

Blank Gaze and Vacant Skull—Cinema & Brain(s) & (Dis-)Affection in Recent Mindful and Mind-Related US Cinema

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ABSTRACT: Screens and brains are peculiar processual frames and/or framing devices. This essay which is part of a larger project intends to demonstrate the value of neurocinematic frames for both cultural studies and scientific considerations. The fusion of theories of cinema and neuroscience needs a media theory that is informed by the affective turn in the humanities. The delicacy of neurocinematic frames becomes visible once they get torn and ruined by diverse depressed, entropic, and disaffected minds as trains of thought that seem to disperse and combust. These phenomena give the project traction and focus. A certain kind of film theory might challenge traditional scholarly concepts of the mind but leads towards a fertile enunciation of the volatile and fragile (en-)trails of thought itself. It is a film theory that includes autopoietic psychological systems in the sense of Humberto Maturana and others which was formulated first and foremost by Gilles Deleuze in his two monographs on movement-images and time-images (2006, 2009).

KEYWORDS: affect(s); brain; cinema; depression; cognition; complexity; faciality; film theory; mind; system

Introduction

I work with the implications of science, philosophy, and the Arts simultaneously. The project is situated at the intersection of film studies and neuroscience, an academic field that only emerged in the last few decades. Bringing brains and screens together might seem inappropriate and crude for some: but according to Gilles Deleuze and others, both notions are actually one and the same (Flaxman). One cannot underestimate this peculiar Deleuzian horizon here—it is an unusual and quite recent strand of theory which opposes traditional Western thought in a way that often seems unacademic and disorganized. Claire Colebrook underlines the specific weight of cinema in this theoretic perspective as an all-encompassing node between thought and time. She alludes to this Deleuzian outlook by saying that “life is perception, or a virtual power *to relate* and *to image*” (5, her emphases). The cinematic apparatus is thus not external here since “all life is simulation” and constitutively “‘machinic’: a

proliferation of connections among natural and technical powers” (7, 9).¹ With this scholarly background I thus continue a critique of simplistic binary media concepts that laboriously discern spectators, protagonists, contents, and transmissions. Yet I go one step further by considering depression and desolation, the disintegrating self, in an equally holistic way. I explore moments of unraveling and entropy—the grid of sense collapses, the perceptive machinery tumbles and identities disappear. This is especially complex with a Deleuzian outlook since it is presumable life-affirming and even “vitalist” (Colebrook 1).

In this globalized and electrified Western society which produces more and more screens, recorded motions and emotions the attentive, exhaustible, and volatile ‘consuming’ mind has to be localized anew. The same society seems to be shaken by massive mental fatigues, confused by the polemics around Prozac and other brain-conditioning machineries. This project intends to bring these two aspects together without falling into biased pessimism and anti-progressive lament. Instead, it examines a *cinema of life* in its widest scope—including the event of systemic death, when communicative flows are severed. This notion of a cinema of life contours a theory of an interconnected machinery of perception both inside and outside the human skull. The pivotal term here is *the image* in its broadest sense: Deleuze can be considered a typical postmodernist here since he posits that “we only know the world or life as it is given through images, or that postmodernism is a movement that has abandoned knowledge, reality or any reference to life [as one might traditionally assume]” (Colebrook 51).

I examine how recent American cinema works with phenomena such as disaffection and inertia. On the one hand Deleuze’s cinema theories have been applied to classic films in the past but they are nevertheless very useful for current American media culture and film-making. On the other hand depression and exhaustion have become a topic of public debate during the 1990s in the United States.² Many rather young US filmmakers do not only portray American depression but work with its systemic implications on an unprecedented level: this new blank gaze, the vacant skull, and stupor signify the “idling” of both the neuronal *and*

¹ *The Brain Is the Screen* offers a wide collection of texts discussing how close cinematic metrics and means are actually connected to the mind in motion. They work with Deleuzian cinephilosophy that is also continued in the works of Patricia Pisters’ *The Matrix of Visual Culture*.

² This discussion can be entered with Peter Kramer’s *Listening to Prozac*.

cinematic machinery. These filmmakers transcend the ubiquitous suffering narrative of civilian exhaustion and thus I, like them, ask about the framing of lost motion or the motion of a lost frame. How can we come up with a productive concept that brings together the lazy eye, the unfocused mind, deviant/disturbed affection and the loss of attention? The medium of cinema can and does capture the motion of minds. While not being a mere secondary *representation* of thought processes, it can channel and disrupt them nevertheless. Film can help to illuminate a neurocultural perspective on social and psychic systems which intrinsically relies on processuality and emergence. This art of filmmaking relies less on plot lines but more on immersive affective fields blending past, future, and present in a unique way. Thus instead of understanding films as deliberate depictions or afterimages of a somewhat real world out there I maintain that one can use cinematics and screens as tools to highlight a world without an objective center serving as some kind of authority of truth.³

The intended reformulation of depression and melancholia is based on theories of autopoietic and communicative systems and flows and favors a rather biophysical vocabulary. This means, for example, that people are actually not a very central issue—to understand depression and an idling mind one needs more than readymade entities like patients and testimonies. I abandon or re-sculpt anthropocentric Freudian, Cartesian, and clinical theories.⁴ The phenomenon of film and a subsequent cinephilosophy serves to situate *affect* as a key concept among neuroscientific and psychic matters, culminating in a theory of mediating materialities (Bennett; Connolly; Gregg and Seigworth). Case-specific analyses of recent mindful and mind-related US cinema will illuminate shapes and peculiarities of moldering psychic systems and their so-called affective disorders.

³ My project moves towards the strange phenomenon of ‘entertainment’ from a special vantage point: I do not focus on the occupied and stimulated mind but intend to formulate the scattered brain, the stagnating mind. Traditional boundaries between individual and collective, self and ecosystem, will be violated. A reference to recent US literature is possible: David Foster Wallace worked on a similar complex with his multi-brained *Infinite Jest*.

⁴ I thus follow the Deleuzean paradigm to put the concept of *difference over identity* and *becoming over being*. The most concise (and complex) work on this might be *Difference and Repetition*.

In the larger project a trinity of chapters helps to make the topic accessible and connectible to other scholarly fields. A look at molar systems comes first.⁵ In order to grasp the implications of an ontology that favors difference over identity and becoming over being, one must come up with a version of materialism that introduces us to a world of “vibrant matter” (Bennett). Cinema is the most promising technology to discover such a world because it can introduce us to the velocities of multiple becomings (Connolly).

The question of the self, the somewhat united *I* or *eye* becomes apparent after that because it is hard to theorize cinematic and other worlds without a central observer. Traditionally one might think of the mind as a container, a storage room where some individual image of world and self resides. But instead of the brain as a central processing unit (something that is unique, fixable, limited to one skull each) I propose a world of many brains, an evolving array of assembling machines. A status of depression might imply a dispersal of matter and a shift of “vitality towards nonhuman bodies” (Bennett 122). Again, the implications of the cinematic medium matter here. Film is not just an extension or some visualization of a pre-established philosophy of the self—film itself is a site for framing (and ‘self-ing’) processes and for assemblies via montage and other means (Deleuze, *Cinema I + II*; Connolly). Film can affect the viewer towards a depressed mood, but it can also explore a world that is *depressed*: in this case, the assemblies and assemblages⁶ of selves and worlds fail (or do not meet eminent standards) and progressive images cannot be entertained. Even the notion of ‘story’ dissolves. The pressure to move on falters and wanes; at least it seems to do so.

After this step towards the molecular⁷ system comes the trinity’s last part. It consists of discussions of recent American cinempoetry that are informed by the ventilations mentioned before. For the sake of scholarly economy I refrain from discussing them in detail here.

⁵ *Molar* does not denote something specifically Deleuzian but rather the general quality of collective and coherent masses—social or other groups without isolatable compartments.

⁶ An assemblage can broadly be described as the ever-changing actual configuration of any autopoietic system. It relies on processes we traditionally locate inside but also outside of this system. We set the sail on a ship in a particular manner but the ocean has a specific drift and the wind changes, too: (waves and boat and wind and my navigating skills) we form an assemblage together.

⁷ Unlike the molar entity, the molecular is an *in-dividual*, it cannot be divided into smaller parts. We tend to associate the molecular with the subject or an observer.

One: Depressed Masses

Depression has a long history reaching back to antiquity, especially known as melancholia: black bile. Freud connects it to *lack* and a process of misled mourning. I seek out another approach that is less philological but more systemic. Depression denotes a self that is under siege. It is a petrification of an *I*: the fortress of solitude becomes a dungeon. No lofty views are possible, there are only labyrinthine catacombs. A gothic imagery fits: tremors shake the thick walls, sun light is locked out. The attempt to frame depression inevitably leads towards presumed industries of the self, towards the fabrication of the calm mind or, rather, towards the failing fabrication of the calm mind. A pathological point of view is necessarily dichotomizing and even Platonic since it makes one ideal of sanity (and safety or sanitation) devalue unexpected glitches and exceptions. Clinics, therapy centers, and hospitals are places where mind-body-dichotomies are truly useful and maybe even necessary. Yet we ought to re-fold depression into its larger relations: roaring and dynamic markets on the one side and skull boxes full with electric tendrils on the other. This is what I mean with a materialistic perspective: depression is a state of the brain, an abnormal circuit (Kramer 1994). But the brain is not a simple or trivial machine. It is connected to a body and to an environment in a complex way (Noë; Damasio). The brain consists of regions, different material meshes which are interconnected themselves. It is actually not possible to say where a self ends and where the environment begins—the psychoanalytic detective who intends to tackle depression and melancholia by illuminating hidden stories is ignorant of the material underneath, the material that even enables story-telling. The clinician who is eager to find a way for this depressed subject to find a way into standardized behavior might be blind for the peculiar qualities of an imbalance of affection, of a mind in slow motion.

Thus if one intends to adapt a materialist perspective one needs a notion that is more basic than 'story,' some notion that transcends cozy fictions such as 'beginning,' 'middle,' 'end,' 'cause,' and 'effect'. The notion of *affect* is such a promising scholarly utility (Gregg and Seigworth). Talking about affective disorder means to put this very term into the center. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg underline its slippery sense saying that it "is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*" and an "accumulative *beside-ness*" marking "a body's belonging to a world of encounters [their emphases]" (2). It can never be

a traditionally central term since it rather illuminates flows and processes of mobile assemblages. This delivers a peculiar concept of selfhood and its industries. I shall describe the customary perspective on depressed masses first before I consider the implications of affect and its disorder(s).

Eva Illouz stresses this traditional notion of selves as, say, civilian entities that eventually become particles in a horde of consumers. Her works do not focus on *affect* in the first place, but they nevertheless might help to consider this notion's convoluted weight. In "Saving the Modern Soul," she considers Freud's impact on the USA and the consequently booming self-help industry. She writes: "No country was as receptive to Freudian ideas as America". Especially intellectuals embraced Freud's concepts as methods for the *secularization* of the masses, to overcome Puritanism for good (29-30). The religious impetus was merely reshaped as the "salvation narrative" became a standard to celebrate and evaluate pictures of selves. Some kind of mediatized individual identity politics began (40-41). It was entertainment but with an educational intent: a kind of *self-shaping* as it enabled the consumer to define a personal Golgotha, a personal Gethsemane. The twentieth century brought personal and intimate reflections about selfhood, identity, and a life's value to the masses. A grand narrative that underlines individualism and exceptionalism was supplied and demanded in an ever-expanding media society which offered a template for individual failure, suffering, and redemption. The phenomenon of depression and disaffection was (and still is) connected to larger storylines. Especially the suffering narrative matches Lyotard's remarks on the postmodern condition of marketing of legitimization tools—it enables citizens and consumers to construct their "little narrative" (23, 60).

This is how a more traditional perspective on depression in mass society looks like. It might lead right on to 'Prozac' showing the intimate relationship between marketing and individualism. But I would like to highlight another approach which situates the traditional way of reasoning in a more encompassing panorama. The twentieth century also saw the rise of the screen—from moving images to an ever-accelerating advertisement industry. The suffering narrative was fueled by this. A central issue here was the human face, goaded by images, cinematics, and other new visual arenas. Consumers were now confronted with talking heads and faces in motion. Most of these faces did something extraordinary: they tensed up,

they contracted muscles and bared their teeth—they smiled. Or they didn't (and maybe had to do something about that).

In the market place, face value is connected to cash value. There is more, however: faces are mass marketed *vehicles of affection*, non-verbally commenting on diverse contents, actions, plots. Faces and the bodies that support them are *fields of affection*, supporting or instigating suffering and a suffering narrative. Faces are at the head of a body in motion, of a vessel in time and space and context. Faces are framing content, and a twisted visage might affect spectators and frame the affective powers surrounding it. Behind the face lies the brain, this mystic fold of affection and affectivity. The movement of facial muscles somehow alters the synaptic configuration in the eye and, subsequently, the brain of the beholder in a unique and unrepeatable affective event (or even shock). I do not intent to lessen Illuoz' argument on the beginnings and whereabouts of the modern self-help industry but want to make clear that this approach does not so much include the actual synaptic matter that got altered by the rise of the screen and the screening of affect.

The brain and the synaptic systems must be included when considering the depressed masses, especially because of the successful marketing of Selective Serotonin Reuptake-Inhibitors in the United States towards the end of the 1980s (Kramer). Very illuminating in this regard is W. E. Connolly's work on what he calls "neuroculture." It abandons the cozy fictions of mature individuals and anthropocentric myopia. From Connolly's vantage point, *media is much more than a representing device: it alters the entire socio-cultural experience and the becoming of selfhood*. For Connolly, "it has become clear that attention to *cinema can [...] inform these explorations*" (xiii, my emphases). He continues: "Contemporary cinema techniques that heighten our powers of perception alert us to complex relays among *affect*, thinking, technique, and ethics [...] and *reveal things about the constitution of time that might otherwise remain hidden*" (1, my emphases).

The materialism I pursue thus is a complicated one, it is subtle and convoluted. It includes the vibrant matter that sets the outside world (itself) in motion, it includes material, molecular, and transmissions of light, and it includes nonlinear time in a world of perpetual becoming. This materialism can be used to define depression in a very broad sense as a state of non-communicative matter. The non-firing (disaffected) synapses in the Serotonin-depraved

brain give in to isolation. Entire brain regions give in to isolation as the neural grid becomes less and less complex. The depressed person gives in to isolation as she finds it harder and harder to communicate (to *affect*) her surroundings. The filmmaker uses his or her craft to sculpt these processes of exhaustion, entropy, expiration because his or her medium relies on *movement* and *time*, on the territories of affect.

Two: The Ruminating Mind

Film is not just another *container* for a story, but it alters the story's and the story-teller's capacities and capabilities. Film is as able to frame the world as literature is—both are attached to the *Geist* in *Geisteswissenschaften*. Film can illuminate the phenomenon of depression and affectivity differently since it frames time and space in fluent motions, un-paragraphed and un-hyphenated.

It is not possible to isolate the acting mind in a film. There are actors and protagonists, people who do something: but they are not the only ones who influence the finished product. The camera's perspective, editorial decisions, soundscapes, and backgrounds are part of one ensemble, of one fluent and volatile whole. We habitually locate active brains in skulls on top of moving bodies. Many narrative films rely on this habit and celebrate protagonists as struggling but finally successful human agents—they *organize* their world. D. W. Griffith is among the pioneers of a cinema of human agency (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 148, 151). But the world and thus film is populated by many smaller brains, many assemblers that deal with the evolvments of a vivid universe. The concept of the (or *a*) brain that I aim at is not opposed to the ideal of the solitary agent, of the central processing unit in technical terms. But this ideal alone does not take into account what modern neuroscience and a sophisticated philosophy of mind imply. A brain is not a self-ruling commander in chief governing a body and its surroundings. It neither is the seat for such an entity. It rather depends on the physical conditions and conditionings of a body that is in the world (Noë; Damasio). The nervous system is as open as any system and it is more than just a container of data and memory: Brains are not buckets but self-fueling engines, splicers, and assemblers. Quite similarly, cinema is a medium that can help viewers to encounter the very conditions of encountering the world. This process of encountering can slow down—instead of thinking forth one is trapped in loops.

This rumination implies stagnation. The production of desire is deadened. Encounters happen less or with somewhat negative results. An inability to be affected is assumed—no wonder that, a few decades back, one tried to electrocute the bland faces into healthy affectivity, hoping they would “snap out of it” (Solomon 101). Rumination is an affliction of the *I/eye*: one is gazing at ruins and one is ruining one’s gaze. Stupor and exhaustion become steady companions on one’s aimless trail and trailing of thoughts.

Two crucial concepts to ‘think’ and link cinema and the mind (and/or brain) are, firstly, *re-flection* (spelled with a hyphen), and secondly, the *wave*, a concept which is superior to the one of the vessel—the latter is merely a container that is in conflict with a systemic philosophy of becoming and assemblages. I chose these notions because we grew accustomed to brains as reflecting devices who give sense and meaning to a world they might illuminate. We also tend to desperately hold on to the ideal of a self being *one* ($I=1$), a solitary carrier of an identity. The implicit utilitarianism in the traditional use of these notions is obstructive here. But we can adjust them to elucidate a metacinematic materialism.

In order to approach *re-flection* we do not need a Freudian theory of the unconscious and of lack. One can instead consider Bergson and his famous cone standing on its tip on the plane that is the world. It illuminates how the mind achieves time management and how (much) memory matters (152). This model has three dimensions: a dot *S* and a plane *AB* are connected via extending sub-planes in between. And, in this model, ‘the body’ comes along: for Bergson, the body, *my* body, is on the plane that is now, *my* now. It is one point at *S*. One cannot maneuver within this point *S*. A body is the “sensori-motoric” anchor in all this: it chains the subject to the proceeding arrow of time, to the communicative flows and becomings of the world (Bergson 162-63). Over the plane *AB* one’s recollections are scattered. It is a vast plane distant to all that is now.

Antonio Damasio uses the telling term “somatic marker” which can enrich the notion of sensori-motor schemes and mechanisms: for him, the body sculpts processes in the brain and vice versa (165). Emotions and the train of thoughts have to be considered in the entirety of body *and* brain, just like Bergson sketched it with his cone. A depressed system seems to be slowed down on many levels: the brain is slowed down because it lacks serotonin, but the body slouches along, too. Subjects only emerge in the eyes of some observer,

but they are not a given due to the fact that vibrant matter comprises them. Brains, bodies, and minds in motion are not separable—in this regard, cinema seems the ideal medium to make this insight accessible.

Cinema steps in as a re-flector of bodies, as an arena for bodies in motion. Deleuze took Bergson's concepts of nonlinear processuality (*durée*), subjective time, and becoming thought to make it a central part in his cinephilosophy. Paola Maratti writes that for Deleuze "(p)erception is nothing other than the effect of the black screen, light reflected by a living image, and the brain, also an image, is nothing other than an interval between an action and a reaction" (34). The brain is something that pushes time between us and the world; an interval between an action and a reaction. It takes time to reflect—and if it takes a lot of time without resulting in any perceivable action we might traditionally call this rumination. The brain is a pacemaker but not a central measuring re-flector, it has a rhythm of its own. It differentiates actions and reactions and depends on things other than itself doing so. The ruminating mind, then, can be considered as being out of step and not being darkened or impaired which brings faulty or wrong re-flections of a world that is collectively assumed to be coherent. The exhausted mind cannot breathe in a steady rhythm; its re-flective process is coming to strange results. For Deleuze, films are not examples for thinking but they *are* thinking. Re-flection is never finished—however, it can appear to be slowed down if it fails the expected velocity of communicative action.

Traditional mind and body dualisms are to be debunked as cozy fictions. Films are less seen, watched, or read but rather experienced as they play with and on the sensori-motor apparatus. It is not productive to oppose mind and screen with the attributes 'sentient' and 'insentient'. It is all humming with *one* oscillating and shifting sentience, making it an a lot more wave-like phenomenon. Film, every film, is an encounter, maybe even a shock to thought. It opens an affective fold, rather resembling a wave of change than the successful access of some definite content or data. Thomas Elsaesser describes this paradigm shift by pointing out that "[b]ody and soundspace, somatic, kinetic and affective sensations have become its default values, and not the eye, the look and ocular verification" (qtd. in Elliott 12, my emphasis).

Three: Analyzing the Mind/Cinemoetry

Peculiar examples of recent American cinemoetry help to understand the fusion of brains and cinema(tics) I sketched above. The approach I intend to formulate and defend can enable scholars to consider screens as a valid tool to monitor processes in and among social and psychic systems, given the fact that both of them are actually “brained” and base on inter-laced material cognitive processes. Film is framing the world and constantly confronting diverse domains of power, of empowering affects. Even a somewhat minimal shot of a deserted or ruined landscape affects each viewer. The shot of the deserted landscape then is not a representation or a poetic analogy of a depressed mind (or mass), but it *is* one fleeting image of mind. Some filmmakers are capable of highlighting this very process—they do not explicitly follow this theory of cinematic and neuronal immersion but offer multi-layered audio-visual works. These works can be understood in a highly productive way if one abandons traditional film analyses relying on plots, representative action, and authenticity without questioning the very artificiality of these notions.

The following three quite recent cinemoetic works can help to conceptualize depression and rumination among brains and screens. Each one is a complex piece of art in itself and alludes to very different aspects of desolation and despair. Each one does not just use the cinematic form to transmit some pre-established notion of depression but ‘visually thinks’ the phenomenon anew. In an encounter with such films, the viewer can learn the capabilities of what I still would like to call a *cinema of life*.

Last Days (2005) by Gus Van Sant could be called a mockumentary with a fake face. The pictures play with one of the most prominent suffering narratives of mass-mediated America, alluding to the disintegration of a teen idol. We can acknowledge a first attack on representationalism in the fact that this film’s central character follows the last days of Kurt Cobain but carries a different name. Along these lines, it makes sense to read the name ‘Blake’ as a link to William Blake since he seems to be the rock star of another era including a notorious lifestyle and an oeuvre full with despair and decay. ‘Blake’ can be the cipher for dire poetic minds that can never be deciphered entirely.

The protagonist is the ghost that haunts an empty cold house surrounded by silence. A blunt, sterile cinematography questions the main objectives of the dead hero and of the filmmaker. Long shots rest in desolate hallways and the mumbling protagonist wanders around the woods without ever proclaiming his intentions or clamors—these are the last days of a drug-addict who understands that his need can no longer be articulated in a communal language. The depiction of the forest around the house seems uninterested and circumstantial. The whispering of the woods does not transmit any content. It is not even soothing because nothing noisy or hectic happens that is to be calmed afterwards. In an early very long shot Blake sits in front of an improvised camp fire and neither the camera nor he himself hint at the battle he might or might not endure at this moment. Despite the allegory of the warming fire this assemblage is one of a sterile whole that does not offer solace for Blake. It neither offers some kind of insight or development to the viewer. The affective flow of warmth, of energy that passes from one instant to another, is blocked in this first scene as for the rest of the film. *Last Days* is an affective disorder in many aspects: it could give the dead celebrity a face that evaluates, explains and comments his actions, but it only plays with mass media's superficial portrayal. It neglects the task of mourning and even ridicules the viewer's intent to do so.

The film resembles a Möbius strip as the viewer recognizes the pop cultural symbols but is also confronted with them in a stagnating and sedated manner. While pop culture works with the steady supply of new images, content, texts, and allusions the viewer of *Last Days* does not get many of these. The film denies any 'investment' in the broadest sense: it does not offer a story despite its allusion to a climactic event in its very own title. The pop cultural symbol of the slouched and suffering young celebrity is not put into a larger explanatory context. This very last moment, as it finally appears, leads the viewer back to the film's first scene and to what he or she might have been expecting ninety-seven minutes earlier. The viewer is not welcome here and nothing is explained. There is not only a ruminating protagonist in this film, but he also serves as the canvas for the very canvassing of such depressed minds. This mute last fragment of a biography ends with a monstrous last step: the dead rock star's naked soul climbs upward as a specter and steps out of the screen's frame. The disintegrating mind and the disintegrating film cannot be resolved within themselves and the film seems to order us *not* to mind it, especially not in the usual American way of cine-

matic glorification and redemption.⁸ *Last Days* does not document anything as it rather alludes to the unfeasible storytelling after a suicide. It only gives muted pictures and sounds to the viewer, perplexing those who are eager to find out about the reasons for the ultimate step.

Dead Man (1995) by Jim Jarmusch alludes to one of the most famous genres of American cinema, this film turns the movement-image (and the concept of the quest) into a shuffling dance of death. The hero is physically de-pressing: his heart is torn and loses the necessary thrust to go on. His brain does the same. Brain and body, sense-maker and pace-maker, are debunked as an entangled whole. The rising machinations of the industrializing USA but also the ubiquitous circuits of nature are about to maim this protagonist. As his heart falters his mind follows. Inertia supersedes conatus and in the end, his boat becomes a coffin that sets out in the river of Lethe, alluding to a mythology that is older (and maybe more fundamental) than the one of the Old West. But the symbolisms are not (only) superficial representations of past motifs. The unmappable elements of water and air replace the harsh weight and resistance of earth and stone. As the protagonist's eyes meet the blank sky his gaze turns blank, too: he is sliding into disaffected tranquility as his body slides downstream.

Dead Man opposes the standard of the virile and grave male who is about to conquer the Wild West. The film questions the idea of an authentic protagonist as the greenhorn clerk is actually conquered and affected by the vibrant matters he is forced to explore. In the long train ride at the beginning of the film the protagonist is horrified by the torn visages of his fellow passengers: the wilderness literally seems to *deface* humanity. The comfort of civilization, once implicitly taken for granted, begins to weather with every mile westwards. The young hero is alarmed that the play of forces and encounters, the affective flow that is known by him, is different here. He begins to lose his orientation and even provokes his fatal accident: the bullet that pierces his heart passed his lovers chest first—but she was not heavy enough to stop it, both physically and regarding her commitment. The inhuman affec-

⁸ *Last Days* thus offers a huge contrast to successful films like James Mangold's *Walk the Line* or Oliver Stone's *The Doors* which situate their protagonists as authentic American artists or even as victims of American society.

tive load of fired lead is stronger than a woman's heart here, both figuratively but also literally.

The hero transforms almost beyond recognition as he gets weaker in a physical sense. He seems to care less and less as he is pushed around by nature—and Nobody, his Native American companion, is not frantic to heal him but instead preaches existential calm and acceptance. It is a lesson that the hero seems to learn only in the last seconds of the film as he begins to drift and lose traction in this world. The less blood his heart pumps, the less rumination his brain performs, and the less his face shows any affection by his surroundings. The hero's name is William Blake and it centers around his very last days, too. Thus *Dead Man* must not be understood as a western or an anti-western alone as it uses but ultimately transcends the genre's convention. It is a film about film-making as such—and it is also a film about the workings of psychic systems as they shape, are shaped, and come undone among blunt matter.

Melancholia (2011) by Lars von Trier deliberately reworks the happy ending that has traditionally been a crucial element in Hollywood film-making.⁹ The film begins with the end of the world and depicts how the minds of the protagonists are incapable of minding the present without a future. Their failure results in stupor, hopelessness, and seemingly aimless agitation. With baroque images the filmmaker also celebrates the concept of ecstasy and/or an erotic sublime: the wedding, a climax of social life and highly loaded with intimate emotions, becomes the focal point of no return. The notion 'baroque' does not denote a mere clinging to the past but the tendency to over-dress an event or an entire life. This impression of a cozy but artificial human existence is furthered by the camera's excursions into outer space: the meticulous earthly bustle seems to be even more futile when an entire planet is about to collide with ours. No accumulation of clutter in the human present can undo the mistakes of the past or the paralyzing looming future, as the assembled family has to learn. The planet breaks through both physical and mental horizons, thereby installing a totalitarian affective regime—a field of gravity no autopoietic entity can escape. At the climax, literally at the highest point of a material encounter, time and space cease to matter. The mind

⁹ Despite the nationality of this director I consider his latter films as unfolding within the American cinematic spectrum because of their respective cast, content, and financing.

is affected in total and as the experience wanes it has to reorient itself to the unstable complex world of rhythms and chores. But without a future, this becomes irrelevant. The brain, incapable of assembling a valid picture of the future, exhausts itself in a desperate but waning adherence to the past.

An erotic sublime can also be assigned to the images of the galactic bodies in their slow motion and their tremendous weight. *Melancholia* needs these computer-generated images: the viewer's mind sees that contemporary film can expand his or her horizon to an almost ridiculously humongous scale.¹⁰ The non-scientific but aesthetic communication of a planet's size, of astrophysics, and of the fugitiveness of life has this sublime quality as reason and understanding clash and the viewer turns toward melancholia and an end of hope. The sheer force of *Melancholia*, the planet, hits us in our vibrant matters and our petty materials. This can be considered highly erotic: this notorious filmmaker refrains from offering brief shock images but questions the entire foundation of a human mind's workings and intents, erasing even the possibility of hope. In one elegiac shot the bride offers herself to the dark skies in voluptuous nudity. Von Trier supports a curiosity of decay with brunt visual force.

Concluding Remarks

With these brief examples of what the provocative thesis/slogan "the brain is the screen" (Flaxman) might bring I conclude this look at the possibilities of a less representational but more affective film analysis. All three films oppose a reading along realist interpretative patterns, and all three films question simple notions of final resolutions and simple (moral or ethical) messages behind the stories they portray. They transcend the traditional frames of genre and deliberately follow a ruminative or circular motion. Their respective filmmakers use the cinematic apparatus as a vehicle to confront and explore the complex materialities surrounding human existence. The localizing of a probing mind, of some kind of mental machinery like a brain that is eager to produce sense, is never completed. Neither viewers nor protagonists can conclude their journeys. This is why these pieces of cinematic art meet the concept of depression as a pivotal concept of images and imagination, of an exhaustion of

¹⁰ Terrence Malick uses this mind-expanding (and mind-derating) capability of contemporary cinema in *Tree of Life* (2011) in a similar manner.

mental possibilities and timeless desolation. With their lacking anthropocentric impetus these films might urge us to redefine melancholia and to take a closer look at the velocities of screens, brains, and minds alike.

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