexuality*, 'Cinemasochism', MacCormack proceeds with an account of the self that, more than merely indebted to Deleuze and Guattari, is a productive exaggeration of their position. Self, MacCormack argues, is a congruity held stable by its disaffiliation from horizons of potential. Self is habitus: a comfort zone and contemplative pole, distinct from that which is contemplated. To this picture MacCormack's tilt introduces an additional element of risk. To 'kick the habit' is to put the self, one's stability as self and one's recognizability (over time, through concepts), into question. Such stability is perhaps the case with most people most of the time; not necessarily by way of being a reactionary position as such but, rather, as de facto conservative position. Conservation and preservation relate closely to memory and recognition. Thus, MacCormack claims, the "majoritarian does not think itself as open percept but knows itself, as thinker (more correctly as knower)."(38) Cinema is the vehicle – privileged but not exclusive – by which we seek to augment the austerity of the closed cogito with the value of the open percept. The crux of MacCormack's position can be said to arise from her contention that

the content of an image can never be good, bad, ethical, unethical, or anything else. Only the ways in which the spectator as problem communicates itself to itself matter, and is the matter, of cinema.(39)

It is not for the images – for their content, for their sake - that the spectator engages with cinema. Indeed, in themselves images are ‘transparent’ and ‘emphatically clear’, giving way to their signifieds with easy passage. In this, images preserve Lévinas’ aesthetic production, wherein they substitute for the object; they remain capable of maintaining the subject as the point from which the substitute is observed. Instead of this image-transition as presentation, MacCormack speaks of cinesexual openness as understanding “the indeterminacy and miasmatic depth that exceeds signification and deferral to the world outside cinema.”(40) Thus, because the spectator is not using the image to navigate the world, nor the image to knot themselves to themselves (through negotiated processes of acknowledgement or acquiescence; distaste or distantiation), their relation to cinema is folded and brings the spectator into an enfolded and engulfing position with their multitudinous desire.

This haptic potential is inherently erotic, in that it brings the spectator to their desire. Folded-folding cinesexuality allows us to touch that bit deeper; to access the obverse of our desire. But this is not just inciting a proximity to viewing the off-side, a return to the naughtiness of watching graphic horror. MacCormack has turned in her work to Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of ‘the great ephemeral skin’, seeing his account of a desiring band that supplants (psychoanalytic) accounts “of an experience of desire by a subject”.(41) (As MacCormack says of the film viewer: their body “is all libidinality with no demarcation”).(42) Rather, the desire excited by extreme images lies not in the content of the images – even if that content is but found in swallowing sexualised morbidity or pornographic violence as a gratuity – but *in our suffering spectatorship*. The weight of a body nauseated is a metaphysical weight: our sickness is stimulating: stimulant to our movement to the good beyond being. Desire is the sundering of self-certainty, the passage away from an I-centricity into becomings. And this, as MacCormack intimates, is not without loss nor without hurt for, as she writes,

There is a risk in opening ourselves to cinematic affect, in experiencing the pain of loss of reified meaning in images.(43)

Thus, MacCormack opens out a new fold: the notion of cinemasochism that is riveted to a sense of accountability. This candid responsibility, we are told, describes “the grace of openness to images.”(44) Moreover, this very openness leaves the spectator party to tangible affective sensations. However, there is no departure from this territory: thus participation of the Lévinasian sort is forestalled. In other words, there is no way out from such overwhelming ordeals as the affect-heavy envelopment of Argento’s *Susperia* [1977] or Fulci’s *The Beyond* [1981] through expulsion or integration.

In highlighting this aporetic position MacCormack alerts us to the ‘filmy’-ness found in cinesexuality: the affective excess within which the spectator participates, always longingly but never painlessly. Indeed, *Cinesexuality* propounds a view of cinema as sacrifice, or rather a twisting dyad of ‘sacrificing-self/self-sacrificing’. What we see is a spectator prepared to enter in, as an entering: a non-penetrative suffusion of the subject. This desirous twisting of the spectator is an ecstasy – a touching of the self to dangerous light, like a tongue-tip to a hot bulb. And it is fundamentally experiential, for what happens in the cinematic space happens to the spectator every time and in our time. Cinemasochism and cinecstasy (as, respectively, the openness to images and the painful pleasure in relinquishing self) are both means by which to divert our relation with the cinematic (this ‘conjugal territory’ as Blanchot calls

it) away from the subjugation of images to meaning. In rerouting cinema to a domain of punishment – the hurt of cinecstasy – MacCormack, quite astutely, asks “*what powers are we punishing?*”(45)

For a start we are slamming the revolutionary aspect of desire, thereby inching towards a certain Lacanianism. Desire here is still a lack that cannot be satisfied but, significantly, this not through a relation to the object in a domain of anxiety. Rather, satisfaction is dispelled through our entrenchment in the atemporality of desiring. There is no fulfilment or resolution precisely because, as MacCormack puts it, “Involution is a non-narrative consistency.”(46) To put this otherwise: there is no meeting up with the object (of desire; of the history of the image; of cinema; of the subject’s subjection) and, as such, the spectator relinquished their place of power. With a crash, the gendered object positions of cinema, carved up by the gaze and visual disempowerment, are dispelled. And how does this still serve an ethical dimension?

In a marvellous turn, MacCormack states that cinesexuality ‘interrogates desire along unfamiliar lines’, a phrase redolent of unnerving excursions and the whispering of unseen voices. This is also the discourse of contemporary philosophy: the articulate abstraction of the world into problematic domains; the excision of the most significant of matters (gender/sexuality/empowerment of minorities) outside of signification and materiality. A temporal projection might, as we have seen, be foreclosed by *Cinesexuality*’s shadowlands but there is always a return and reinscription of ethical weight upon a materialist politics. As with much post structural signification, the cinesexual fantasm is hollow. The trajectories that the interrogation pursue are weavings; convolutions. There is affective play upon the spectator, or rather, the spectator is in a touching and folding with the cinesexual. This is desire writhing and it hurts the spectator to give way so: it leaves the spectator bound to the image as the proxy of its self. The image is nothing *qua* image but provides the affective presence against which changes in self redouble. Thus the dis-order of asemiosis is an abstraction: it draws away from the worldly and the recurrent to position a cusp or fringe subjectivity that is compelled to engage with the current (and what is current is the presence of affects). In this, and as I will mention below, cinesexuality is like troubling and taxing thought. Here though, through the emptiness of images and the invitation to cinecstasy, cinesexuality creates for itself its hither side through which an echo chamber is produced. And it is to the sounds – the moans and rhythms – that we must listen.

To write this through the dividuated discourse of spectator/screen (thereby, of course, to write against *Cinesexuality*’s grain), it would seem that, following the play of light upon the screen, the spectator – MacCormack’s cinesexual – is haunted by the image. A shadow falls upon the spectator and occupies her. However, as with Lévinas’ critique of the image, MacCormack’s rebuttal of dialectical film theory has created a deficit in the economy. Cinema is not a subject; it cannot occupy or inhabit the spectator’s subjectivity, not least because it is not itself a matter sufficient (in MacCormack’s thesis) to be integrated as subject of thought.(47)

The ensuing bare spaces – the blank tension-plane of the haptic - are an heterogeneous territory in which desire is both catalyst and carrier to ethical (ex)change. Into this system of ellipses, MacCormack extends a movement to infinity. The failure (or inadequacy) of cinema as a subject means that the spectator takes ‘themselves as the other of the other subject’. The ‘I’ that comes before cinema, desirous of the ecstatic coupling that cinesexual participation offers, fractures and fragments; twinning in cinesexual touch yields the inter-kingdom relations and hybrid selves given us through the lexicon of Deleuze and Guattari. Thus MacCormack speaks of ‘the infinite combinations of spectator-desire’ and the impossibility of offering a ‘taxonomy of forms of cinesexuality’.(48)

MacCormack's dyad 'self-sacrifice / sacrifice of self' is a giving over, an ecstatic relinquishment that depends upon touch. Desire is the intensity wherein the (human) subject shudders out of their corporeality and enters viscerally to a non-human becoming.(49) Thus, as I have intimated throughout, *Cinesexuality concerns spectatorship under an impossibility of reflection*. MacCormack's challenge is to demonstrate acts that allow for occupation of the spectator: participation is intransitive, as the verb denotes. There is no rapprochement between dialectically dividuated subjects and images: what there is instead is a folding of the horizon; a breaching that is also a touching. This occupation of the viewer by nothing – no extended subject thing – evinces a division and hybridism, a coupling with and in the beyond. What has proved crucial for MacCormack is, in what I might deign to posit as her own Platonic turn, to ensure that the beyond is good.

Black Academic Mass

MacCormack's concern is to demonstrate what is at work in the surfeits and surpluses surrounding all images. Such a challenge could prove overwhelming but MacCormack is interested in images that "necessitate an encounter with the self as always in excess of itself"; she therefore restricts the argument to the spectator-subject.(50) Thus MacCormack's *Cinesexuality* is an open text, arguably as applicable to literature as much as to film, for, crucially, the liberty found in images is not itself contained *within* the image. Such a claim seems counterintuitive when considering *Cinesexuality's* contribution to film theory – more so in light of MacCormack's account of her project: "This desire for the strange, impossible and corporeal within the texture of celluloid I have termed *cinesexuality*".(51) Yet whether deployed to discuss watching *Susperia* or utilised to understand reading *The Statement of Randolph Carter*, MacCormack's arguments seem equally germane: the affective relation which the spectator develops and subsequently retains with the image serves to vivify the subject herself. (As I have argued above, 'spectator' should here be understood as the subject encountering a territory of images that are themselves laced through with affective resonances.) This is not a question of aesthetics, of form, genre or the mimetic: it is a question of philosophy.(52) As MacCormack puts it,

I wish to argue that film is philosophy not because it is film, but because cinesexuality describes a unique consistency that is cinematically 'filmy' rather than being about films. [...] Every time a concept is

teased it affects all other concepts and the total singular whole changes its nature, function and percepts

– the territory of which is an event of the production Spinoza sees as the result of affection and affectivity.

This book [*Cinesexuality*] is about cinema but certain cross-over concepts arise.(53)

We are in the territory of the filmy, a reticular skein of tactile and tacky elements. Here, the image is a conduit for encounter with a material that is both excessive and sensuous and from which, we are told, a reflexivity necessarily follows. This encounter, although still eminently iterable, is an event.(54) Thus, the texture of celluloid - as the affective site from which an encounter proceeds - is a phenomenological nexus. Put thus, literature, when considered for its properties of affectivity, is arguably as much a nexus as cinema is. (Affective literature is philosophy not because it is literature but due to a consistency that is literarily 'inky'.) MacCormack has observed that "philosophy as abstract in its unapplied form, offering no appropriate subject through which it may be used as an analytic tool, is re-abstracted rather than elucidated through its play in investigating cinema."(55) Similarly for the cinesexual in her wider role as lover of the macabre: philosophical abstraction occurs when investigating the affective-libidinal prose of Caitlín R. Kiernan as much as when watching Fabrizio Jovine's priest 'stare' a victim into prolapse in Fulci's *City of the Living Dead*.

Ultimately however, it is to cinema that MacCormack, and *Cinesexuality*, directs us. The shattered spaces left behind when the subject-screen relation is sundered are haunted and give rise to a non-human becoming: thus MacCormack ushers in alterity in a Lévinasian sense: wholly otherwise. Whilst the lyricism, if not poeticism, of MacCormack's writing and style invoke these cinecstatic territories of desire, it can only ever teach and tempt us to find these shapes in the dark. Cinesexuality is illimitable but also individual: exposure to the self-unselfed in MacCormack's cinesexual opening cannot be by consensus. To each, therefore, her own.

The subsequent reunification of the image-resemblance in the later stages of Lévinas' essay suggested the enrichment of philosophical thought through exploration of the event which eludes cognition. Because the turnings and tracings of these exegetical steps are manifold, the process is unlimited and there is an intellectual liberty in considering how flesh eludes cognition. Similarly, MacCormack's cinecstatic openings are, by definition, unfolded to a plenitude. It is through this generosity and generating that MacCormack leads us to reconsider desire as passion and passivities - but always as a love for the 'new universes' offered by the fabulous, horrific, gory and gothic. Flesh is not the gendered body (or, as MacCormack also puts it, "can we really ask what gender a spleen, intestine or corroded skin are?") (56)

In seeking to move beyond the 'image-spectator fold', *Cinesexuality* pushes asemiosis forward into responsibility. The difficulty of thought unfolds us but, when this happens, we must also retain a keen awareness of how participation affects a passage out toward new forms. Whipping the cinesexual up and out of their skin, asemiosis unhinges the spectator through abstraction-as-alterity: MacCormack expressly states: "Asemiosis is the beyond" (57)

In the playing out of affective semiosis the spectator is put through her paces in becoming more than she thought she was. There is rigour and application found here in the demands of desire and the pressure on the libidinal surface. But what comes of it, what follows from the passage into unnatural connections, is a territory of possibility held open for entry and then engagement. Thus MacCormack's claim that abstraction is ethical.

More than this, asemiosis brings the cinesexual's desire into encounter with submissive grace. Through all her vibrant and insightful readings of Guattari, Foucault, Irigaray and Serres, MacCormack can be said to arrive at *Cinesexuality*'s first sensitivity: love. Such might be the extreme shock intimated in *Nerve Scales*, wherein one is enlightened by unreality. For MacCormack's ethical conclusion is that from abstraction (asemiosis) and through passive spectatorial masochism (cinecstasy), the membrane of self is painfully and pleasurably stretched to bring desire and grace together. And perhaps this is MacCormack at her most Lévinasian: turning eros from objectified bodies and bringing flesh to desire.

My thanks to JK & JH.

1. Michael O'Rourke 'For the Love of Cinema' in Patricia MacCormack, *Cinesexuality* (Ashgate: Aldershot & Burlington, 2008), ix
2. Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2005), 17-18. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 11

3. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 5
4. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 7
5. This observation, although apparent from reading *Cinesexuality*, is amply supported by watching MacCormack's excellent lecture 'Deleuze and the Demonological Text' given at Manchester Metropolitan University (see Actual Virtual Issue -#09 www.eri.mmu.ac.uk/deleuze/journal09_2.php)
6. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 2
7. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 4
8. Antonin Artaud, *Collected Works Volume One* (Calder & Boyars: London, 1999) 71
9. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 64
10. Patricia MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele's Ephemeral Skin', (*Senses of Cinema* www.sensesofcinema.com Issue 22, September - October 2002), 6
11. Patricia MacCormack, 'Perversion – An Introduction' (*Senses of Cinema* www.sensesofcinema.com Issue 30, January – March 2004), 4
12. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (The Athlone Press: London, 1988), 262. See Massumi's notes in the same volume on affect/affection xvi.
13. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge: London & New York, 2002)
14. I am thinking here particularly of Graham Harman's 'On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl' in Mackay, R [ed] *Collapse – Philosophical Research and Development* (Vol. IV) *Concept Horror* (Urbanomic: Falmouth, 2008) and Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*. See also China Miéville's notion of the 'new (Weird) haptos' in the same volume of *Collapse*.
15. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele', 9
16. Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Reality and its shadow' in Hand, Séan [ed] *The Levinas Reader* (Blackwell: London, 1989), 141. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988).
17. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
18. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
19. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
20. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
21. Lévinas, 'Reality', 132
22. Lévinas, 'Reality', 142
23. Lévinas, 'Reality', 133
24. See Lévinas *Otherwise than Being* (Duquesne University Press: Pennsylvania, 1998), 64
25. Generally understood in Lévinas' philosophy, the face is what signals the more-than cognisable existence of the other person; it is by virtue of the excessive face that I do not draw the other into my domain, assuming the other through an extension of my parameter (where greeting is more like eating). Of course whilst this is a crude simplification of Lévinas thought, it arguably reduces the ethical domain of his work somewhat, in that the simultaneity of being and reflection obtains as the same shadow falling between object and its image as that falling between the identity of a person's substance and what escapes it.
26. See Lévinas, 'Reality', 134-5
27. Lévinas, 'Reality', 136
28. Lévinas, 'Reality', 136
29. *Wastelands* exhibition at Newlyn Art Gallery, 25th April – 16th May 2009. See also www.lucywillow.com
30. Lévinas, 'Reality', 136
31. See Mark Samuels' story 'Mannequins in Aspects of Terror' in *The White Hands and Other Weird Tales* (Tartarus Press: Layburn, 2003)

32. Not that Lévinas didn't also see the rank oppressive horror accompanying insomnia and sleep: see *Existence & Existents* (Duquesne University Press: Pennsylvania, 2001)
33. For Deleuze & Guattari's Bergsonian reading of the *entre-temps* (meanwhile) see *What is Philosophy?*, 158-9
34. Lévinas, 'Reality', 141
35. See also MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 142 for a similar theme of the 'creation of the world'.
36. Lévinas, 'Reality', 142
37. Lévinas, 'Reality', 142
38. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 40
39. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 40-1
40. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 41
41. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele', 7
42. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele' 8
43. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 41-2
44. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 41
45. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 44
46. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 44. See also Deleuze & Guattari on involution in *A Thousand Plateaus* 238-9
47. i.e. as thematic cinema in the doubly-genitive sense that the phrase 'subject of thought' provides.
48. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 65
49. MacCormack is crisp in her rejection of a certain vanguard for the post-human: the project is not to wrench away from our disavowed selves through recourse to a skittish alterity. Instead, *Cinesexuality* makes a rigorous call for a dissolutive sacrifice in the erotically-suffused haptics.
50. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 15
51. MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele', 1
52. Put thus, Lyotard is as much a cinesexual writer as Lovecraft. Theory, philosophy and critical writing can itself be suffused with the residues and excesses that necessitate an encounter with self.
53. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 15-16
54. Elsewhere MacCormack implies the singularity of the cinesexual event when suggesting that "these sensations may or may not be repeatable, while psychoanalysis relies on repeatability for its diagnoses." MacCormack, 'Barbara Steele' 6
55. MacCormack, 'Perversion', 4
56. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 100
57. MacCormack, *Cinesexuality*, 45