Performatism in the Movies (1997-2003)

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In the study of culture, a short span of time can sometimes make a big difference. If I had set out to write a survey of artistically ambitious movies six or seven years ago, my article would no doubt have been heavily skewed towards a discussion of otherness, undecidability, belatedness and ironic regress–in short, towards the devices and ways of knowing normally associated with postmodernism. As examples, I might have singled out movies like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* (1989), Lars von Trier's *Europa* (1990), Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink* (1991). And, had I ventured a glance into the future, I would almost certainly have predicted that the ironic perspective, deferred identifications and metaphysical pessimism of these films would continue on seamlessly into an endless posthistorical future. Beginning sometime in the mid-to-late 1990s, however, a massive sea change in the subject matter and focus of independently made movies began to take place. These movies, which all bore the imprint of sophisticated *auteur* sensibility, began to do unusual things. They started treating themes of identity, reconciliation, and belief. They forced viewers to identify with single-minded characters and their sacrificial, redemptive acts. And, as if all this were not enough, they began to set up dramatically staged, emotionally moving denouements. As milestones in this development you could cite productions like Lars von Trier's *Idiots* (1997) and Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998); Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog* (1999); Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1999); and, in mainstream cinema, the Oscar-winning *American Beauty* (1999). Before the year 2000, it might still have been possible to write off this sort of movie as a sentimental aberration. Since then, however, dozens of important and striking films have appeared that follow this same threefold pattern. Indeed, it has become increasingly hard to find serious movies wholly committed to postmodernist themes and strategies, and it is becoming increasingly hard to apply poststructuralist theory in a positive way to the new type of film.

Several years ago, in an attempt to wend my way out of postmodernism, I set forth the notion of *performatism*, which can be thought of as an application of Eric Gans's generative anthropology. Regular readers of *Anthropoetics* need hardly be

reminded of GA's basic premise, which is that all culture begins with the emission of a simple (ostensive) sign formed by spontaneous agreement between two or more protohumans caught up in a situation of mimetic rivalry. The emission of the ostensive sign creates an originary, sacral word, the name-of-God, which defers violence and lays the foundation for all later human culture. The root idea behind performatism is that in recent years, as a reaction to postmodern culture, there has been a massive shift of attention back to ostensive signs, as well as to the dense or opaque subjects using them and the scenes of transcendence around them. Instead of being swept away in a sea of duplicitous, unreliable signs, viewers are now "framed"–forced to identify with a central, often sacrificial figure (in drama) or with unexpected, constructed modes of reconciliation (in comedy). Although this sort of involuntary identification sounds terribly conventional–Hollywood movies, after all, have been doing something similar for years–in practice it is anything but. The forced focus on the simple, irrefutable truth of ostensive signs, on annoyingly dense or opaque characters, and on incredible acts of transcendence bores or irritates mainstream moviegoers accustomed to the easy identifications offered by Hollywood genres. Conversely, postmodern viewers tend to write off performatist films as "banal," "trite," or "melodramatic" for not engaging in the intellectual ludism and ironic regress expected of postmodern discourse.

When talking about movies systematically in any way, you are usually faced at some point with the choice between mainstream Hollywood productions and so-called art movies. As it turned out, the nature of my topic–epoch-making artistic innovation–didn't allow for much leeway. Hollywood undeniably turns out innovative movies, but for the most part tends to sugarcoat the themes and devices I'm interested in (Tom Hanks movies like *Forrest Gump*, *Cast Away*, and *The Green Mile* are a case in point). The main problem with art movies, by contrast, is accessibility. Not being a festival-hopping professional critic, I decided to concentrate on European movies and North American independent productions that are readily available on video or DVD. For comparison's sake, though, I've included in my collection at least one bona fide mainstream Hollywood movie, David Fincher's *Panic Room*. I've also avoided treating the hard-to-get Russian and Czech movies which are my normal stock in trade, the one exception being Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Kukushka* (The Cuckoo); readers interested in a discussion of performatism in Czech cinema may refer to Eshelman 2002.

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The best way to describe the shift from postmodernism to performatism is to start with the notion of the frame. This refers less to the term used by Derrida in his *The Truth in Painting* (1987) than to the American sociologist Erving Goffman's "frame analysis," which studies ritualized microsituations, or frames, in everyday life. Like

Derrida, Goffman places a premium on the meta-analysis of disruptions and permutations in such frames, for which some think him cynical. However, unlike Derrida, Goffman also makes very clear that human interaction is rooted in a "common focus on a physical scene of action" prior to language (Collins 1988, 51). For Goffman, language is always anchored in some way in such scenes by means of indexical or deictic signs ("that there," "this here," etc.) not immediately applicable to other situations. And, unlike the Derridean concept, which begins and ends with a notion of frame-as-paradox, Goffman's approach is generative and originary: he suggests the existence of "primary frameworks," out of which develop still further, more complex frames or modulations of those frames. Especially interesting from the perspective of GA is that the primary frameworks, which allow us to ascribe a basic meaning to things, include an explicit sacral dimension–the "astounding complex," which serves to determine whether things have a supernatural origin (Goffman 1974, 28-30). Other primary frameworks relate to "stunts," "flubs," "fortuitousness," and the potentially embarrassing "tension" between social norms and bodily functions (Goffman 1974, 28-39). The frameworks help us decide, for example, whether the quick upward flip of someone's right arm is a religious blessing, a move in sport, an accident, or a natural reflex. Goffman's frames, in other words, are more than just accidental, transient incisions in the stream of human discourse. In fact, you could say that they are anchored in reality in a way comparable to Gans's notion of the originary scene, which is based on a spontaneous agreement to defer mimetic rivalry through the emission of an ostensive sign (also a kind of index sign pointing to a concrete, present thing and surrounded by a frame of social consensus). Taken this way, the ostensive scene would provide the originary ground missing from Goffman's theory, which does not try to explain how the the "astounding complex" came about in the first place, or why it is even a *primus inter pares* within its own category.(1) Conversely, Goffman's theory and observations serve to remind us that ritual and sacrality continue to play a key role in everyday behavior.

While it would probably be possible to describe performatist works of art using the entire range of Goffman's categories, I do not wish to do so here. For one, I am not trying to found a sociology of narrative fiction. For another, Goffman's own terminology draws heavily on theatrical and fictional metaphors that create a kind of undecidable continuity between reality and fiction (in this sense Goffman is still very much rooted in postmodern thinking). Instead, in keeping with the minimalist ethic proposed by Gans, I suggest we can reduce the kinds of frame necessary for a description of any work of narrative art to three types: primary (or ostensive) frames; intermediate frames; and outer (or work) frames.

Primary or *ostensive frames* are analogous to the originary ostensive scene in that they create a constructed or artificial proximity to things, people, or simple physical

acts. As with the original ostensive scene, they can be thought of as having both an anthropological and a transcendent or divine motivation. In their anthropological guise they form by more-or-less spontaneous agreement among characters and tend to be unstable. When the two lovers in Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* meet to copulate without exchanging words, they create precisely this kind of scene in an erotic, human mode. When Amélie (in the eponymous movie) "plays God" by returning a small box of toys to the lonely man who as a child once hid them away, then she creates a revelatory scene which is accepted by the man as an everyday miracle. When the seven unfortunate characters in the science-fiction thriller *Cube* wake up for no good reason in a very large and extremely dangerous labyrinth of interconnected boxes, this theist scene challenges them to act in an ethically coherent way to get out. The frame itself remains an ineffable origin, as if God-given; the characters in it show their humanity–or lack of it–in trying to overcome its lethal traps.

The thing-related closure experienced in such primary scenes acts as a *ground* for the rest of the plot. To work, the constructed ur-scene must be confirmed somewhere else on the higher, authorial level of the outer frame (I will return to this in the discussion further below). If this occurs, it enables the protagonists and ourselves to experience such scenes as part of a greater, transcendent frame, and thus as *ethical*, *beautiful*, or *sublime*. Beauty and sublimity are constructed, for example, when Ricky Fitts deifies a white plastic bag in *American Beauty*, and a kind of ethical beauty is generated when Amélie sets up her little traps in which people "discover" small objects that bring happiness to them. One of the most poignant such ethical moments, in Lars von Trier's *Idiots*, involves two Hell's Angels, an exposed penis and an act of urination–you have to see it to believe it.(2) Depending on theme and plot, however, many other variations are possible, including suspense and comedy. In David Fincher's slick Hollywood production *Panic Room*, for example, the primary frame is a trap, with the designer of the safe room trying to break back into his own creation. In Spike Jonze's brilliant, bizarre comedy *Being John Malkovich*, the primary frame–John Malkovich himself–is patently absurd, as are the transcendent principles governing its usage.

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Primary frames in themselves do not necessarily lead to greater realism, and certainly not to any sort of authenticity. The sex practiced by the breathless, physically rather ordinary couple in *Intimacy* may appear "realistic" to us against the background of dreamily filmed sex scenes. However, there is nothing particularly authentic or natural about their trysts, which are based on a kind of contractual agreement which dissolves as the movie goes on. Similarly, there is nothing intrinsically authentic about the digitalized movie of a plastic bag whipping

around in the wind in *American Beauty* or about Amélie's little pranks, which take place in an idealized Montmartre and are based on well-meant deceit. Artistic ostensivity involves a performance that creates ethical beauty or sublimity and occludes meaning. However, this is possible only because of a "fit" between an inner scene and a higher, authorial will that causes that ethical beauty or sublimity to occur, or that meaning to be shut out. There is nothing at all authentic about this spontaneous agreement, and indeed it is always accompanied by resentful suspicion that someone is benefiting from it more than he or she should. Performatist art tries to frame and contain this resentment, to create scenes or constructs in which viewers or peripheral characters can identify with a central, often sacrificial experience to the point where they can benefit from it themselves. The point of performatism is not to restore the dogmatic authority of the center, but rather to return, if only temporarily, to the originary scene as way of restoring to culture the originary experience of love, beauty and reconciliation.

I cannot emphasize enough that this "return" to the originary scene is an artificially arranged journey subject to ironic twists and turns of its own. One of the most effective and moving attempts to portray a lengthy sojourn in ostensivity is the Russian movie *Kukushka* (The Cuckoo), which, unfortunately, has not been widely distributed in the West. In *Kukushka*, the circumstances of the Russo-Finnish war in 1944 throw together three people who don't understand one another's language: a young Lapp woman whose husband is lost in the war, a Russian officer (who has been betrayed to the secret police by a trusted underling), and a Finnish sniper fighting for the Germans (who have betrayed him). Unable to explain the nuances of their political and personal plight to the others, all have to make do with purely ostensive means of communication (dubbed-in oral translations allow us to understand what the Finnish and Lapp characters are actually saying). Trying to demonstrate to the Russian that he is a former student and not a Nazi, for example, the Finn helplessly yells at him using the only Russian words that he knows: "Tolstoy–*War and Peace*! Dostoevsky–*The Idiot*!" Not surprisingly, this sort of ostensive communication doesn't lead to any natural sort of rapprochement. In fact, just before he learns the war is over the Russian grievously wounds the Finn, who he thinks is a convinced Nazi. The movie vividly demonstrates the multiple ironies that arise when we, as creatures of semiotic complexity and nuance, are forced to return to direct, non-narrative modes of communication. The movie could have chosen to make a shambles out of this irony: instead, it presents us with a happy ending based on feeling and being rather than on knowing. At the movie's conclusion, the young Lapp woman tells her two twin sons (who could have been fathered by either the Finn or the Russian) an idealized–and false–version of who their fathers were and how they got along. This falsification isn't intentional: the Lapp woman simply never did understand the things that happened out of her immediate line of sight and that were "explained" to her in Finnish or Russian. None

of the three characters, in fact, will ever understand exactly what happened to them in the ostensive situation; all, however, are able to overcome the resentment and rivalry inherent in it. As viewers, we know that the characters lack this understanding, but we identify with their ability to transcend all the same. The postmodern moment of knowing is contained in the aesthetic gesture of the movie; it is simply not intended to be the last word.

Just how the resentment arising out of a primary or ostensive scene is dealt with in narrative is a problem of *intermediate frames*. In analogy to Gans's typology of language, you might say that intermediate frames form the declarative language of performatist narrative: they involve abstraction, individuation, imagination, contradiction, complexity, and so on. In short, they are the stuff of which human conflict (and plots) are made. Intermediate frames "compete" in a certain sense with the primary frames established by or around key characters. Examples of a fatal competition would be that between the Samurai frame of Ghost Dog in the eponymous movie and the Mafia frame of his "master" Louie. Through Ghost Dog's self-sacrifice at the end of the movie, however, it is clear that the competition is one-sided. Although the Mafia code triumphs in a purely physical sense, Ghost Dog's samurai ethos is successfully carried over to a little girl, who will presumably continue the struggle in a non-violent, more spiritualized way. This sort of struggle is even more intense in *Cube*, where six differently "framed" characters–an architect, an escape artist, a policeman, an autist, etc.–help and hinder one another trying to get out of an enormous, inexplicable labyrinth. The beneficiary of this process is person with the simplest frame, the autist Kazan, who at the same time represents a new, minimal origin. Once more, it is absolutely imperative that the inner frame "lock" into the outer one, creating a coherent event or denouement within the work in question.

When postmodernists misinterpret performatist works it is almost always because they think that there is only kind of legitimate frame: the intermediate one. This corresponds, in effect, to the Derridian notion of frame: it is that which mediates between inside and out while being reducible to neither.(3) The irreducible frame (a.k.a. différance, pharmakon, hymen, trace, gramme etc.) becomes the focal point of interest, even though (or, more likely, exactly because) it itself does not represent anything in particular and fails to bring about the closure it seems to promise. Performatist works of art, of course, also allow contradictory and/or deceptive intermediate frames to develop. However, if the work is to remain performatist, such frames must always be locked into a kind of full nelson between the primary and the outer frame, which *do* represent binding ethical and aesthetic positions within the world of the narrative. The existence of such a basic narrative "lock" or "fit" between outside and in is *the* crucial element defining a performatist work, and, from a postmodernist point of view, its most disturbing and unacceptable

feature. (4)

4

Outer frames (or work frames) give performatist works their peculiar unpostmodern fit or feel. The outer frame deliberately creates a monolithic point of view forcing the viewer back “into” the work (in this sense you could say that the movie itself becomes one giant ostensive sign which the viewer must accept or reject in one fell swoop). Instead of constantly intertwining the inner space of the work with the endless outer space of the context, as Derrida prescribes, the outer frame drives a wedge between the work and its context: it forces us, at least temporarily, to perceive the outer space as a blank, transcendent Beyond, and it forces us to focus back in on and privilege certain objects, acts, or persons in the work. The outer frame, in short, creates the temporarily binding conditions that cause mundane objects, acts, or people to become beautiful or ethical, sanctified or sublime. For example, the famous white plastic bag in *American Beauty* that Ricky Fitts thinks is beautiful would not appear so to us if it did not turn up again in the outer frame of the movie narrated by the now deified Lester Burnham. Similarly, in Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark* you would not give a hoot about a half-blind Czech factory worker, her money troubles, or her passion for schmaltzy musicals if she did not sacrifice herself in such an ostentatious and “fitting” way at the end of the movie (she foregoes the money needed for her defense so that it may be used for her son’s eye operation).

Postmodernists, by contrast, tend to think of outer frames as either instruments of hegemonic repression or supplemental frippery that can be ignored at will. This applies to anyone, for example, who thinks *American Beauty* is nothing more than a scathing deconstruction of American middle-class life. If you believe this, you will also believe that the frame represented by the deified narrator is little more than an odd device that helps wrap up the social criticism practiced within the movie (interestingly enough, if you do so, you will be taking the position Derrida ascribed to Kant in *The Truth in Painting*, that is, you will write off the sacralizing frame as a mere ornament). Performatist outer frames always *do* something to a viewer, and this performance–at least temporarily–resists being sucked up in the infinite regress of discourse so crucial to postmodernism. In keeping with Goffman and Gans, you could say that the outer frame (in its “lock” with the inner one) makes the work itself into a scene to which the viewer or reader reacts in a cult-like, ritualistic way. The scene or frame of the performatist work “buys time” for viewers to plunge back into the scene and be affected by it once more, rather than leading them out into an endless tangle of spatial and temporal traces from which there is no return.

Ultimately, of course, the performatist outer frame is not impermeable or inviolable.

Performatist works, in fact, are probably no less rich in citations and allusions than any others (a notable example is *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which draws heavily and obviously on noir classics like *Murder, My Lovely* and *Double Indemnity*). Also, the rigid outer frame cannot and should not be exempted from ideological and metaphysical critiques. As a general rule of thumb, though, the more closed and restrictive the narrative outer frame, the more performatist it will "feel" to the viewer, and the greater will be its aesthetic-ritualistic impact. In this sense performatist movies tend towards the "closed" type of film described by Leo Braudy (1976, 44-51). In such movies, as Braudy suggests, "plot and pattern seem imposed from above," (48) and the viewer has the feeling of being entrapped and manipulated. However, unlike the rather malevolent atmosphere projected in the movies of Braudy's "closed" directors like Hitchcock and Lang, performatist films use rigid outer frames to suggest the existence of a redeeming transcendency, of a purifying Beyond outside the film. When the exposed and humiliated child-abusing patriarch in Vinterberg's *The Celebration* voluntarily leaves the family gathering to exit forever into the blinding glare of the morning sun, then this is just such a redemptive ending. The toppled patriarch has now become the scapegoat of the family collective; his expulsion from the group is not just an act of belated justice, but also one of sacralization in the sense used by Girard (1987, 48-49). The evil patriarch will become a Danish family deity; he will be transported into a realm of "white" myth from which the regrouped collective will continue to derive solace and inner strength from having defeated him. Here, a poststructuralist might object that the collective is simply whitewashing a trauma in order to preserve the paternal, phallic order. Indeed, as Derrida likes to say, there is no way of preventing anyone from taking this kind of stance. However, such a viewer will have missed the point of the movie, which is to make us identify with the ability of a lifelong victim to transcend his victimary status in a way that is also productive for the community around him. The performatist work shows how it *feels* to be a victim of incest, and it shows how a corrupted social frame can be rejuvenated in order to accommodate what evidently remains a very basic problem of human interaction. This rejuvenation, in turn, can only be done by framing–by artificially focusing in on–the victim's debasement, which is revealed and ritually reenacted before the eyes of all. In *The Celebration*, Christian's revelation of his own victimization causes him to be temporarily expelled from the group, thus offering himself as a scapegoat–but also as a medium of redemption for the family, who tacitly aided and abetted the father. By contrast, in Derrida's way of thinking, which transforms everything from defloration to the threat of nuclear war into an endless skein of discursive paradoxes, the victim's psychological and physical plight is never made the focus of a centered identification. Instead, victims are compensated with a privileged, elusive position allowing them to act as the critical, incontrovertible Other of whatever hegemonic force happens to be weighing down on them. In a Derridean world, Christian's victimary experience would have been intellectualized and

sublimated in a network of decentered sign relations rather than played out again in a simplistic and rather obvious ritual; the Derridean dynamic would never allow a performance or scene which you could identify with directly.

5

Performatism also has “open” films. However, these are constructed differently than postmodern conundrums or the sort of cinematic waltzes through reality described by Siegfried Kracauer. Examples of fairly open performatist films would be the Norwegian comedy *Elling*, Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich*, and Tom Tykwer’s *The Princess and the Warrior. Elling*‘s hero, a self-proclaimed “mother’s son,” must be pulled out of a closet by the police after his dominating mother dies. Cast out of a mental institution into the world, he gradually acquires the ability to overcome the spatial and social frames confining him. In the end, he walks the city streets at night–still a “mother’s son,” as he says, but now also an unknown urban poet (he publishes by placing his poetry in miniature frames–boxes of sauerkraut that he buys and returns to the supermarket). Elling has transcended the series of closed institutional spaces confining him, yet still remains true to the kernel of his own closed-in self, which is the result of an imposed matriarchal order and not an authentic state of being or knowledge. In *Being John Malkovich* the openness is rooted in the absurd outer frame of the movie, which suggests that human “vessels” can be occupied by other people, thus allowing them to live forever. At the end, a new vessel–a little girl–is ogled by the old vessel–John Malkovich–and the film gives us to understand that the framing process will be continued on ad infinitum. And, in Tykwer’s *The Princess and the Warrior*, the two main characters, having successfully fled from a sanatorium where the “Princess” works, escape to a cottage facing out onto the vast, sublime expanse of an open, unmarked body of water–itself a larger incarnation of the life-saving pond into which the two lovers leapt from the hospital rooftop. This kind of leap into transcendence is even more pronounced (or overdone, as the case may be) in Tykwer’s *Heaven*, in which the two fleeing protagonists hijack a police helicopter and literally disappear into the sky. Openness in Tykwer’s movies is practically identical with the experience of sublimity, of a transcendent, unfathomable limit.

Openness can also result from ambivalence in the outer frame (not to be confused with undecidability, which as an aesthetic device rubs your nose in the fact that you can never definitively know what is going on in a movie’s plot). *Intimacy* doesn’t really end happily–the two lovers Claire and Jay part forever–but it seems clear that Jay, whose jealousy and curiosity destroyed the silent relationship, has actually fallen in love with Claire; their last meeting is “consecrated,” as it were, by the near presence of the gay French bartender Ian, who is the only person in the movie with a positive attitude toward human relationships (earlier on, when Jay cynically

“confesses” that he meets a woman just to copulate with her in silence, Ian earnestly replies that “it’s not often you come across somebody who wants the same thing”). It’s not clear what will happen to the protagonists–hence the openness–but the movie does suggest that it is possible to love, even if the realization comes belatedly.

In theological terms, you could think of the shift from postmodernism to performatism as one from a radically deist notion of the world to a radically theist one. Regarding film, this theological subtext must be taken quite literally. This is because the most incisive and comprehensive postmodern theory of film, that of Gilles Deleuze (1986 and 1989, orig. 1983 and 1985), is based on an entirely conscious use of the deist metaphysics developed by Leibniz and continued later by Bergson. In this tradition, the notion of a personal God is replaced by a dynamic, constantly shifting relation between parts and a whole. By definition, the whole represents a virtual field of possibility that the parts actualize in their own dynamic, individual ways. Leibniz, whose frame of reference is purely metaphysical, calls the virtual whole “God” and the parts “monads.” For Bergson the virtual whole becomes Time; for Deleuze, “cinema” or “meta-cinema.” Unlike his predecessors, Deleuze considers the parts to be fairly arbitrary; they can be just about anything that is physically set off from the never-ending flow of energy coursing through the world. Deleuze, for example, treats “frames” (*mise en scène*), “shots,” “images,” and even “faces” in pretty much the same way that Leibniz speaks of monads. Each part actualizes the virtual whole of the movie (or the virtual whole of all movies); at the same time, the virtual whole is constituted by the specific inner dynamic of the image unfolding within it. The part, which represents a certain segment of movement through the whole, is defined by the whole, while the whole, in its virtual plenitude, eludes anything but partial, constantly shifting perceptions of what it might be in toto. Deleuzian concepts reverberate with this radically relational, decentered logic, which is meant to cut through our spatially fixed concepts and tap into the virtual, open Whole of relations around them–much in the same way that Bergson wants us to cut through our spatially fixed concepts in the *durée* and tap into a rather static, diffuse kind of virtual Time (in reality the simultaneity of all dynamic, immanent relations, or the deist God).

The point here is not to belittle Deleuze’s theory, which is a brilliantly conceived work of applied philosophy and a useful tool for thinking about movies. Film *is* a fluid and temporal medium, and practically no theorist today–let alone practitioner–would want to return to an aesthetic based on still photography or the ironclad type of montage practiced by Eisenstein. However, I think we have to realize that the flowing, endlessly open, deist world of postmodern film effectively described by Deleuze is now being exposed to strategies of framing, centering, and ordering that are comparable to those found in theist cosmologies.(5) In short,

filmmakers are beginning to impose closed, monistically organized narrative frames on what is by nature a moving, fluid medium. Rather than being based on abstract or impersonal part/whole relationships, fictional worlds are now shown to be set in a world that appears to have been “framed” or formed by a personal creator, who may appear explicitly or implicitly. Also, within this framed world, characters tend to act like personal creators in their relations with other people. Worlds constructed in this way become ethical by definition (whether subjects really *act* ethically in that world is another matter–deceit is always possible). What is important, however, is no longer the relation of a part to a whole, but rather of one framed subject to another framed subject within the greater frame of the narrative world–a situation that is specifically ethical and aesthetic in the way used by Kant, and specifically anthropological in the way used by Gans.(6) Performatism, you could say, seeks to restore a space where transcendence, goodness, and beauty can be experienced vicariously, by identifying with fictional ostensive scenes (inner frames) and with the possibility of transcendence as such (outer frames). In this kind of “framed” art, we can all appreciate and be moved by incredible events even if we “know better”–that is, even if we know they don’t apply in the practical world.

6

The problem of framing is closely tied to that of the subject. Once more, it is useful to draw on Goffman to build a bridge between postmodernism and performatism. At first, Goffman’s subject might appear to be postmodern–the mere effect of a multitude of overlapping and conflicting frames not reducible to one single kernel or core. However, the “Goffperson” is never so consumed by the discourse it uses so much as to lose all sense of orientation or decorum (Collins 1988, 59-60). As Goffman nicely says at the beginning of *Frame Analysis*, “all the world is not a stage” (1974, 1). Just because we slip in and out of complex sets of overlapping roles doesn’t mean that we get hopelessly lost in them, or that fact and fiction are *really* equivalent, or that the *possibility* that something can be fabricated means that our everyday faith in it must be vitiated. Our ability to find a firm “footing” or “anchoring” (Goffman’s term) in social interaction is possible because, unlike the poststructuralists, Goffman also sees social frames in a ritual, sacral dimension (*cf.* Goffman 1967, esp. 47-95, “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor”). This is rather different from a commonsense, namby-pamby trust in convention, which a poststructuralist would have no problem confirming as a fact of social life. Indeed, Goffman, following Durkheim, goes so far as to say that social interaction hinges on a tacit agreement in everyday interactions to deify individual subjects: “Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance” (Goffman 1967, 95). In other words, society is held together by individual subjects using frames in a way that both enhance their own “holy” status and uphold the decorum necessary to allow others to do the same.(7)

This mutual respect for the sanctity of the individual can be made into a element of plot, even in rather unconventional, violent situations. In *Panic Room*, for example, the theist creator of the saferoom Burnham, played by Forest Whitaker, is driven by a double dose of resentment: he resents Meg's having a three-story Manhattan townhouse–the loot from a messy divorce–and he needs the millions hidden in the panic room to resolve a nasty custody battle of his own. After successfully getting into the room, however, his respect for the human object of desire (the child in the custody case, equivalent to his own) causes him to aid Meg's daughter, to whom he administers a badly needed insulin shot. Ultimately, Burnham will shoot the evil, faceless Raoul to save both mother and daughter; at the end of the movie, the cornered burglar stands with arms spread, Christ-like, as 22 million dollars in ill-gotten bank deeds flutter away in the wind. The rather more cynical and complex *Cube* is less sanguine about how human nature reacts in a closed, threatening frame. At the end of the movie, only the resentment-free autist Kazan manages to get out of the Cube, with all the other characters either falling prey to their own hubris or to resentful rivalry. The movie suggests that an act of transcendence–escaping the Cube–can come about only through a transpersonal mixture of rivalry and cooperation, of intentionality and disinterestedness. The movie ends by deifying a new, "simple" origin represented by a cowed, stuttering character who fears the color red–the color of blood–above all else. And, as in *The Celebration* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the hero stumbles out into a blinding white light suggesting the infinite openness and sublimity of experience beyond the outer work frame. The deification of the subject, though hardly noticed in everyday life, is now being brought to the forefront in narrative arts like the cinema.

The performatist subject, like Goffman's, is a constructed or framed one. Unlike Goffman's facile and highly adaptive social actor, however, performatist heroes and heroines are, at least at the beginning of their development, locked into a tight "fit" with a single, set frame. These fits can be more or less self-imposed, as in *Idiots*, *Ghost Dog*, and *American Beauty* or, as more usually seems to be the case, involuntary, as in *Amélie*, *Elling*, *The Celebration*, *Being John Malkovich*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *The Princess and the Warrior, Dancer in the Dark*, *The Cider House Rules*, *Panic Room*,*Cube*… In these movies it is up to the subject to transcend the constraining frame in some way, often with the aid of "fortuitous" happenings suggesting the handiwork of a theistic creator (*i.e.*, an omnipotent but unreliable author intervening at odd times in the plot). Almost always, the framed subject is forced to become a theist creator itself, though always in a vulnerable, peculiarly human way. Conversely, it is possible for theist creators to "fall" into a personal, vulnerable mode. *Panic Room*, for one, uses these ironic switches very effectively to create suspense. At first, the weak, seemingly powerless mother and daughter reside in the powerful center frame, with the designer of the safe room helplessly trying to get in; the roles of weak and strong switch back and forth as the film

progresses. As it turns out, the true objects of identification in the movie aren't the victims–the edgy, vengeful Jodie Foster character Meg and her know-it-all daughter–but the theist burglar Burnham, who combines the languid spirituality of Forest Whitaker's Ghost Dog persona with the involuntary self-sacrifice carried out by Burnham's namesake in *American Beauty*. By the end of the movie, everyone left alive has been redeemed through the Forest Whitaker character, albeit indirectly. Meg's unfaithful husband gets badly beaten up (by Burnham's unwanted accomplice Raoul) while trying to help her, and Meg and her daughter, seated on a Central Park bench, begin to look for an apartment suited more to their modest living needs than to draining the bank account of her battered ex-husband.

In my original formulation of performatism, I suggested that the prototypical performatist subject is dense or opaque. The former quality must not be taken too literally–performatist characters don't necessarily have to be fools or play at being them. Performatist heroes and heroines are, however, almost invariably opaque, since their initial identity is the result of a too tight fit between their selves and a primary frame. Amélie, for example, is at first caught up in an isolated personal frame caused by her father's mistaken diagnosis of a dangerous heart condition. Cissy, the "Princess" in Tykwer's movie, practically grows up in the mental institution where her father is incarcerated and has trouble interacting with men in non-institutional settings. Homer Wells, of *The Cider House Rules*, who grows up in an orphanage, is a "creation" of the institute's theistically inclined director, Dr. Larch, who named him and later trained him as a doctor in his own mold.

As in Goffman's frame analysis, the problems inherent in this "fit" between subject and frame usually become apparent only after something goes wrong with or within the frame–hence the great role played by theistically motivated "accidents," which often have a liberating effect on the subjects inside. In the case of the Princess, it is a traffic accident which allows the Warrior to penetrate and literally breathe life into her by way of a tracheotomy–theist symbolism doesn't get much more explicit than this. For Amélie it is the death of Lady Di, which through a series of small coincidences causes Amélie to step into the role of a benevolent theist prankster bringing happiness to others. The break can, however, be brought about willfully. Homer Wells, for example, leaves the orphanage and Dr. Larch after a conflict over abortion–an especially drastic and ethically controversial kind of theist intervention. After being faced with an serious ethical dilemma of his own in the outside world (he carries out an abortion on behalf of a woman impregnated by her father), Homer accepts his theist responsibility and returns to take over the role of the by now deceased Dr. Larch. With credentials faked by the good doctor, Homer becomes the new director of an institution devoted to turning out ever more

opaque, constructed subjects. You don't have to have studied poststructuralist rocket science to figure out that the whole theist, paternalistic order behind the orphanage is a giant, albeit benevolent, scam. In a typical performatist ploy, the movie affirms this deceit while at the same time forcing us to identify with its two theist heroes in spite of our better knowledge. In this way deconstruction is given its due–and at the same time defused for good. The point is not to *know*, but to *identify* with someone caught up in a frame that will always be generating intractable ethical problems.

In comedy, there are many ways of playing around with this sort of opaque character and its theist frame. In *Being John Malkovich*, the whole idea of a framed personality is carried ad absurdum by making John Malkovich himself into a "vessel" that can be entered for fifteen minutes at a time (at one point the hero and heroine charge $200 a shot for this). The point is not that the characters involved experience continually unfolding alterity or multifarious shifts in gender, as poststructuralist philosophy of self proposes. Rather, they enter into an artificial, opaque mode of being, a frame which allows them to transcend their own social position and/or gender in one fell swoop. Thus Maxine is able to have Lotte's baby (conceived while the latter was in John Malkovich), and Craig, a talented but unsuccessful puppeteer, is able to manipulate John Malkovich while inside him, using Malkovich's renown to make himself into the famous puppeteer Craig always wanted to be. The point is not that Lotte or Craig are experiencing otherness in an especially extravagant or subversive way; the point is that otherness can be appropriated by invading the "holy"–and whole–frame of someone else, in this case the hapless John Malkovich. You might call this a cynical version of the performatist or Goffmanian self: being involves role-playing or getting into an opaque frame *in the present*, within a certain time frame, and exploiting that frame to its utmost. Lotte, Craig and the others who inhabit John Malkovich do not really experience otherness in the way envisioned by someone like Judith Butler, that is, as a belated, constantly unfolding play with bits and pieces of gender having no natural, preordained configuration. Rather, the characters get to buy into a whole, though temporary, otherness by being John Malkovich for fifteen minutes at a time. The grotesque point of the movie is that people don't revel in otherness for sheer pleasure or to escape some hegemonic dictate of society; instead, they want to control and inhabit others so that they may live forever *as their own selves*. Ideal selfness, in other words, consists in appropriating otherness (understood as someone else's whole frame) for your own ends. Conversely, as the movie makes clear, you can't achieve ideal selfness through oneness with yourself. When John Malkovich finally gets wind of what is going on and enters his own portal, he is aghast to find a world in which *everyone* is John Malkovich and in which "John Malkovich" is the only word spoken–a nightmarish world of asocial, redundant self-deification.(8) *Being John Malkovich* brilliantly parodies a basic, insoluble problem of

theism: namely that as a theist creator, you need someone else in order to be yourself. Fashioning someone in your own likeness inevitably involves creating someone weaker than you and dependent on your own self (it is no accident that the hero is a puppeteer). Conversely, a character striving for deification will also attempt to mold others in his own image and manipulate them as much as possible according to his own needs. Much more reconciliatory, on the other hand, is the movie's wildly dark suggestion that this kind of manipulation can be carried out by a collective (at the end, a group of genteel-looking elderly people enter the actor and proclaim: "*we* are John Malkovich!"). Actually, we don't even mind this sort of appropriation, since John Malkovich, with his vaguely malevolent persona and his postmodern ability to slip into any role whatsoever, is the ideal vehicle for it: we do not mourn the "loss" of a personality that is opaque and infinitely adaptable to begin with.

It is probably too premature to make any sweeping claims about performatist cinematography. Its most memorable individual devices–jumpy use of hand-held cameras (the Dogma movies), black-and-white noir-style photography (*The Man Who Wasn't There*), rhythmic use of fade-outs (*Memento*), etc.–are quite familiar in formal terms and are in themselves not enough to define an epochal shift. What does seem to hold true for most performatist cinematography is a double strategy that is "predicted" by the double nature of the originary frame: performatist movies can be said to *anthropologize* time-space relations on the one hand and to *sacralize* them on the other.

8

Just how this works becomes clearer when considered against the background of Deleuzian, deist cosmology. In the deist tradition everything in the world takes place on a single, immanent plane: psychomechanically defined impulses of energy on the one side are processed by psychomechanically defined consciousness on the other. Deleuze, for example, speaks of cinema as a "spiritual automaton" (1989, 263); the brain is for him "nothing but . . . an interval, a gap between an action and a reaction" (1986, 62). Our consciousness is a material extension of reality and reality a spiritual extension of our consciousness. The two are different expressions of the same thing, although by definition they are always somewhat out of sync–you are not what you perceive in the world and the world's energy will always have flowed a bit farther down the line by the time your perception of it gels into a fixed concept. Rather than running after reality trying to paste cut-out concepts back onto it, deists try to bring the two disparate types of immanence to meet in the way they think best fits the metaphysical flux of the world, that is, in terms of time and relationality. Because this happy meeting of mind and world must still take place in the vulgar confines of space, this is easier said than done. Bergson, for example,

rejects film as a mechanical deceit because his radical intuitivism rules out any positively defined semiotic mediation between mind and matter; for similar reasons he is unable to make any coherent statements about aesthetics or poetic method. Deleuze, by contrast, is a good deal more flexible on this point, arguing–quite plausibly–that consciousness and world can be thought of as converging in the medium of film (Deleuze 1986, 20). Because Deleuze thinks of film as either conveying something of the essence of fluid materiality (the "movement-image"(9)) or as the direct apprehension of time caused by the disruption of coherence and teleology (the "time-image"(10)), this leads to two basic types of movie, depending on what kind of image is emphasized. In discussing film's historical development, Deleuze likes to speak of an "action-image" on one hand and a "crystal-image" on the other. Stripped to its barest essentials, the action-image can be thought of as a focal point capturing primary human emotions and the binary conflicts growing out of them; the latter, in turn, can unfold either in large, epic forms (as an integral) or in small, ethical ones (as a differential). The action-image and its many variants form the basis for the practices dominating pre-World War II narrative cinema. The crystal-image, by contrast, breaks away from the chronological, motivated representation of affect and conflict in order to tap into the virtual Whole of the world (Leibniz's God and Bergson's Time). This Whole is an endlessly open Other, the virtual, constantly unfolding totality of all moving relations. The "crystal-image" refracts and reflects, plays with sound and sensuality, causes characters to be "swallowed up" in non-localizable relations (Deleuze 1989, 41). Deleuze relates this quite convincingly to the techniques of postmodern cinema, beginning with postwar cinema in Italy and the French *Nouvelle Vague* of the 1960's. There is no doubt that these concepts lead to very subtle and productive insights on film, and there is no doubt about their basic compatibility with postmodern and/or poststructuralist thought.

Unfortunately, Deleuze's concepts have the same effect on cultural history as do all other basic strategies of postmodernism: they choke off any further attempt to describe cultural development above or beyond them. If you force the crystal-image still further, you will plunge even deeper into the depths of postmodernist virtuality; if you fall back on the action-image, you will be doing little more than ironically (or naively) citing tried-and-true techniques of pre-war cinema. As a matter of fact, if you stick with the concept of image as *the* filmic and metaphysical nexus between reality and consciousness, you will be condemned to shuttle back and forth endlessly between part and whole, as is the case in Deleuze's deism. The point is not to rework the concept of image, but to start thinking of cinematography in terms of a human/theist perspective. There are indications that just such a change is occurring right now on the practical level in performatist cinema.

As suggested above, performatist cinema likes to approach the world in terms of

fixed, boxed-in spaces and bought or apportioned time. This approach is neither a repetition nor a citation of grandpa's narrative cinema, nor does it mark a return to the cookie-cutter type of montage common to the early days of film. Its focal point is once more the *frame*, which must be understood as a temporal, spatial or ethical limit imposed on someone. As outlined above, the frame itself may be thought of as being *theist* or *sacral* on the one hand and *anthropological* or *human* on the other. The theist side of the frame impinges on, crimps, or temporarily cuts off the continuous passage from one state of affairs to another in an authoritative way. Such frames are imposed from above or without and cannot be easily overcome or placed in doubt. They are, for the most part, onerous givens that–like theist cosmologies everywhere–subject the characters within them to severe tests of faith, courage, or perseverance. The flip, or inner, side of the sacral frames is that their constraining character sets off an impulse to transcend in the human characters locked up inside of them. The "bound" characters, in other words, react to their incarceration by trying to break out of, rework, or somehow overcome the frames confining them. The force exerted by the theist frame and the intensity of the human reactions to it materialize directly in plot and cinematographic technique. For in film we are simultaneously confronted with the impassive, fear-evoking authority of theist time-space and the emotional pathos of human time-space trying to overcome it. Perhaps the most effective allegory of this situation is *Cube*, in which the unforgiving theist space makes purely human time–the time before hunger and thirst are going to incapacitate the six would-be escapees–into the measure of all things. Whereas the deist space-time continuum provides consolation by letting you tap into the infinitely unfolding otherness of the world, theist space puts the heat on you, challenging you to use your own time to become like the higher, ineffable will that is bearing down on you from above.

9

One of the most striking examples of how temporal framing works in the new cinematography is the Coen Brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There*. At first, the viewer might be inclined to see the movie as nothing more than a lengthy, ironic citation–the movie fastidiously imitates noir conventions both in its camera work and in its depiction of a criminal case unfolding in a Californian town of 1949. Although there are admittedly certain breaks and discrepancies within the movie's period style, they do not interfere with our perception of it as a whole slice of time. (Real noir films, for example, never mixed science fiction and detective plots, as happens here, and the Production Code would not have allowed a young girl to make a sexually explicit pass at an older man, as happens between Birdie Abundas and Ed Crane, the hero. Neither device, however, represents a break with the paranoid ambience and sexual forthrightness common to noir.) The question remains, however, as to just how this slice of time acts upon us as viewers.

Given the similarities between *The Man Who Wasn't There* and various other films of the Coen Brothers, you could, I suppose, make a case for the movie being a postmodern critique of 1950-ish American mores. The society in which Ed Crane lives is founded on politically incorrect norms clearly tailored to empowering white, male, Anglo-Saxon heterosexuals. Either you're a real man, like Big Dave Brewster (who is killed by Ed), or a "pansy" like Creighton Tolliver (the traveling salesman killed by Big Dave). Sexually mature women like Ed's wife Doris are defined by nylons, lace underwear, perfume and the like; "innocent" girls like Birdie Abundas wear bobby sox and v-neck sweaters. In terms of language the white, Anglo-Saxon culture sets the tone: Japanese are "Nips," Germans "heinies," and Italians "wops"; a Jewish lawyer and a fat Frenchman of color also don't come off too well. These two hegemonic orders–the white, Anglo-Saxon one and the male, heterosexual one–meet ideally in the form of Big Dave Brewster, a ladies' man who has made his reputation mowing down "Japs" in World War II.

As in their previous movies, the Coen brothers expose the grotesque inconsistencies and flagrant rule-bending peculiar to this order. Big Dave, for example, gladly dons an apron in order to spend some time washing dishes with his mistress, Ed's wife Doris. Doris, who is herself of impeccable Italian lineage, hates "wops" and tries to assimilate as much as possible. The teenage girl, Birdie Abundas, proves to be anything but innocent. And, as a hired detective later discovers, Big Dave's heroism in the war is a fabrication designed to further his business career.

If the Coens were really only concerned with exposing the falsity and hypocrisy of 1950s America or exhaustively citing noir norms, the movie would hardly be very memorable. What in fact makes the film remarkable is its focus on transcendence and the hero's–and our–gradual realization that such a transcendence might be possible and desirable.

This can be better understood if you think of the whole movie as a temporal frame. We perceive this frame as a homogenous chunk of concrete time, rather than as the diffuse apprehension of virtual time peculiar to postmodernism (as an example of this you could take David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, which deliberately mixes up styles taken from the fifties, sixties and seventies to create a Deleuzian, vaguely paranoid feeling of a Time existing outside of space and chronology). In addition to being homogeneous, time in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is also depicted as both historical and obsolete: details like the wearing of fedoras and the use of politically incorrect language mark it as irrevocably passé. This historicity creates in us a feeling of distance to the time frame: we, who neither wear fedoras nor verbally abuse minorities, can easily feel superior to it. This is *theist time*, which at first appears well-defined and set: like theist creators or authors we stand outside of it looking in. At first, theist time would seem to stand in simple contrast to Ed's personal or

human time, which is measured by the heads of hair he cuts and the inexorable, step-by-step unfolding of the plot. So far, these two types of time–the authorial and the personal–are part of standard narrative procedure and not in themselves noteworthy. What keeps *The Man Who Wasn't There* from being just another remake of a noir "action-image" plot is the way we (and Ed) are made to reverse our apprehension of the two types of time. In the course of the movie, our feeling of temporal superiority to Ed gradually changes to one of identification, whereas Ed's feeling of living incrementally gradually becomes more and more expansive and spiritual, until he disappears completely into the transcendental whiteness of the screen.

This interplay of theist and anthropological time takes place in several ways. Originally, Ed's scheme to blackmail Big Dave in order to co-finance a dry-cleaning franchise (run by a homosexual traveling salesman) seems petty and emotionally almost unmotivated–he and Doris carry on what appears to be a marriage of convenience, and he isn't all that perturbed by being two-timed ("I guess, somewhere, that pinched a little, too" [Coen & Coen 2001, 26]). Gradually, however, we discover that Ed's attempts to escape his time frame are motivated by a vaguely felt kind of spiritual quest. Dry cleaning, which is touted with preacher-like fervor by Creighton Tolliver ("You heard me right, brother, 'dry cleaning,'–wash without water, no suds, no tumble, no stress on the clothes" [Coen & Coen 2001, 12]), appears as the first step in a search for ways to achieve a spiritual cleansing not possible in the cramped social setting of the late 1940s. Here, our theistic superiority to Ed's time frame helps provide a moment of involuntary identification: we know that dry cleaning is not a scam, just as we know that there is a way out of the 1940s-style mindset with its wops and pansies. We know, in other words, that we can transcend.(11) At the same time, the wall-to-wall noir cinematography causes us to experience 1940s-style temporality as an inescapable, sensual fact: as spectators, we are outside the time frame intellectually but in it emotionally and visually. This makes it possible for us to take Ed's last words before he is executed entirely seriously, as the prophetic expression of a transcendent longing which may also be our own:

> I don't know where I'm being taken. I don't know what waits for me, beyond the earth and sky. But I'm not afraid to go. Maybe the things I don't understand will be clearer there, like when a fog blows away . . . Maybe Doris will be there. . . And maybe I can tell her all those things they don't have words for here. (Coen & Coen 2001, 104-105)

The question posed at the end of the movie is not so much “who is Ed Crane?” but rather “who are *we*?” One, quite plausible answer might be that we are postmodernists. That would mean that we are stuck in an ironic bind of always already possessing partial knowledge about the conditions necessary for achieving transcendence but never quite being able to experience it ourselves. Taking this a step farther, you might argue that Ed Crane died for nothing. Had he lived to transcend his own time frame he would have wound up in *ours*, in which a premium is placed on ironic reflection rather than on the search for “things they don’t have words for here.” The movie, however, anticipates this argument and counters it using a split appeal to our theist and human ways of identifying with Ed. The crucial scene takes place in Doris’s cell (based on circumstantial evidence she has been falsely accused of murdering Big Dave). Her attorney, a cynical, money-hungry, obviously Jewish lawyer named Freddy Riedenschneider, suggests a defense based on his version of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle:

> They got this guy, in Germany. Fritz something-or-other. Or is it. Maybe it’s Werner. Anyway, he’s got this theory, you wanna test something, you know, scientifically–how the planets go round the sun, what sunspots are made of, why the water comes out of the tap–well, you gotta look at it. But sometimes, you look at it, your looking changes it. Ya can’t know the reality of what happened, or what would’ve happened if you hadden a stuck in your own goddamn schnozz. So there is no “what happened,” not in any sense that we can grasp with our puny minds. Because our minds . . . our minds get in the way. Looking at something changes it. They call it the “Uncertainty Principle.” Sure, it sounds screwy, but even Einstein says the guy’s on to something. (Coen & Coen 2001, 66-67)

From our theist vantage point this sounds like a parody of postmodern sophistry, as also does Riedenschneider’s later defense of Ed (“He told them to look not at the facts but at the meaning of the facts, and then he said the facts *had* no meaning. It was a pretty good speech, and even had me going . . .” [Coen & Coen 2001, 100-101]). In terms of noir visual devices Riedenschneider is deliberately cast in a bad light: as he talks, he moves in and out of sunbeams flooding in starkly from above the cell; in the moment that he ends his speech he turns away from the light, his face utterly black and no longer visible. With Riedenschneider, the Coen brothers use the incarnation of an anti-Semitic stereotype to debunk the notion of *posthistoire—i.e.*, the idea that “there is no ‘what happened.'” However, this kind of ad hominem argumentation remains completely acceptable because we experience it as having been set in a time frame we have transcended–thus proving that “something has happened” after all. Placed in the proper theist frame, any form of

ugliness can become ethically good, aesthetically appealing, and sublime.

The noir cinematography in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is quite obviously a gimmick–an effective, though one-time thing.(12) Gimmickry of this sort is not absolutely necessary, but it does seem to crop up frequently as a side-effect of performatist attempts to make transcendence visible and palpable. The most famous such gimmickry is, of course, enshrined in the Dogma 95 manifesto. Widely misunderstood in postmodern circles as a misguided attempt to return to authenticity, the Dogma 95 credo is really nothing more than a theist frame set up so that humans may transcend it or, alternately, so that theist moviemakers may be humbled by having to assume a crudely human perspective. Lars von Trier's *Idiots* takes the latter route: until the very last scene of the movie, which makes everything fall into place, you may have felt yourself in the presence of an "idiotic," literally unfocused director. In truth, of course, the sloppy camera work is a (tiring) gimmick setting you up for a carefully planned denouement deifying a meek heroine. The much more artful *Celebration*, by contrast, uses a break with the anthropological, hand-held camera perspective to suggest the possibility of transcendence: in one scene, oddly shot from a bathroom ceiling, we are suddenly shown a perspective that can only be that of Christian's dead sister, whose suicide was the driving force behind the hero's decision to confront his father (appropriately, Vinterberg "broke" the Dogma 95 vow of chastity and used a crane to make the shot). Gimmicks abound, too, in the other movies mentioned–the director of *Amélie* uses digital techniques to show the heroine's heart pounding away in her chest when she falls in love, and the people who climb into the John Malkovich portal view the world through a slit at the top of the screen that represents his seeing-eye view. Taken together, these devices do not, of course, an epoch make. However, it is important to take them seriously as part of the performatist play with immanence and transcendence, with the theist and the human.

11

One of the most radical exercises in performatist cinematography can be found in a movie that remains, when viewed as a whole, with at least one foot still firmly planted in postmodernism. This is Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, by now something of a cult classic. The main conceit behind the film is that the hero, Leonard Shelby, is suffering from a memory disorder caused by a blow to the head received while he was trying to defend his wife, who he repeatedly states was raped and murdered. As a result, Leonard has only a short-term memory; he can remember his life before the attack, but forgets everything else after about fifteen minutes. The movie presents his basic story as a series of 22 slightly overlapping temporal frames or scenes documenting how he tries to seek revenge. This, however, is not all.

Memento splits up into two times: Leonard's stunted, framed time, and chronological time, which, in an act of theist willfulness, has been set to run backwards. The movie begins with the end of Leonard's attempts to find and kill the murderer of his wife; as it progresses (backwards), frame by overlapping frame, we learn more and more about how Leonard's final act of vengeance came about. The hero experiences a series of framed presences in terms of a dysfunctional human time, while we experience the accumulation of these presences in terms of both his time and a theist, authorial time. In the beginning, these two times are practically identical: in the first few scenes we are as confused as Leonard is as to what is going on. This feeling of absolute bewilderment caused by a cruelly limited frame forces the viewer, at least at first, into a close identification with the hero–we, too, experience an odd, frantic kind of need to overcome the frames confining us and to find out what the things around us mean. Gradually, however, a distinct split in experience and knowledge develops. For, as our theist time accumulates, we begin to realize that Leonard, who knows that he forgets things, has set himself up by writing (not very reliable) notes instructing himself what to do and whom to trust or avoid. The man he kills at the beginning of the movie, a corrupt cop named Teddy, is by all appearances probably not the murderer; he's someone who tried to manipulate Leonard and whom Leonard decided to make the scapegoat for his wife's murder. Leonard, who is stuck in a hellishly limited personal time, becomes the self-appointed executor of an impersonal vengeance that will always be seeking new victims or scapegoats. In a way, Leonard is the prototype of all participants in mimetic rivalry: he embodies a kind of minimal human consciousness programmed to seek revenge over and over again–the acts of vengeance being his performances, his way of transcending what he experiences as one, severely limited, time frame or present. This view of human consciousness, though limited and pessimistic, could at least be considered the ground of a primary, monist frame.(13) Nolan, however, complicates things by adding a *second* set of frames to his movie: he intersperses the backtracking color frames recounting the murder story with backtracking black-and-white frames in which Leonard recalls a character named Sammy Jankis, who suffers from the same mental condition as he. Without going into all the details, it will suffice to say that Sammy kills his diabetic wife without being aware of it and then falls apart; we seem him sitting in a mental institution–and for a split second we see in his place Leonard Shelby. A neurophysiological, monist origin becomes a psychoanalytical, double one: just as we think we are about to get the hang of Leonard Shelby's original motive, we are told that he is, psychologically speaking, someone else. Whether or not this basic confusion about who Leonard is makes *Memento* a better movie is a matter of some debate.(14)*Memento*, however, remains interesting as a case study because the dividing line separating postmodernism from performatism runs right through it. As long as the frame has an ontological, anthropological ground it is performatist; as soon as the ground is made into a conundrum or double origin the frame becomes

postmodern.

Memento reminds us that we are still in a transition period from postmodernism to performatism. There are movies that start off with a seemingly firm performatist premise but then fade back into postmodern murkiness, and there are movies that have a primary, “grounded” frame but hide it in what at first seems to be an undecidable tangle of double attributions. As an example of the first type of movie you could take David Fincher’s *Fight Club*, whose yuppie, Caspar-Milquetoast narrator (Edward Norton) teams up with a subversive and willfully cruel character named Tyler Durden (a slumming Brad Pitt). The two begin by founding a “fight club” devoted to bloody, bare-handed fisticuffs; eventually, the Brad Pitt character moves on to organize an urban prankster group called Project Mayhem (this is one movie that could not have been made after 9/11–it ends with two towers of an unnamed, ostensibly empty financial center collapsing into themselves after a bomb attack by the Project). The fight club and the prankster-like terror group are evidently meant to re-empower the raw-knuckled kind of masculinity that was repressed for so long by effeminate postmodern culture (this is the avowed intention of Chuck Palahniuk, who wrote the book on which the movie is based). Seen in terms of GA, though, the movie is naive: it would like to take us back to *before* the originary scene, to a state of pure, signless mimetic conflict in which resentment is purged through the application of brute force and not through signification (one of the rules of the Fight Club, in fact, is that you’re not allowed to talk about it). As in *Memento*, the movie ends by swatting us over the head with a postmodern red herring that it has been dragging through the plot the whole time: Tyler Durden, as it turns out, is the narrator’s evil alter ego. Although the narrator believes he has purged himself of Durden by the movie’s end, the last frame of the movie suggests that quite the opposite is true–Durden enjoyed splicing snippets of porno movies into family films to disturb viewers subliminally, and this is just what we see (though not quite subliminally) at the movie’s very end. The cruel prankster Durden, in other words, is still in control of the frame.

12

By contrast, movies like David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* and Alejandro Amenábar’s *Open Your Eyes* (the Spanish movie on which *Vanilla Sky* is based) seem at first to offer us nothing more than a spectacular off-and-on between two undecidable, highly confusing perspectives. As Eric Gans has, however, shown in his *Chronicle* 269, one perspective in *Mulholland Drive* does turn out to be real–it acts as a psychological ground for the bizarre fantasy sequence with which the movie begins. Lynch’s movie, though still exuding postmodern paranoia, turns out to be devoted to a surprisingly unparanoid theme–that of unrequited love. *Open Your Eyes* also confronts us with the interplay of two seemingly undecidable perspectives: it

concerns a handsome young Spaniard and his grotesquely disfigured alter ego, who continuously, and seemingly senselessly, replace one another as the film rolls along. Just before the confused hero (and the viewer) are about to give up in despair, the movie provides a watertight, reconciliatory explanation: the hero, it seems, has died, but a futuristic society has developed a process allowing him to dream his own life through again even in death. The disconcerting appearances of his disfigured self can be willed away in the next cycle of the dream, which begins with the hero jumping from a rooftop and landing unscathed below. The character, in other words, has the power to be both theist and human; he can frame his own life-after-death in the transcendent reality of the dream.

I don't pretend to have described the transition from postmodernism to performatism in a comprehensive way. There are no doubt dozens of other contemporary movies that fit the performatist bill, and there are numerous films that in the early and mid-1990s were already edging away from postmodern themes–Eric Gans has noted this development in several of his *Chronicles* (see, for example, No. 42, "Tarantino Transcendence," or No. 80, "Triangular Utopias"). However, I believe that the broadly drawn borderline of 1997-1999, which in my view marks the beginning of performatism, will hold up to further scrutiny. The thematic and cinematographic innovations introduced by the films in this period have not only caught on, but are also being constantly reapplied and renewed. As such, I have no doubt whatsoever that the performatist devices and themes just described will continue to develop in exciting new ways in the coming few years, even as the tried-and-true postmodern ones wither and fade. Much less easy to predict is when film critics and theorists will begin to jettison their increasingly unworkable poststructuralist concepts and begin to apply more fitting, monist ones to the new epoch. But that, of course, is where an already well-developed theory of performatism can lend a helping hand.

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Notes

1. The surprisingly good "fit" between Gans's and Goffman's theories is undoubtedly a result of their common Durkheimian heritage. For more on Goffman's indebtedness to Durkheim see Collins 1988; for more on Gans's appraisal of Durkheim see Gans 2000.(back)

2. A commune member pretending to be mentally retarded is left by his "attendant" in the company of several fierce-looking motorcycle gang members, who interpret his grunting attempt to leave them as a wish to use the toilet. Assuming that he is truly severely retarded, they have no qualms about helping him urinate. (back)

3. The Derridean approach to framing aims to show that there is no way to discuss intrinsic, inner space without including extrinsic, outer space in it. Hence the frame, which is where inside and outside meet, constitutes itself out of an irreducible duality which, for Derrida, is the paradoxical point of departure and end point of all analysis.(back)

4. It is interesting to note that Goffman's notion of face-to-face interaction works in a similar way. The reliability of interaction is made possible by the "fit" between the self (inner frame) and an outer frame (meaning the physical world, the social ecology and the institutional setting): "only if the larger frame is properly handled can conversation take place" (Collins 1988, 51). (back)

5. Buddhism, which also plays a role in performatism, is a special case. Although dispensing with the notion of a personal God, Buddhist-influenced fictions such as*Ghost Dog* and *American Beauty* suggest no less than Western theist fictions that reality is constructed around a subject, and that the subject, in order to transcend, must merge with that construct. (back)

6. As outlined in *Chronicles* 260, 261, 262, and 271, which Gans has brought together in the as yet unpublished article "Originary and/or Kantian Aesthetics." (back)

7. From Goffman's point of view this type of agreement is based on more than simple adherence to convention. For convention, taken as a set of rules, is easily susceptible to the kind of critique practiced by Derrida in *Limited Inc.*: even as you try to set the limits of convention, you wind up incorporating still more conditions into your own convention, which require still more conditions that open out into an endless, uncontrollable flux of what turn out to be rather unconventional traces. (Indeed, Goffman, in a very similar kind of argument, shows how something similar can happen when using quotation marks to bracket a phrase–*cf.* Goffman 1974, 16-20.) The best way of interpreting Goffman's notion of convention would be to describe it as performatist. It does not seek to describe rules, exceptions to the rules, and exceptions to the exceptions to the rules, but rather spontaneously arrived at agreements or adjustments among participants in a face-to-face interaction rituals, or frames. Although they are not completely impervious to description, these tacit adjustments or spontaneous agreements within the frame resist simple codification; indeed, the charm of Goffman's own studies derive from his attempts to capture the "traces" showing just how these little daily performances work. (back)

8. Goffman (1967, 58) even warns of this: "If the individual could give himself the deference he desired there might be a tendency for society to disintegrate into islands inhabited by solitary cultish men, each in continuous worship at his own shrine." (back)

9. Cf. Deleuze (1986, 23): "the essence of the cinematographic movement-image lies in extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their

essence.” (back)

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10. Cf. Deleuze (1989, 40-41): “the sensory-motor schema is no longer in operation, but at the same time it is not overtaken or overcome. It is shattered from the inside. That is, perceptions and actions cease to be linked together, and spaces are now neither co-ordinated nor filled. . . . It is here that the reversal is produced: movement is no longer simply aberrant, aberration is now valid in itself and designates time as its direct cause. ‘Time is out of joint’: it is off the hinges assigned to it by behavior in the world, but also by movements of world.” (back)

11. A friend of mine, Sven Spieker of the University of California at Santa Barbara, suggested to me that Ed Crane’s longing for a transcendent world is caused by his being homosexual. At first, this doesn’t seem convincing at all. Ed rejects a pass made by Creighton Tolliver, and, if anything, seems to be asexual–he doesn’t sleep with his wife and crashes his car after Birdie Abundas makes him an unambiguous offer. However, some small clues indicate that a repressed sense of gender plays a major role in his spiritual quest. For example, before Ed is electrocuted, a patch of his leg is shaved in the exact way that Ed shaved a patch of Doris’s leg earlier on, suggesting that the only way a man could be treated like a woman in the 1940s is in the death chamber. Also, Ed is writing his story for a men’s magazine featuring pictures of half-naked, muscular hunks on the cover–the only type of venue where repressed homosexuality could “safely” be expressed in the 1940s. If Sven’s theory is true, Ed would not be looking to express his homosexuality in 1940s-style terms–as a “pansy” like Creighton Tolliver–but in transcendent ones as yet unknown to himself, and in fact also to us. Doris (with her masculine, blunt personality and anti-Italian self hatred) and Ed would then be reunited in a Great Beyond where all gender and ethnic distinctions have been overcome for good. (back)

12. As Gans notes in his *Chronicle* 83, “Film Open and Closed,” the universalization of color in movies and TV “makes impossible the abstract shadow-world of the *film noir*and its closed predecessors.” By making an “impossible” movie, the Coen Brothers suggest the possibility that any frame of reference can be transcended–as a one-time performance. (back)

13. You could probably also argue with Deleuze that Leonard’s type of consciousness is a “spiritual automaton,” *i.e.*, a highly restricted reaction to outside impulses directed by a single, deeply embedded memory. However, in Deleuzian and Bergsonian terms Leonard’s condition embodies “bad” time–a series of presents that are chopped out of the flow of time and then pasted back together again. It is only in the pathological dysfunctionality of this minimal setting that the

theist and deist conceptions can meet.(back)

14. Andy Klein of *Salon Magazine* (Klein 2001), who invested enough energy for five film reviews in trying to untangle *Memento*‘s plot, came to the conclusion that it doesn’t work even on its own terms: “the only way to reconcile everything is to assume huge inconsistencies in the nature of Leonard’s disorder. In fact, in real life, such inconsistencies apparently exist, if Oliver Sacks is to be believed. But to build the plot around them without giving us some hints seems like dirty pool.” (back)