

# Digital Figurations

## The Human Figure as Cinematic Concept

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# Abstract

Mainstream cinema is to an ever-increasing degree deploying digital imaging technologies to work with the human form; expanding on it, morphing its features, or providing new ways of presenting it. This has prompted theories of simulation and virtualisation to explore the cultural and aesthetic implications, anxieties, and possibilities of a loss of the ‘real’ – in turn often defined in terms of the photographic trace. This thesis wants to provide another perspective. Following instead some recent imperatives in art-theory, this study looks to introduce and expand on the notion of the human figure, as pertaining to processes of figuration rather than (only) representation. The notion of the figure and figuration have an extended history in the fields of hermeneutics, aesthetics, and philosophy, through which they have come to stand for particular theories and methodologies with regards to images and their communication of meaning. This objective of this study is to appropriate these for film-theory, culminating in two case-studies to demonstrate how formal parameters present and organise ideas of the body and the human. The aim is to develop a material approach to contemporary digital practices, where bodies have not ceased to matter but are framed in new ways by new technologies.

## **Keywords**

The human figure, figuration, digital technology, body, film-theory, figural, visuality, dispositif, anthropocentrism, motion-capture, materiality, *Gravity*, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*

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# I:

## Introduction

The figures, it is true, still differed slightly from the human actors we are used to seeing, but they differed pleasantly: the faces were more brilliant, more flawless; their eyes of a larger cut, like precious stones, the movements slower, more elegant, and in moments of excitement, even more violent and sudden than anything in our experience. [...] Thus one could say that these figures did not simply imitate the human form but carried it beyond its possibilities and dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

Ernst Jünger (1957)

Jünger's 1957 positing of a new kind of cinema corresponds, as Tom Gunning has pointed out, uncannily to the mainstream cinema of today.<sup>2</sup> Digital imaging technologies such as CGI and motion-capture allows for a treatment and expansion of the human form which resonates with Jünger's scenario; be it in the extension of its borders, the morphing of its features, or in the manipulation of spatio-temporal coordinates as to perceive this form differently.<sup>3</sup> These kinds of technologies can also induce its visual disappearance altogether in favour of digitally animated avatars, as seen in a range of popular films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003), *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (Matt Reeves, 2014). This thesis is about these kinds of work with the human form, which, I suggest, provide a productive ground to again ask questions about the processes by which bodies are usurped, displayed, and represented in the cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> Jünger, *The Glass Bees* (New York: New York Review Books, 2000), 137-138.

<sup>2</sup> I am in debt to Gunning for leading me to Jünger's cinematic imaginations, as well as to the introductory quote. "Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial Bodies," in *From Hobbits to Hollywood*, eds. Mathijs and Pomerance (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 338-339.

<sup>3</sup> Whereas the former brings to mind several humanoid creatures, the latter evokes scenes such as the one in *Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) where Neo is shown dodging bullets in extreme slow-motion. Of course, the two are often combined, as many of today's superhero-franchises attest to.

With the normalisation of such work over the past three decades, concepts of simulation and virtualisation have been deployed to explore the cultural and aesthetic implications of a “loss of photographic certainty”<sup>4</sup> – as in the equivalency of the pro-filmic and the film-image. Scott Balcerzak, for example, argues that CGI-characters are products of a new mode of technological mediation which “takes one externalised aspects of performance (realistic movement), separates it from the body, and uses it to guide the special effect,” and as a consequence removes “the physical reality of the body.”<sup>5</sup> Balcerzak is less discouraged than many by these developments, yet he makes some curious distinctions in his account; the physical body becomes a kind of ultimate integer of the pro-filmic world, which cannot be taken up by digital signals, yet the continuation of ‘real’ movement ensures a humanisation of the digital avatars. Digital media is differentiated from photographic media on the basis of this body and its presumed reality.<sup>6</sup>

However, as Paul Malone has pointed out, already in the early 2000s, to base the difference between the photographic and the digital image on the level of reality of their bodies negates to consider that cinema has always been a mediating technology. Looking back to the beginnings of cinema, Malone finds similar arguments there regarding the manipulation of the human form.<sup>7</sup> He does not go on to discuss this, but it points towards the idea that the represented body (or, indeed, the body as such) is always a technological construct, a result of historically specific technological conditions, as has been argued variously by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, and Nicolás Salazar Sutil, to only mention a few.<sup>8</sup> This puts into question the notion of an a priori body, or what it means to talk of its intrinsic reality at all. Sutil has argued that techniques like motion-capture do not “forget” the body, but rather refer to it in other, non-visual ways.<sup>9</sup> Further, focus on such media differences often negates how hegemonic tropes and values continue to form a crucial role in shaping cinematic representations. Claire Molloy and Nicola Rehling, for example, both find anthropocentric paradigms with particular articulations of subjectivity, gender, and race in a range of films that use digital imaging technologies to ‘leave’ the human form;<sup>10</sup> the question, then, appear to be not so much how

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<sup>4</sup> Accessibly chronicled in J. Hoberman’s *Film after Film: Or, What Became of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cinema?* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 3-46, quote 13.

<sup>5</sup> “Andy Serkis as Actor, Body and Gorilla: Motion Capture and the Presence of Performance,” in *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, eds. Balcerzak and Sperb, vol. 1 (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), 196.

<sup>6</sup> In a similar way to Vivian Sobchack’s argument in “The Scene of the Screen” in *Technology and Culture*, ed. Andrew Utterson (London: Routledge, 2005), 139.

<sup>7</sup> Malone, “Cyber-Kleist: The Virtual Actor as Uber-Marionette.” *Contemporary Drama in English* 7 (2000): 57-58. Such similarities are also discussed by Gunning, “Gollum and Golem,” and by Anette Kuhn “Thresholds: Film as Film and the Aesthetic Experience.” *Screen* 46, 4 (2005): 401-414.

<sup>8</sup> This notion is thoroughly explored in Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), where he discusses all these writers except from Sutil. For Sutil see *Motion and Representation: The Language of Human Movement* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), esp. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Sutil, 201.

<sup>10</sup> Molloy, “Animals, Avatars, and the Gendering of Nature,” in *Screening Nature*, eds. Pick and Narraway (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 177-193; Rehling, “Fleshing Out Virtual Bodies: White

bodies and actors ‘lend’ their humanity to digital figures, but by what means such constructions are continued as their common ground – the human body – is increasingly, and openly, manipulated and blurred.

Gunning has argued that theoretical positions such as Balcerzak’s are derived from a “classical” realist stance, whereby the film medium is defined in terms of its photographic essence, most famously developed by André Bazin in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>11</sup> The medium’s relationship to the world (how it refers and produces meaning) is thusly defined in terms of what Thomas Elsaesser has called a “phenomenalist naturalism, in which the photograph reproduces the singularity and contingency of the surface appearances of reality.”<sup>12</sup> This has consequences for how the represented body can be interpreted since it conceives of it as a reproduction of an already existent model. Drawing on Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth, I think it is fair to say that such a theoretical model operates according to a “specular politics” whereby the represented body signifies the already there rather than indicating a mediating and symbolic construct.<sup>13</sup> For Steven Shaviro, this kind of approach has been continued in film-theory through a reliance on psychoanalytic and linguistic-semiotic models.<sup>14</sup> Discussing the kinds of ‘cinematic situations’ as I bring up above, Gunning sees the shortcomings of assuming a realist ontology as the *only* model and encourages theorists to look for other genealogies and systems of thoughts through which to engage with cinematic imagery, meaning, and representation.<sup>15</sup>

In this thesis I want to take some steps in such a direction, starting by taking inspiration from Jünger; by invoking the concept of the *figure* I want to outline a theoretical proposition for thinking about images of bodies and representations of the human. Conventionally a descriptive term, the concept has nonetheless recently been taken up in art-theory to look at how formal parameters present and organise ideas of being and knowing rather than embody them innately. In the anthology *Art and Subjecthood* (2011) Isabelle Graw suggests that even in its most abstract outlines the human form carries with it a projection of “subjecthood.”<sup>16</sup> Devin Fore formulates a similar notion more extensively in terms of an “epistemological framework” that prescribes (or undoes) an ideologically

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Heterosexual Masculinity in Contemporary Cyberfantasy Cinema,” in *The Future of Flesh*, eds. Detsi-Diamanti, Kitsi-Mitakou, and Yiannopoulou (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 181-198.

<sup>11</sup> Gunning, “Gollum and Golem,” 321-322; in reference to Bazin see “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18 (2007): 29-37.

<sup>12</sup> Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film: A Guide to Movie Analysis* (London: Arnold, 2002), 200.

<sup>13</sup> Jacobus, Keller, and Shuttleworth (eds) introduction to *Body Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), esp. 8-19.

<sup>15</sup> Gunning, “Gollum and Golem,” 321-322; “Moving Away,” 35-37.

<sup>16</sup> Graw, “Introduction: When Objecthood Turns into Subjecthood,” in *Art and Subjecthood*, eds. Graw, Birnbaum, and Hirsch (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 11-18.

motivated subject-position.<sup>17</sup> Fore deploys the term ‘human figure’ to designate a formal-aesthetic ‘unit’ through which ideas about the human, its body and subjectivity are inscribed structurally in works of art and literature, without necessarily be articulated through speech. He describes, for example, linear perspective and novelistic narrative as cultural practices where the human figure functions not merely as a motif but as a “device,” a kind of structural core which guides the organisation and presentation of a work.<sup>18</sup> In his work he explores ways in which human figures are made central in a multitude of ways; formal, technical, aesthetic, and epistemological, all of which can amount to (but does not necessarily) a visual image.

In a thesis with a related topic to mine, Karl Hansson holds that digitally produced images and effects bring attention to how the film-image can also be thought of as material and plastic, as a transformative surface and not merely a ‘window’ through which the spectator can peer.<sup>19</sup> Although Fore only briefly discusses cinema, his approach towards “realist” practices in terms of their technical and formal presentation of figures *as* human and *as* bodies appear to me an interesting vantage point from which to approach characters made and sustained by digital imaging technologies.<sup>20</sup> With this thesis, then, I want to propose the human figure as a cinematic concept. The notion of figures has been moderately developed in relation to cinema, as we shall see, but I want to start by giving the concept a somewhat wider scope.

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The term ‘figure’ stretches over a multitude of scholarly disciplines where it frequently takes on different meanings dependent on the context. From my point-of-view, originating in visual culture studies, the figure and its corollary figuration are generally comprehended in opposition to abstraction. In the simplest terms possible, drawing on Jacques Aumont, they are linked to the perception of defined and recognisable forms.<sup>21</sup> As such, talking about figures is to consider the image in a plastic sense; considering a surface, how it comes into being and the appearance of forms within. These figure-concepts, however, have an extended history in the fields of hermeneutics, aesthetics, and philosophy, through which they have come to stand for particular theories and methodologies with regards to images and their communication of meaning. The first half of this thesis will elucidate this wider context in order to define the human figure as a theoretical concept and tool, and show how it has been and might be appropriated for film-theory. Whilst this concept, however, can be formulated as a tool, it nonetheless is also an object of study for this thesis and therefore needs to be

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<sup>17</sup> Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 1-19, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Fore, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Hansson, ”Det figurala och den rörliga bilden: Om estetik, materialitet och medieteknologi hos Jean Epstein, Bill Viola och Artintact” (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2006), 11-15.

<sup>20</sup> “Realism is always already an ensemble of technical devices.” Fore, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Aumont, *The Image* (London: BFI, 1997), 45-46.



considered in terms of how it can be situated. This requires some attention towards elucidating a theoretical framework and context in which the figure and figuration can be placed. In chapter II I will first summarise these terms usages in philosophy through to film-theory, and second, look at how this term might fit into a critical genealogy of thinking about images.

This first part will fan out broadly, whereas the chapter III and IV will again narrow the field, eventually returning back to the particular figures that I started out with. In this second half I will utilise two film examples, *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) and *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* in order to exemplify different aspects of the frameworks outlined. I have chosen these films because they both feature a particular emphasis on bodies as produced through digital imaging technologies. The aim is to operationalise the method suggested previously,<sup>22</sup> to explore aspects of how the human figure is produced, deployed, and articulated by means of some specific instances of digital imaging technologies. My question in these instances is not how the body is erased, but rather how it is mediated. What kinds of human figures are produced and how are they presented? These are questions that can only be posed with specific images in mind and are not meant to produce general statements; by suggesting answers to these questions I hope to formulate constellations of technology, figuration, and representation that suggest other ways of thinking about how the body is taken up by cinema. Thusly, the final aim of this thesis is not to go over a(nother) development in the representation of bodies, or suggesting a ‘better’ analytical approach to it, but to excavate a contemporary moment through a certain prism.

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The topic of my thesis feeds into a larger film-theoretical discussion regarding the organisation and communication of meaning in cinema, which is more varied than Gunning might have us think. However, many overviews of film-theory agree that film-theory as an interpretative practice has largely been dominated by psychoanalyst and semiotic discourses since the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> These, as Shaviro and Daniel Yacavone have effectively demonstrated, base their notions of representation and ‘meaning’ in the “iconic and indexical properties of film images,”<sup>24</sup> in how objects are *symptomatic* and *reflexive* of pro-filmic objects, events, and structures.<sup>25</sup> This discussion has arguably become more pertinent with cinema’s digitisation; as Elsaesser and Buckland have concluded, digitisation is not only transforming the cinema but also our way of thinking about it.<sup>26</sup> Similarly but more

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<sup>22</sup> I use the term operationalise meaning a process to define phenomena that are not directly measurable, which I think is suitable for this study as it deals with a porous idea and object of study.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Noel Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10-15; Elsaesser and Warren, esp. 250-255, 287; Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (London: Macmillan, 2000), especially the first two chapters, 6-70; Shaviro, 8-19.

<sup>24</sup> Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 117.

<sup>25</sup> Shaviro, esp. 8-19.

<sup>26</sup> Elsaesser and Warren, 290.

extensively, D.N. Rodowick has argued that these kinds of traditional discourses are ill equipped to understand digital and electronic media.<sup>27</sup> Whilst this is an important backdrop to this thesis, I do not want to formulate a stance with regards to how film-works should be interpreted. I am not concerned with spectators and the reception of meaning as such, but rather with elucidating some “situated” instances of the technological and cinematic mediation of the human body.<sup>28</sup> Neither is this a theorisation of digital technology as such, but rather, I will use it as a “heuristic device” from which certain parameters and configurations can be approached anew.<sup>29</sup>

As in any academic text, I deal here with a variety of materials; texts, concepts, technologies, images, films, all of which come through in an overlapping and interactive manner. Each new chapter is a process to operationalise what has been said previously, to which new inferences are added for a different perspective. Some overarching methodological ‘issues’, however, will run through the text; for example, how to discuss visual and moving images in text-form, in particular in a theorisation that favours the image as a sensible surface, rather than an “empirical object” to be interpreted by means of words. I will suggest the figurative approach as a method that deals with exactly this, but I do not pretend to offer a solution. My aim with this thesis is to expand on a philosophical concept and methodological approach, but also to engage critically with film-works. I will do so by adopting and expanding on what Fore calls a “formalist methodology,” an approach that concludes that “ideological labor” is found not merely on the level of content but also in “formal structures.”<sup>30</sup> In this the human figure will be considered an entity that is neither “inherently progressive nor indispensably oppressive [...] but rather as a situated practice that becomes meaningful with specific material circumstance.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), x.

<sup>28</sup> Borrowing Haraway’s sense of the term from “situated knowledges” as a way of producing non-hegemonic knowledge and criticism. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 183-202.

<sup>29</sup> Elsaesser, “Early Film History and Multi-Media: An Archaeology of Possible Futures,” in *New Media, Old Media*, eds. Chun and Keenan (London: Routledge, 2006), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Fore, 13.

<sup>31</sup> As Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, and Effie Yiannopoulou helpfully puts it regarding their idea of body representation, introduction to *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 6-7.

## II:

# Theoretical Frameworks

## Part 1: Figure, Figuration, Figural

The figurative object is not an object in the world, and not a representation of an object, but an element of a certain type of proposition: a piece of thinking and a way of thinking.<sup>32</sup>

Jacques Aumont (1996)

The notion of a figure seems initially easy to grasp. A shape, form, or even object, a figure is something that is grasped and recognised as it *is*, rather than by way of explanation. Yet, in its simplicity, a figure defies easy definition;<sup>33</sup> whilst it appears to be a crucial part of representational practices, it is not exactly representational in and of itself; a figure does not “stand in the place of” something, it is that something – a body, a creature, or, in another sense, a certain conjunction of elements; a stylistic trope, for example – but then again, a figure is part of a process of conveyance, of showing or of saying. As is evident, any attempt at a precise definition will run in a circle. Rather, ‘figure’ needs to be considered in terms of its deployments. The concept ‘figure’ stretches across disciplines but finds perhaps its strongest roots in hermeneutics. There, as Erich Auerbach has shown, it formed the conceptual core to biblical interpretation (and a Western mode of thought), embodying the notion of incarnation, of something *prefigured*.<sup>34</sup> Together with its more general meanings as plastic form and a manner of speech (i.e. figuratively speaking), this makes for a dynamic concept;

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<sup>32</sup> Aumont, *À quoi pensent les films* (Paris: Éditions SÉguier, 1996), 162. My translation. This work by Aumont has not been translated into English, and I am grateful for Karl Hansson’s summary of Aumont’s work on the concept of the figure in his doctoral dissertation, which also led me to this quote. Hansson, esp. 42-57.

<sup>33</sup> As Adrian Martin puts it in his overview of the term: “the idea [...] of the figure is simultaneously a very simple and a very complex business, natural and easy as well as contrived and theatrical.” Martin, *Last Day Every Day: Figural Thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Brenez* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Auerbach develops his exegesis of the term ‘figura’ (the Latin root to ‘figure’) very closely in “Figura,” opening chapter of *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), but it is in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) that it is most forcefully linked to a mode of thought and representation running through Western history.

William D. Routh has suggestively likened it to DNA in its apparition as neither ‘model’ nor simulacra.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps more relevant to a study of cinema, as an audio-visual medium, the concept has also derived a lot of its currency from its usage in aesthetics as it developed as a philosophical discipline in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Here, as Rodowick has shown, it emerged as a key defining term for the plastic, visual arts, in the process of creating a hierarchical separation between the visual and speech. This hierarchy was established on Platonic idealism; conceived as further away from the world of matter and realm of perception, thought and speech became identified with discourse, and thusly with a way of ordering and rationalising – giving meaning and being intrinsically meaningful in itself (this is also the context of Cartesian dualism, the split between mind and body). The visual arts, then, whilst by no means being discounted, rather became celebrated as means of representation, of being able to present the world to and for discourse.<sup>36</sup> Drawing on Michel Foucault, Rodowick argues that the ‘figure’ here came to designate acts of “repetition-resemblance;” defining not so much an object as an “intrinsic architecture,” a plastic formation.<sup>37</sup> Being so close to its material support, as it were, it was then considered as dependent on discourse to be named as significant; a system of thought, for Rodowick, “protected by the entire hermeneutic, semiotic, phenomenological, and formalist traditions.”<sup>38</sup> This system stands in contrast to the “figural thinking” traced by Auerbach, and it is perhaps no coincidence that he sees it as diminishing during this time.<sup>39</sup>

According to Routh “figural thinking” might actually be more of a 20<sup>th</sup> century invention or, at least, an intervention.<sup>40</sup> As such, it is indicative of a reaction against the framework Rodowick outlines, dedicated to exploring figures as alternative systems of meaning (as is Rodowick). Indeed, the proliferation of images and their systems of reproduction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so succinctly elaborated on by Benjamin,<sup>41</sup> does provide a tempting background to explain how some writers saw such alternative structures emerging from the visual, in opposition to the linguistic. Benjamin himself elaborated on a process of “thinking-in-images” wherein “*figures* of thought correlate with those of history or of experience and reality.”<sup>42</sup> In Benjamin’s thought this also gave rise to a conception of

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<sup>35</sup> William D. Routh, “*De la figure en général et du corps en particulier: l’invention figurative au cinéma* [book review],” *Screening the Past*, March 1, 2000, accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2014/12/de-la-figure-en-general-et-du-corps-en-particulier-linvention-figurative-au-cinema/>.

<sup>36</sup> Rodowick’s account is perhaps slightly too generalising, but it gives an overarching context for the concept at hand. For the past few statements, see *Reading the Figural*, esp. 45-64 and 107-140.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 61 and 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>39</sup> As he calls it in *Mimesis*, e.g. 195.

<sup>40</sup> Routh, “*De la figure.*”

<sup>41</sup> For example in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Art of Art History*, ed. Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 435-442.

<sup>42</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), viii. My italics.

mimesis that was not tied to the notion of Platonic representation, elaborated on by Siegfried Kracauer, but rather about a structural similitude, about correspondence and affinity.<sup>43</sup> Whether or not it is possible to affirm such a rise in figural thinking, the latter half of the century did see a variety of theoretical and philosophical work which deployed the term figure in a renewed manner, utilising it reflexively and conceptually, rather than in a descriptive or designative manner. Gilles Deleuze, for example, used the term in his engagement with Francis Bacon's paintings to define an 'entity' characterised by a becoming, or an undoing of figuration into the realm of the figural.<sup>44</sup> These terms are, as is evident, cognate with figure, and have been used in an equally multifarious manner. However, in their usage in later 20<sup>th</sup> century critical and philosophical thought they do not differ from 'figure' as grammatical variations on a term, but rather embody a conceptual spectrum that articulates a certain stance on the visible and discourse. As such, they are crucial for an understanding what it means to talk about figures.

### Figuration, Figural

In his brief work trying to sum up some crucial developments for "figural thinking" toward film-theory, Adrian Martin offers a definition of figuration from a film magazine worth quoting in full:

the symbolic game or process aiming to establish a *fixed, evolving or unstable* correlation between the plastic, aural and narrative parameters able to elicit fundamental categories of representation (such as the visible and invisible, mimesis, reflection, appearance and disappearance, image and origin, the integral and the discontinuous, form, the intelligible, the part and the whole . . .) and other parameters – which may be the same parameters, depending on the particular type of determination effected – relating to fundamental categories of ontology (such as being and appearance, essence and apparition, being and nothingness, same and other, the immediate, the reflective, inner and outer . . .).<sup>45</sup>

The magazine emphasises the unstableness of any such relations or depictions, suggesting that at the core of figuration is only a constant process of formation. Martin, who is particularly concerned with developing the concept's heritage from Auerbach into the film-theoretical context of Nicole Brenez, does not make a distinction between figuration and the figural, often considering the terms as variations of each other. However, in Deleuze's case there is a definite distinction, one more famously and concretely put into use by Jean-François Lyotard; where figuration stand for something more concrete, a definite formation, whereas the figural is an undoing, a dissemblance into the field of the "visual" escaping both rational comprehension and linguistic interpretation.<sup>46</sup> To put it in an overly

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<sup>43</sup> See Shaviro, 51 and Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 150-153.

<sup>44</sup> Of course, referring to objects and subjects in a painting as 'figures' is not uncommon, perhaps even a norm. I bring up Deleuze here to show an instance where the term is deployed in said reflexive manner. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sense* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Martin, *Last Day*, 8. Author's italics.

<sup>46</sup> As summed up by Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, esp. 6-16.

simplistic way, Lyotard developed the notion of the figural against the definition of meaning and the communication of meaning he saw engendered by semiotic linguistics, as something to be extracted, interpreted from visual works of art.<sup>47</sup> The figural, then, become for him the force of the visible, not in opposition to discourse, but as something which envelopes, cuts through, and escapes it. Lyotard uses the notion of the visual to indicate immediacy and unmediated apprehension. Rodowick, trying to contextualise and employ Lyotard's idea, designates its relation to the figure; "the force of the figural [...] deconstructs not only discourse but also the figure as recognizable image or proper form."<sup>48</sup>

Any figure, drawing on Lyotard and Rodowick, can be considered part of a figuration but also as encompassing the figural. The figure has a form that is recognisable, but at the same time it "does not signify, it makes sense."<sup>49</sup> The figure is there, it appears, and it even refers, but not through signification, rather through a "libidinal" mode of recognition.<sup>50</sup> For the purposes of my study, I will attempt to steer away from further abstraction towards a more practical definition; the figure is sustained *both* by figuration, as a mode of organisation, and the figural, as a mode of perceptual and material immediacy (I will avoid using Lyotard's notion of the visual, because, as we shall see this becomes problematic in discussing images). In this sense, this thesis is more concerned with figuration; how things take shape and how they are sedimented into conventional meanings. Yet the figural emerges an important concept to theoretically define this process and how can be articulated as a distinct approach to cinema.

The figural, thusly, can stand for the difference of what figuration and the figure are, with respect to other 'processes' theorists have identified at work in images. Aumont articulates them as a "force of signification" with regards to images; the way images are made concrete, recognisable, and accessible, in terms of the optical connection between spectator and image.<sup>51</sup> In a similar way, Yacavone defines processes of "presentation" as different from those of representation, highlighting how they (e.g. connotation, framing, composition, editing) are means by which a film communicates meaning that cannot be solely explained by recourse to a linguistic sign-structure.<sup>52</sup> Considering the formal side of film-studies, neither of these positions sound perhaps particularly new, but, however, they do not discriminate between formal and pro-filmic elements;<sup>53</sup> rather, they both try to pinpoint a process by which representation, or the apprehension of images, is grounded. Speculation on the perceptual and cognitive ontology of images, as such, is beyond this thesis, but these deployments of

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<sup>47</sup> This emerges most clearly in Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), but is a thread throughout most of his writings.

<sup>48</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 191.

<sup>52</sup> Yacavone, 70-72 and 86-113.

<sup>53</sup> By which I mean the formalist tendency pointed out in Noël Carroll in *Philosophical Problems*, which ultimately considers formal style as a key to interpreting film-works.

the terms at stake enable an articulation of what they suggest for a film-theoretical perspective. Whilst it is too definite to say that they are not representation, then, they are not representative in terms of signification; rather the figure indicates something other, as Warwick Mules have suggested, the material (concrete, technological, formal) elements that give rise to an image, and enable representation. It is in this sense that he defines it as “plastic;” as the intermediate between these material conditions and an image’s visual surface.<sup>54</sup>

## Figural Film-Theory: The Contemporary Context

Film and film-theory, albeit incrementally and variously, became part of the figural tradition, not least through Deleuze’s own engagement with the cinema,<sup>55</sup> which also came to re-appropriate a much earlier mode of film-analysis; that of such film-aesthetes as Béla Balázs, Jean Epstein and Rudolf Arnheim and their elaborations on surface, the face, and close-ups. Like the earlier film-theorists Deleuze, whilst not arguing against cinema’s referential abilities, promoted a view of the film-image as more constructive, as presenting something new to experience. This mode of thought regarding images differed from those promoted by the “psycho-semiotic” approach that had emerged during the 1970s and 80s, not least in its dissociation from notion of the image as an illusion.<sup>56</sup> This is not to propose that Deleuze stands as some origin to “figural” film-theory, nor really to suggest a radical difference, but mainly to point out a different emphasis of which Deleuze was exemplary. Indeed, what Martin defines as “figural thinking” demonstrates the arbitrariness of many film-theoretical distinctions since it is more about identifying processes, particular ‘logics’ of films, rather than strictly define a set of meanings.

“Figural analysis” is, in a somewhat vague manner, considered a practice in film-theory, as the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory* or the web-archive *Film Studies for Free* attest to.<sup>57</sup> Nicole Brenez is often credited as the one having developed the figure and its cognates most clearly into a method of film-analysis, defined by both Martin and Routt as distinct from the phenomenological focus of Dudley Andrew and ideological critique of Rodowick.<sup>58</sup> Unlike these two, Brenez is not after creating a new category to define the film-experience, but suggests quite a traditional method of analysis whose purpose is to concentrate on figures, their relations and their constitution, which she

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<sup>54</sup> Mules, “The Figural as Interface in Film and the New Media: D.N. Rodowick’s *Reading the Figural*,” *Film-Philosophy* 7, 56 (2003), accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol7-2003/n56mules>.

<sup>55</sup> Hansson notes that even though Deleuze does not develop a theory of the figural in relation to cinema, he is nonetheless an important philosopher in this context because of the categories he brings to light (52). Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>56</sup> Shaviro, 14-18.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland, eds., *Routledge Encyclopedia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 298; Catherine Grant, “Figural Analysis in Film Studies,” *Film Studies For Free*, accessed May 11, 2016, <http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.se/2011/05/on-figural-analysis-in-fim-studies.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Martin, *Last Day*, 6; Routt, “*De la figure*.”

considers have been neglected in film-theory. Her method revolves around finding the “figurative logic” and “economy” of a given film; focused, not on the types of relationships suggested by narrative- (action-reaction) and classical mise-en-scène-analysis (frame-subject-background), but rather on the circulation of tropes and motifs – that is, the way figures, as formations of the audio-visual properties of a film, are presented and distributed across images.<sup>59</sup> These are, for Brenez, work-specific and figural analysis is therefore a located method aimed at explicating a particular film’s “visual and acoustic proposal,” and not to produce general statement regarding filmic figuration.<sup>60</sup>

Brenez is particularly interested in figures that pertain to an “idea of the body.” However, she turns the realist proposal on its head when she argues that this idea is never dependent on an a priori body, but rather on “figurative models” that “load the cinematic effigy up with their artistic and cultural weight.” In this sense it is the figure that informs “our apprehension of the body;” the body is never ‘given’ because it corresponds to an individual, but rather is a symbolic and plastic construction; a product of the image, of the particular circuits enabled by the film-work.<sup>61</sup> Arguing thusly, Brenez takes some steps towards conceptualising what the human figure might be in relation to cinema. However, Brenez’s engagements with the figure *as distinct* from the human characters which populate a cinema *and* their bodies present a problem, not least for this thesis. Indeed, her focus on films in which the body is willingly deconstructed makes her approach neglectful of how body-figures (often in mainstream films) are humanised, normalised, and psychologised; how they are made into appropriate and accessible *subjects*.

## The Human Figure as Cinematic Concept

When derived from theories that revolve around notions of the visual, then, the notion of the figure indeed seems to lend itself to the cinema. Yet the concept of the specifically *human* figure remains uncommon in film-theory, or at least underdeveloped in the sense I have indicated so far; as a plastic entity that is part of formal modes of organisation.<sup>62</sup> Even Brenez, in many ways, stay strictly on the surfaces of film-images, concerned as she is with motifs, enabling little discussing regarding the kinds of structural and material organisations Fore sees the human figure as partaking in, and that Rodowick and Aumont consider as central to theorisations of the figural/figuration.

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<sup>59</sup> See Brenez, *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier: L'invention figurative au cinéma* (Bruxelles: De Boeck Université, 1998), or for a condensation of her method, Routt, “*De la figure*.” For an example, see “Come into My Sleep,” *Rogue*, 2005, accessed March 29, 2016, <http://www.rouge.com.au/rougerouge/sleep.html>.

<sup>60</sup> From “A Conversation with Nicole Brenez,” *Cinética*, February 20, 2014, accessed March 29, 2016, <http://revistacinetica.com.br/english/198/>.

<sup>61</sup> All quotes in paragraph from Brenez, “Incomparable Bodies,” *Screening the Past*, August, 2011, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/incomparable-bodies/>.

<sup>62</sup> Plasticity is a concept relatively underdeveloped in relation to cinema, however, Aumont points out some exception, *The Image*, 200-211.



Brenez suggests that film-theory's lack of thought regarding figures is because it has largely remained preoccupied with the implications of "real" bodies.<sup>63</sup> This is of course a slight exaggeration, which she appears to be acknowledging elsewhere where she credits "post-structuralist" theory with having enabled a view of films as "signifying, textual systems."<sup>64</sup> However, in doing so she curiously skips over feminist and post-colonial theory, in many ways highly instrumental in addressing imaged, represented bodies as products of the screen *and* as ideological constructs with stakes in being presented as 'real' and natural. Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler, for example, advocate cinema as a "technology of gender," meaning that it actively produces and constructs ideas of gender (and thus participates in wider power-structures concerned with creating gender as a natural category) and not merely reflect a state of things.<sup>65</sup> In another way, Laura Mulvey comes close to talking about the represented female body as precisely a figure in the above senses; as a figurative schema which binds together circuits of gazes and actions, as well as several representational and ontological categories.<sup>66</sup>

In Fore's account, however, the notion of the human figure posits, I would argue, a different approach to discourse, defined following Lyotard and Michel Foucault as the production of knowledge within cultural practices. If it is possible to say that accounts such as the ones I have all too briefly summarised above focus on the manifestation and maintenance of social power relationships through cultural practices, then an interest in figuration regards the material fabric of those practices, approximating what Jacques Rancière has called the "distribution of the sensible."<sup>67</sup> This focus neither rejects nor neglects the structures found in the former, but rather approaches them from a different angle. For example, Fore's deployment of the prefix 'human' indicates his interest in a formation that is both formal and ideological. As Braidotti has shown, the notion of the human is a heavily policed construct, one that neutralises political hierarchies "within a paradigm of natural law."<sup>68</sup> Fore's interest, and by extension mine, then, is, quite literally, how the human is materially produced as and through form. Fore, I would like to add, does not bring up Michel Foucault and Rancière, although his writing suggest them, and I invoke them here to show my theoretical allegiances and to provide a certain foundation for thinking about images, which I will develop in the next part.

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<sup>63</sup> Brenez, "Incomparable Bodies."

<sup>64</sup> Brenez, "The Ultimate Journey: Remarks on Contemporary Theory," *Screening the Past*, December, 2014, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2014/12/the-ultimate-journey-remarks-on-contemporary-theory/>.

<sup>65</sup> de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) and Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Summarised well in the anthology *Dialogier: Feministisk Filmteori i Praktik*, ed. Tytti Soila (Stockholm: Aura förlag, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film-Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (London and New York: Routledge/BFI, 1988), 57-68.

<sup>67</sup> See esp. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Braidotti, 1.

In relation to cinema, then, what might we take the human figure to be? Brenez argues for a separation between the “effigy” which appears on the screen and the “real body,” by which she indicates that corporeal, fleshy entity that necessarily exists.<sup>69</sup> While this seems a logical move for this study, it is nonetheless problematic; not least because of the politics of the body invoked above, which connects representation to the social reality of bodies and vice versa. Stephen Heath, before Brenez, utilised the term figure to designate illustrated people, but away from their function as narrative agents, characters, and persons (as in a famous actor).<sup>70</sup> In a similar way, Mary Ann Doane writes of a “fantasmatic body [...] reconstituted by the technology and practices of cinema” that “offers support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film.”<sup>71</sup> Kracauer, in his time, held that cinema as a mode of aesthetic mass-production had taken the human form and turned it into a “social hieroglyph,” not in the sense of becoming disembodied or ‘figural’, but rather because in the (or as an) image it would come to indicate the social reality of bodies under capitalism.<sup>72</sup> As the product of various forces of production, technology, and representation, that is, this human figure/social hieroglyph would at the same time be a material embodiment and a visual phenomena of a historical condition; a snapshot, as it were, giving form to a certain reality “rendering it accessible and cognizable to a critical and self-reflective consciousness.”<sup>73</sup>

I bring up these instances from the history of film-theory because rather than presenting the ‘persistence’ of the body as a problem, they consider it integral to the formation of cinematic human figures. What I am interested in is similar to Kracauer’s hieroglyph; the figure as a product of historically specific technological conditions, as well as methods of presentation, and their representational implications. In exploring the human figure as a concept for cinema, then, I am interested in how figures are produced and presented, rather than representations of psychologically driven human subjects constituted through narratives. This is not about applying a model onto films, but rather to suggest a certain approach which will look at work-specific deployments of the human figure; located “proposals” of, not what, but how that figure is.

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What kind of theoretical approach towards cinema can be derived here? Whereas Martin defines “figural thinking” as something akin to a genre,<sup>74</sup> I want to, drawing on Rodowick and Aumont, formulate an approach that considers figuration as a continually present category in film-works, in much the same way as narration and signification. In different ways they focus on how this ‘category’

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<sup>69</sup> Brenez, “Incomparable Bodies.”

<sup>70</sup> In Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 176-193.

<sup>71</sup> Doane, “The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33-34.

<sup>72</sup> Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75-88.

<sup>73</sup> I borrow this reading of Kracauer partly from Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 145-153, quote from 149.

<sup>74</sup> Martin, *Last Day*, 26.

materialise in and for cinema, as something that pertains to the material and technological levels of a film, but at the same time amounts to symbolic and ideological expressions. As such they outline a potentially critical approach that pays particular attention to the “arrangements and assemblages that make film happen in the way that it does”<sup>75</sup> – a figurative approach concerned with situated figurations and figures. Aylish Wood, drawing on Haraway, talks of technologies as “materialised figurations,” which can “inform ways of thinking about figures,” rather than presenting them as objects that innately represents.<sup>76</sup> I will develop this technologically oriented and critical focus as I go along; first, however, to see how figuration can function as a critical approach at all, a methodological framework regarding images is required.

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<sup>75</sup> Mules, “The Figural,” under section III.

<sup>76</sup> Wood, *Inception’s Timespaces*,” in *Special Effects*, eds. Dan North, Bob Rehak and Michael S. Duffy (London: BFI and Palgrave, 2015), 254-255.

## Part 2: On the Image

An event is neither substance, nor accident, nor quality, nor process; events are not corporeal. And yet, an event is certainly not immaterial; it takes effect, becomes effect, always on the level of materiality. . . . Let us say that the philosophy of event should advance in the direction, at first sight paradoxical, of an incorporeal materialism.<sup>77</sup>

Michel Foucault (1971)

According to Wood, through Haraway, any figure is necessarily part of a figuration; that is, it is located, embedded, and indicative of a larger network that is material as well as conceptual.<sup>78</sup> For this study, this has both practical and theoretical implications. On the one hand, in order to consider how it is that human figures appear and are embedded film-works, a framework is needed through which plastic processes of organisation and arrangement can be conceptualised. On the other, in order to develop situated figuration as a critical theory, it needs to be contextualised among modes of thinking about images and visibility as such. In what follows, I will outline some theoretical and philosophical resources for thinking about figuration outside its designation in contemporary film aesthetics.

As I have already suggested, figuration is ubiquitous process across many modes of representation – Routt even argues that, ultimately, all experience is based on figuration as a mode of cognition, of making sense of perceptual data.<sup>79</sup> However, even articulated as a process of visual representation, where and how figuration takes place is by no means clear. As Rodowick points out, first through Lyotard and then Foucault, an image's visibility cannot be taken for granted. Just as images have a figural dimension, he asserts, their discursivity also needs to be taken into account, to see how an order of the visible is articulated and sustained.<sup>80</sup> As 'discourse' is invoked by Rodowick mainly to

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<sup>77</sup> Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 231.

<sup>78</sup> Wood, "Inception's Timespaces," 254-258, drawing on Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), esp. 8-11.

<sup>79</sup> Routt, "De la figure," under 'Figure and rhetoric'.

<sup>80</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 31-33 and 49-64.

suggest operations of power as articulated by Foucault and Deleuze, this “visible” is not only what can be seen but what “can be rendered as intelligible and therefore knowable in a society.”<sup>81</sup> This still has nothing to do with linguistic expression because, for Foucault, visual media such as painting “is itself a discursive practice that embodies techniques and effects [...] shot through [...] with the positivity of knowledge.”<sup>82</sup> The question is then how to conceptualise (film-) images in order to understand figuration as a process which not only produces, but also sustains and orders the visible.

Aumont’s 1990 book *The Image* was concerned with outlining some foundations for thinking about images *as such*, as a mode of experience that can be optically perceived, as a category of representation, and as epistemic constructions, materially and conceptually constituted according to sets of social and ideological conventions. For me, in the process of researching this study, Aumont’s book has come to indicate a moment of change in film-theory (although perhaps not constitutive of that change), which in turn was reflective of larger disciplinary re-organisations in the humanities.<sup>83</sup> Not least, the emergence of “visual culture” as an academic discipline denoted a change of emphases from medium-specificity to larger frameworks of meaning,<sup>84</sup> and the rise of digital technologies provoked new takes on cinema.<sup>85</sup> These visual and digital “turns,” as well as the rise of a “new aestheticism,” are manifest in Aumont’s work,<sup>86</sup> which launches itself by starting from scratch with regards to the perception and cultural manifestation of images. This is also the context for the mode of “figural analysis” that I described previously, only Aumont starts from the other end of the spectrum; with what he considers to be the building blocks that create images, rather than the final product and its display of figures. Aumont takes a material and plastic approach to understand what images are and what they do. Visuality (of the image, not of perception) is considered an end-result, dependent on a range of other, technologically- and ideologically-oriented, processes. This chapter is about exploring how such processes have been understood, and so to add to a contextualisation of a figurative approach.

Both Foucault (through Rodowick) and Aumont, in very different ways, suggest what we might term the ‘realm’ of figuration as a complex intersection between different forces, which leaves the final

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 194.

<sup>83</sup> Martin talks about this change in “Turn the Page” and introduction to Brenez’s “The Ultimate Journey.” It is also brought up intermittently in Elsaesser and Warren’s *Studying Contemporary American Film*, especially in chapter 9, 250-284. Fuery also discusses such “major developments” in the wake of Deleuze’s 1980s cinema books, 1-5.

<sup>84</sup> Rodowick, esp. 32-40. See also introductions to *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicolas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 3-49.

<sup>85</sup> For discussion of the changes provoked by digital technology see e.g. André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion. *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Also, the anthology *Cinephilia In the Age of Digital Reproduction*, eds. Balcerzak and Sperb (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009); Elsaesser, “Early Film History.”

<sup>86</sup> Hansson elaborates on the connection between “new aestheticism” and especially Aumont’s film-theory, 19-30.

image as discursive ‘proposal’. Before being able to utilise ‘situated figuration’ as an approach to film-images, then, I find it necessary to develop this notion of the image, how it is that an image is seen as being able to organise and distribute. This will be a way of bringing certain terms to the surface for this study to employ in designating how human figures might be situated in images and what kind of relations they are inscribed through.

### The Act of Framing: Foucault and *Las Meninas*

Foucault frequently deploys ‘scenes’ in his works in order to, not exactly illustrate, but to demonstrate how acts and practices are animated by particular structures of power and knowledge. In *The Order of Things* (1966) he opens with a painting; *Las Meninas*, painted by Velázquez in 1656, which he posits as an example of a formation or enactment of certain conditions particular to a historical episteme.<sup>87</sup> What the painting evinces, for Foucault, is a historically specific idea of representation – representation as such being a key component in the operations of knowledge in the “Classical age,” but above all in the “Modern age.”<sup>88</sup> What Foucault then continues to elaborate on in relation to *Las Meninas* is a set of relations determined by certain formal elements, which *perform*, precisely in their formal-aesthetic capacities, epistemologically.<sup>89</sup>

Central to Foucault’s analysis of *Las Meninas* is the mirror that appears on the wall at the back of the room depicted; “the mirror provides a metathesis of visibility that affects both the space represented in the picture and its nature as representation; it allows us to see, in the centre of the canvas, what in the painting is of necessity doubly invisible.”<sup>90</sup> Foucault refers to the incorporation and assertion of the (external) space in front of the painting as “an ideal point in relation to what is represented, but a perfectly real one too,” affected by the painting which further also projects that position “within the picture.”<sup>91</sup> The point Foucault makes in relation to the Classical episteme is that here representation has become a function of itself; the image corresponding not so much to a real thing as to a subject-position. This image is thus conceptualised as a vehicle for vision; for Foucault, what is crucial is that it articulates its own conditions of visibility.

The elements of *Las Meninas* – its network of gazes, objects, perspectival lines – are distributed across its surface according to the articulation of a set of positions, largely *determined* by the function of the frame. Foucault does not mention the role of the frame directly since it is in his account somewhat replaced by an “observing function,” necessarily outside (or at least presented as

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<sup>87</sup> Put simply, in Foucault’s work an episteme is an underlying epistemological field which forms the conditions for knowledge in a given period. See *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), esp. xvi-xxvi.

<sup>88</sup> Foucault’s terms for the historical periods, first, from the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, and second from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. *The Order of Things*, xxiv.

<sup>89</sup> Foucault, chapter 1 in *The Order of Things*, 3-18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

necessarily so).<sup>92</sup> Yet it is clear that in this act of obscuring the frame posit it in a new role; namely that of an intermediate boundary which determines the image as a surface for the distribution of ‘lines’ but also the position which receives those lines. It is in this way, I would say, that Foucault links this painting both to Classical and Modern representation; it is the articulation of an ideal space, but also overtly points towards its own composition. The importance of Foucault’s account is that he shows that an image is not universally perceived as such, but performs functions which situate it as representation whilst at the same articulating more general epistemic conditions. The transition of the frame-function from passive to active (framing as indicative of viewing and composition) thusly indicate, not a movement towards an alignment of perception and representation (greater realism), but rather a reorganisation of the ontic vis-à-vis representation. Interestingly, for me, this historical development of representation dovetails nicely in with the development of photographic image-technologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the point where it corresponds with the conception of film-images even today. As Aumont has pointed out, the notion of a frame is subjected to further obscurity in relation to cinema where it often exists in terms of an identification with a “visual pyramid,” or a mobile window which can be moved to follow action in a continuous space.<sup>93</sup> Yet the frame, as in the limit of what is visible, continues to designate access. Indeed, in relation to cinema, the “observing function” Foucault describes with *Las Meninas* is often exaggerated to a point of further abstraction; the frame (made synonymous with the camera) as eye, offering an unmediated perception of the reality that is projected.<sup>94</sup>

The film-image is, of course, much more than a development of a certain construction of representation that Foucault sees as emerging in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and has its own range of theories and terms concerning its formal and aesthetic processes. Yet, I find it useful to draw on art-history (if Foucault can be said to do that) to point out certain continuities in the relation between surface, represented space, and frame. This is because whilst film-images have a perceptual closeness to a physical real, which seemingly negate their need for ‘optical tricks’, they equally have a stake in the composition, organisation, and distribution of visual elements. “Realism,” Aumont points out, is always culturally specific,<sup>95</sup> and this has been argued as equally relevant for the photographic “imprint” of reality which, according to theorists as Nelson Goodman, Noël Carroll, and Barbara

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 15. Derrida postulates on a similar historical function of the frame in terms of the “parergon.” “The Parergon,” *October* 9 (1979): 3-41.

<sup>93</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 166-167.

<sup>94</sup> This was argued enthusiastically by Dziga Vertov (*Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), e.g. 17) and Balázs (*Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), e.g. 93) in the 1920s, but then re-emerged in, for example in Christian Metz’s psychoanalytic account in the sense that the experience of watching a film disembodied the spectator, “The Imaginary Signifier.” *Screen* 16 (1975): esp. 59-60.

<sup>95</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 74-75.

Flueckiger, depends on more factors than a chemical trace.<sup>96</sup> Appropriating Foucault's approach to painting, then, is also a move toward being able to talk about digital film-images (and figures) in a way which does not bracket them in relation to photographic ones. Rather, what is of concern is how formal elements are *organised*; how they are enabled to distribute their 'content' *as* representative.

### Linear Perspective as Dispositif

A technique widely associated with the above mode of representation – the distribution of lines accumulating into an ideal observing position – is linear perspective. Initially, this might appear to off-set Foucault's delineation of epistemes in suggesting a continuation with a Renaissance mode of organising painterly space.<sup>97</sup> However, I would argue that *Las Meninas* effect an *internalisation* of linear perspective that is precisely to Foucault's point; it does not employ it in an obvious manner as do, for example, early 15<sup>th</sup> century artists such as Brunelleschi and Alberti, but rather *naturalise* it through the circulation of gazes and the sense of spatial continuity. As such, perspective in *Las Meninas* becomes a system of vision rather than an articulation of a geometric system.

Linear perspective has for some time been written about as something more than a formal-aesthetic device for rendering three-dimensionality on a flat surface. Louis Althusser considered it an ideological agent, positioning and therefore effectively creating a subject, inscribed as such by a set of relations set up by capitalism.<sup>98</sup> Fore similarly, although without a Marxist agenda, describes linear perspective as part of that "epistemological framework" which through a range of practices was concerned with "establishing man as the measure of all things."<sup>99</sup> As a technique, he argues, it posits a universal and "fully centred" subject, but also a concomitant set of 'ontological' categories through which that subject is located; for example, space and vision.<sup>100</sup> Linear perspective is thus an example of what Fore describes as a "formal-aesthetic device" and in its structural capacities he refers to it as "dispositif."<sup>101</sup> He does so in accord with Foucault's definition of the concept; a device (in English translations of Foucault "dispositif" is often translated as "apparatus," however I will retain *dispositif* to avoid confusion with more technological parameters of the film-image) that indicates a "system of relations," the epistemological stakes of a wide variety of disciplines and institutions.<sup>102</sup> In the case of

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<sup>96</sup> Flueckiger outlines this theoretical strand in her "Photorealism, Nostalgia and Style: Material Properties of Film in Digital Visual Effects," in *Special Effects*, 79-80.

<sup>97</sup> As *The Order of Things* continue, it becomes clear that Foucault sees *Las Meninas* as breaking from the Renaissance episteme, which he hints at on page 16.

<sup>98</sup> Ideology, for Althusser, being a thoroughly material (not conceptual) thing, see *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), esp. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," 85-126.

<sup>99</sup> Fore, 25.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 25-31, quote 26.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>102</sup> Foucault did not develop his concept of the *dispositif* to any great extent, although Adrian Martin argues that "much of his work, in retrospect, can be seen as developing it under other rubrics and through other models."



linear perspective what emerges is the visual manifestation of various notions in geometry, philosophy, optics, aesthetics and so on, *and* the representation of them as objective categories for representation, as it were. It is an interesting example to consider as a *dispositif* because it speaks of a *material inscription* of a range of propositions and stakes – without them ever being enunciated linguistically.

This brings, for this study, up the question of to what extent we are dealing with signs; can linear perspective be construed as a signifier and humanism (to be intentionally simplistic about it) as signified? Aumont, not negating the importance of semiotics in his approach to images, suggests instead a “symbolic dimension” of images to account for their communication of meaning via visual and material modes of organisation.<sup>103</sup> In this, he conflates the roles of signifier and signified into a function that is, simultaneously, indexical and ideological – or, ideological because it is presented as indexical. Using the notion of *dispositif* frames a subject of inquiry in a certain manner; namely, as a *constellation* that exists materially and discursively in a network of power-relations concerned, according to Foucault, with the subjectivisation of bodies.<sup>104</sup> The concept of the *dispositif* demonstrates a mode of thought were a formalist (as per Fore) approach is utilised to give shape to critical statements; I want to argue that it is with this genealogy that figuration can be productively developed as a category for thinking about cinema through. Figuration, as I have brought it up so far, indicates the processes that organises and arranges the visual for representation; the theoretical approach that is indicated by the *dispositif* gives ground to consider these processes as partaking in larger distributions.

### The Film-Image: Centring, Mise-en-Scène & Diegesis

A continuity of the “perspective paradigm”<sup>105</sup> into cinema has been argued for, especially by Marxist-influenced thought. Jean-Louis Baudry sees “the dominant form of cinema [as] driven by a wish for continuity and centering,” with the effect of positing a subject-position and its conditions for viewing in a manner analogous to that of linear perspective. Baudry even considers “the way the cinematic apparatus creates a centred subject [...] as a continuation of the traditional notion of a transcendental subject as it has been elaborated from Descartes to existentialism.”<sup>106</sup> In his summary of such thought, Aumont suggest that it is possible to regard cinema as operating in accord with a “centred” perspective, referring back to Arnheim’s term regarding the double propensity of (especially) classical cinema to present a centre on screen in which action unfolds and a concomitant idealised view of that

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Martin, “Turn the Page.” Foucault quote from “The Confession of the Flesh,” in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Gordon, 194-198, quote 194.

<sup>103</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 130-137 and 161-165, quote 134.

<sup>104</sup> Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” 194-198.

<sup>105</sup> As it is referred to by Fore, 37.

<sup>106</sup> Baudry, paraphrased by Aumont, *The Image*, 142. For his original argument, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus,” *Film Quarterly* 28, 2 (1974-75): 39-47.

action.<sup>107</sup> Aumont expands this idea of perspective by referring to it as “photographic,” incorporating the importance of the optical correspondence in the perception of the film-image.<sup>108</sup> This line of thought puts emphasis on how space is articulated by cinema, and not simply ‘given’ to it unmediated by the camera.

Aumont has shown how the general presentation of space in the cinema as a field existing beyond the frame “underline[s] the equation between the frame and the act of looking.”<sup>109</sup> This field both subsumes and supersedes linear perspective in that it propositions a similar presentation of space and interplay of gazes, but at the same time these elements are dramatised according to a number of other operations. In my transitioning now from the painterly image to the film-image I am not concerned with suggesting a history of the image or in presenting some universal property of images as such. Rather, I want to highlight the extent to which the film-image can be thought of in its plasticity, upon which particular dispositifs, modes of organisation, are brought to bear.

Mary Ann Doane likewise considers the presentation of a unified and continuous space one of the main concerns of mainstream Hollywood cinema. However, she moves away from the idea of cinema as carrying its own overarching version of linear perspective, she instead posits several functions for this presentation of space. Doane outlines the use of “mise-en-scène” as one such function in that it “organizes and aims at the body of the spectator” the “disparate elements” of the cinematic spectacle.<sup>110</sup> Mise-en-scène is a pervasive concept in film-theory and has taken on many meanings, from a theatrical one, referring strictly to a setting in front of the camera, to a more abstract one, where it can be used to designate relationships between the different elements constituting a shot. “Classical mise-en-scène” refers to both a technique and a mode of criticism, both of which posits an integration of filmed space (the sets made up for performance) and techniques with narrative, the telling of a story.<sup>111</sup> As such, it sustained certain categories as universal for cinema, summed up by Martin as “continuity, verisimilitude, the ensemble effect in acting performance, narrative articulation, the necessity for smoothness and fluidity, centring, legibility and formal balance.”<sup>112</sup>

In Doane’s account, however, mise-en-scène is presented as a mode of organisation; as enabling a particular idea of space *through* the bodies that occupy it (the “fantasmatic body”).<sup>113</sup> She draws on Lyotard for her conclusion of mise-en-scène as pertaining to a visual mode of organisation, as something which works on bodies (performers) for bodies (spectators) driven by and motivating

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<sup>107</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 66 and 115.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>110</sup> Doane, “The Voice in Cinema,” 47.

<sup>111</sup> Elsaesser and Buckland provide a good overview of the concept of mise-en-scène in *Studying Contemporary American Film*, 80-83.

<sup>112</sup> Martin, “Turn the Page.”

<sup>113</sup> Doane, “The Voice in Cinema,” esp. 33-34.

‘sense’ that is not reducible to story.<sup>114</sup> Lyotard puts forward a more affirmative notion of *mise-en-scène*, but as Martin sums up, like Doane, through this approach it emerges as a particularly cinematic *dispositif*; one way of “putting into place” the disparate elements of a film-work, and by putting them in place sustaining a certain order of the visible.<sup>115</sup> As Elsaesser and Buckland further suggest, considering *mise-en-scène* (non-classically) can be to consider connections between a variety of cinematic elements, how they work together, and how they produce an image.<sup>116</sup> I bring up this notion of *mise-en-scène* here to show how figuration can be thought of as an extension of concepts that are already formulated for cinema, and an example of how the image can be ‘approached’ in the case-studies.

Also, *mise-en-scène* displaces the optically oriented notion of a “photographic” perspective in favour of a more dynamic idea of cinematic operations. Because important to take into consideration with the films that will shortly be discussed, is that all the elements invoked so far will be presented in accord with a narrative, and as corresponding to a diegesis. Aumont is adamant in pointing out that the film-image is also a dramatic unit, engaged through a spatio-temporal continuum and momentum of action. This, he argues, points to other structures of meaning-making that equally determines the image, structures combined with yet other than those of the “symbolic dimension.”<sup>117</sup> For Ryan Pierson, the diegesis, as the “field of related possible actions” which describes a film’s universe,<sup>118</sup> is indicative of continuity functions besides those of perspective and *mise-en-scène*. He brings up camera movement, and its digital simulation (for him, they amount to the same thing), as a formal-aesthetic strategy which works to underline the ontic nature, openness, and spatial cohesion of the diegetic world. As the camera ‘moves’ around some central point of action, or with it, the world ‘appears’; this, for Pierson, becomes especially important in animated films or films heavily reliant on CGI.<sup>119</sup>

Speculations on immersion or reality-effects aside (for now at least) this suggest that the extent to which the film-image cannot be separated neatly into narrative and formal elements, or the temporal progression of action and the plastic dimension which presents it. Aumont uses the term “apparatus”<sup>120</sup> (away from its structuralist heritage) to suggest the (film-) image as a meaning-making machine in the sense that it induces what I would like to call situated figurations; sensible and intelligible visual forms both produced and confirmed by the material and conceptual network which ‘frames’ them.

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<sup>114</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “The Unconscious as *Mise-en-Scène*,” in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime*, ed. Murray (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 164.

<sup>115</sup> Martin, “Turn the Page.”

<sup>116</sup> Elsaesser and Buckland, *Studying Contemporary American Film*, 80-83.

<sup>117</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 169-173.

<sup>118</sup> Pierson, “Whole-Screen Metamorphosis and the Imagined Camera (Notes on Perspectival Movement in Animation).” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 10 (2015): 10.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 6-21.

<sup>120</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, chapter 3, 99-147.

## Situated Figurations: A Critical Approach & Methodology

In adopting these kinds of theorisations of the image, and of the film-image in particular, where the notion of a physical imprint or the structure of signs are no longer valid in ‘explaining’ realism, how can its connection to the ‘world’ be articulated? To clarify; how can a theory of figuration take into account of what Lyotard refers to as the “indexicality” of the visual;<sup>121</sup> the kind of schema by which, for example, a body is recognised as a body, not because it signifies a body but because, as the notion of a figure would suggest, it is?

In his attempt to develop a more synthesised account of the film-image, Yacavone has suggested the notion of a “film world” as a “singular, holistic, relational, and fundamentally referential reality.”<sup>122</sup> This world *of* a film is different but includes the world *in* a film and is first and foremost a “formal and presentational construction rather than only a representational and symbolic one.”<sup>123</sup> Objects (and bodies) of such a world, according to Yacavone, does not reference mainly by signification, but rather by “exemplification.” A term borrowed from Goodman, this is the process by which an object is presented as possessing a “property or quality,” and by extension represents it through being it, not innately but as part of the film-world.<sup>124</sup> It might seem an arbitrary distinction as first, but it is actually a similar notion to the one Butler proposes regarding gender, or Flueckiger regarding filmic realism; how certain properties are invoked as constitutive – femininity in the case of the former and, for example, film-grain or lens-flares for the latter – when they are rather affective and affected. Yacavone does not discuss figuration very comprehensibly, even though his way of writing about films seems to skirt around it constantly, but does implicate it into this context of exemplification; a ubiquitous process whose meanings are always specific to the work in questions.

The human figure, read through this framework, is ‘empty’, but brought to bear through the “assemblages” that produce and articulate it.<sup>125</sup> A figurative approach, then, assumes and is interested in its “technicity,”<sup>126</sup> not only as a representative category, but as the terms on which it is presented as human, as subject, as body, and so on, as a result of technological mediation. In each case-study, then, I will consider a central figure in terms of some particular technical and technological “assemblages,” and derive some conclusions of how this could be incorporated into a more critical approach to representation.

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<sup>121</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 6.

<sup>122</sup> Yacavone, xiv.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 16-17.

<sup>124</sup> “Exemplification,” see Yacavone, 117-130.

<sup>125</sup> “Assemblage” is an essentially Deleuzian term, with Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), e.g. 4, although I use it in a more general sense.

<sup>126</sup> As per Bradley’s account, see chapter I.



### III:

## Technology and Body in *Gravity*

Having in the previous chapters outlined a larger framework for thinking about figures and figuration in film-images, in the next two chapters I will focus on situated human figures. I started to do research on this thesis with *Gravity* in mind, interested in its overt centralisation of the human and the bodily not on the side of but *through* what was marketed as progressive digital imaging technologies and techniques. It seemed to me that its focus on embodied presence engaged notions of the ‘real’ beyond the necessity of a photographic trace; mirrored in its existentialist proposal which forefronts the experiences of “bare life”<sup>127</sup> whilst also re-asserting subjectivity as the core of such life. In what could create a problem for approaches such as Balcerzak’s, then, *Gravity* appears to have an invested stake in retaining the physical body, whilst that body is made analogous to spectacularised technological conjunction, which also sustains the means by which it is made visible. In short, *Gravity* highlights the kinds of relationships between the body, representation, and digital imaging technologies that I feel the figurative approach lends itself to and where it can “inform ways of thinking *about* figures,” rather than through them (as representing this or that).<sup>128</sup>

If the human figure always indicates a technicity, which determines not only its re/presentation but also the possibilities for conceptualising it, as human, or as body, at all, how can we nonetheless engage with the idea of technological mediation, as a key for considering figuration in films? For Scott Bukatman, films that employ extensive use of “effects” technologies (termed as such mainly to differentiate them from more traditional camera-work) often play out as a kind of meta-discourse on the technologies of filmic representation, and in correspondence to larger culturally specific ideas of technicity.<sup>129</sup> He uses the term “technological engagement” to discuss a conceptual flattening that takes place within such films, whereby a figure (often pertaining to technological imagery) comes to exist in reference just as much to the represented object (say, a robot) as it does to the technologies

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<sup>127</sup> As in biological life, and the physical ‘signs’ of it. I am using Agamben’s term in a simplified manner to designate something intrinsic to bodies as matter, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>128</sup> Wood, “*Inception*’s Timespaces,” 254. My italics.

<sup>129</sup> See *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), esp. 1-12 and 81-110. This is not an unusual proposal for, in particular, science-fiction films as is made evident in the anthology *Special Effects: New Histories, Theories, Contexts*, eds. North, Rehak and Duffy (London: BFI and Palgrave, 2015) as well as by e.g. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Doane, “Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine,” in *Body Politics*, 163-176; and Gunning, “Gollum and Golem.”

which enabled its presentation.<sup>130</sup> A particular issue, then, for a figurative approach in relation to a film like *Gravity*, is not to suggest a body-to-technology ratio, but rather to consider how the human figure is part of such a technological engagement; how it is made accessible and visible through and in relation to a specific, as Wood puts it, “instance[s] of materialised figurations.”<sup>131</sup>

In this chapter I want to begin to operationalise the “formalist” (via Fore, Aumont, Foucault, and Yacavone) framework set out previously. As is already evident, this requires also to see what it means to even talk about a particular film’s figurations, what elements to approach and why (why a particular assemblage and not another one?). As a hermeneutical enterprise in Auerbach’s sense, interpreting a work according to its figures depends on a comparative framework. Elsaesser, although not working with figures in my sense, has shown how comparison can lend itself to considering the largely non-verbal elements of film-works (such as figures) without reducing them to descriptive segments.<sup>132</sup> Even though I am not concerned with figural hermeneutics here, my work involves in some measure interpreting what a human figure might be, how it is deployed, and to somehow derive a conclusion of its ‘proposition’. In order to approach *Gravity*’s figures, then, I will start with a comparison that lends itself to the situation; not only because it was frequently articulated around the time of *Gravity*’s release, but also because Bukatman have developed some of his ideas regarding technology and visuality around it – *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968).

### The Human Figure in *2001* and *Gravity*

In reviews *Gravity* was often favourably compared to *2001*, indicating confluences of genre and style, a scaling down of story, and expansion of space (quite literally) into the sublime.<sup>133</sup> The films contain several similar sequences<sup>134</sup> and both feature scenes where a character’s bodily presence (their “bare” physicality) is given prominence across several axes of composition. *Gravity* opens with a prolonged scene where, after the accident, Stone is spinning uncontrollably through space. This recalls a few different parts of *2001*, such as the spacewalk scenes, when Bowman (Kier Dullea) struggles to dismantle HAL, or even the Stargate sequence, in the focus on what I have so far called *bodily*; heavy breathing, facial expressions (in close-up), and slow, concerted movements. The character’s faces

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<sup>130</sup> He uses this term specifically in the foreword to *Special Effects*, x; but it is a recurrent concern throughout his works in general, see esp. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 1-22.

<sup>131</sup> Wood, “*Inception*’s Timespaces,” 255.

<sup>132</sup> I am thinking especially about *Studying Contemporary American Film*. Sudeep Dasgupta and Wim Staat write explicitly about the influence of Auerbach on Elsaesser, and his frequent recourse to the methods of comparative literature, in *Mind the Screen: Media Concepts according to Thomas Elsaesser*, eds. Kooijman, Pisters and Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 43-59, esp. 44.

<sup>133</sup> E.g. Peter Bradshaw’s review for *Guardian*; Matt Zoller Seitz for *Roger Ebert*; and Megan Girdwood for *Paste*. For details see bibliography.

<sup>134</sup> For examples, the blog *STNLY KBRK* have gathered some images and sequences. “Kubrick and Cuarón,” March 14, 2014, accessed May 14, 2016, <https://stnykbrk.wordpress.com/2014/03/14/kubrick-and-cuaron-nods-to-2001-in-cuarons-gravity/>.

often fill the surface of the screen, contrasted with shots picturing the extremity of their surroundings (be it the void of space or the interior of HAL). However, as Wood points out, a comparison of these films also reveal differences,<sup>135</sup> most obviously in the scope of their “worlds.”<sup>136</sup> Whereas *2001* plays out over hundreds of thousands of years and vast amounts of space, *Gravity* unfolds over a couple of hours in the proximity of one character.<sup>137</sup> I would add that formally, *2001* often presents a still point-of-view, the spectacle in question retained within the image,<sup>138</sup> whereas in *Gravity* digitally produced trajectories create a constantly moving point-of-view very much part of the spectacle that unfolds. Further, Bukatman’s writings on *2001* points towards another difference;<sup>139</sup> whereas the characters of *2001* are put into relation with encompassing technological environments, in *Gravity* machines are fairly inconsequential (at least in visual terms).

Bukatman has written on *2001*’s construction of visuality as belonging to a “mode” of the sublime, recurrent in popular culture since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “address[ing] the perceived loss of cognitive power experienced by the subject in an increasingly technologized world.”<sup>140</sup> On these terms technology is presented as spectacular (and, if we follow Bukatman, anxiety-inducing), only to be contained by an assertion of the subject – through the narrative assertion of agency, by which protagonists ‘master’ the technological, mirrored by the positioning of the spectator as an ideal observer through a centralised perspective. Bukatman generalises what I would consider being a more varied resource of functions into one purpose, but he does point to a specific ordering of visuality in *2001*; in scenes like the one I mention above, on Bukatman’s terms, the focus on the bodily serves to anchor a spectacular cinematic experience defined by the latest imaging and effects technologies. It does so in a double sense; on the one hand, to confirm that effects take place on the same diegetic field as the characters (that they exist together), and, on the other, to integrate such new technologies of imaging into an established optical framework.<sup>141</sup> Much like Foucault argues of the mirror in *Las Meninas*, the positing of the character Bowman here provides something of a “metathesis” on the spectator’s engagement with the technological and representative object that is the film-image.<sup>142</sup>

On these terms, one is made aware of how the presence of Bowman in the image serves functions other than those of a character in a narrative; in short, how the *human figure* that indicates ‘Bowman’ in a narrative sense also operates across the “organisational and material structures” that designates

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<sup>135</sup> Wood, “*Gravity* by Alfonso Cuarón,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 7 (2014): 441-444.

<sup>136</sup> I will use this term henceforth to indicate Yacavone’s meaning for it, as explained in the previous chapter.

<sup>137</sup> Wood, “*Gravity*,” 441.

<sup>138</sup> Bukatman point out the importance of this technique for the “technological sublime” within *2001*; *Matters of Gravity*, 94-97.

<sup>139</sup> About science-fiction and technological environments, *ibid*, 24-30.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>141</sup> For the above argument see *ibid*, esp. chapter 4, 81-110.

<sup>142</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 9. See chapter II.



the cinematic apparatus.<sup>143</sup> Yet, this ‘situated figuration’ also suggest that it does so precisely to the extent that it can be comprehended as a body – not exactly as the body of the actor playing Bowman (Kier Dullea), but a body as a “point of identification,” that indicates the conditions of visibility.<sup>144</sup> The articulation of the bodily in such scenarios, for Bukatman, becomes an important “rhetorical figure” that sustains the human as embodied and in a dialectic with the technological.<sup>145</sup> *2001* becomes at this point a bad example for Bukatman’s point, as it ultimately pertains to an undoing of subjectivity. But invoking other films such as *TRON* (Steven Lisberger, 1982) Bukatman does put his finger on a ‘technological engagement’ that relies on figuring the human (as an embodied subject) and technology as separate entities, in a scopic relationship designated by a “centred” perspective.<sup>146</sup>

In contrast, *Gravity*’s even more overt centralisation of a human figure and the bodily does seemingly not adhere to this dialectic. Firstly, the technology depicted *in* the film is neither encompassing nor sublime, nor is it meant to designate a progressive and threatening state of technology (at some degree ‘beyond’ the human). Even though it is a broken machine which causes the accident that sets Stone spinning, it is not these machines which are the threat to her life and also not a locus against which subjectivity has to be re-assured. Secondly, the prevalent use of continuous “camera” movement<sup>147</sup> dislocates the frame (that which border what is seen) from a stable perspective, as these movements neither support nor finds support in even the most basic spatial constants (such as up or down). Whereas the frame occupy a point of relative fixity in relation to the human figures in *2001*, in *Gravity* the figure is ‘seen’ from a constantly changing point-of-view, the camera ‘as’ affected by the loss of gravity as is the protagonist. Rather than function according to a centred perspective, then, as Wood suggest, *Gravity* uses “the human figure as a visual tether” for its world.<sup>148</sup>

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What does this difference amount to? For William Brown, the increased possibilities of using such moving trajectories with digital imaging technologies leads to a decentering of figures in favour of a continuum based on movement, leading to a “minimizing of anthropocentrism in digital cinema.”<sup>149</sup> Contrary to this, Judith Roof, another theorist who laments the loss of physicality, has argued that such kinds of digital movements (she also talks about 3D) rather speaks of an illusion of “thereness;” a conflation of the spectator’s “physiological mechanisms of perception into the modes by which

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<sup>143</sup> In Aumont’s terms, *The Image*, 99.

<sup>144</sup> Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema,” 34.

<sup>145</sup> Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 16.

<sup>146</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 115. See chapter II, part 2.

<sup>147</sup> I have put ‘camera’ within quotation-marks here to highlight that I am using a turn of phrase rather than talking about a practical technique, as these movements were created digitally. See Pierson’s discussion of this problematic, 6-7.

<sup>148</sup> Wood, “*Gravity*,” 444.

<sup>149</sup> Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 2.

images and sounds are captured and transmitted” which ultimately amounts to “a narrowing of sensory breadth and a loss of idiosyncrasy.”<sup>150</sup> Considered in more formalist terms, it seems to me that *Gravity*’s construction of such double, or relative, movement indicates other techniques for representing spatio-temporal continuity; one that functions in a similar way to, for example, how in *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927), drawing on Alain Badiou, “the progress of a tram organizes the segmented topology of a shady suburb” (Badiou also speaks of “false movements”).<sup>151</sup> Fore, talking about linear perspective and photography, describes how an artist like László Moholy-Nagy tried to engender “new logics of perspective” by using machines as vehicles for seeing.<sup>152</sup> In a similar way, in *Gravity* the human figure functions instead of a centred perspective as an organising principle of visuality; as a structural “device” in Fore’s sense.<sup>153</sup>

Yet, whereas Fore saw this as a method that made relative the “epistemological framework” of linear perspective,<sup>154</sup> in *Gravity* it is hard to locate a concomitant reduction of the anthropocentric, not least because the human figure continually occupies the centre of the image. Further, the protagonist’s normative subjectivity is carefully staged and maintained throughout the film, in terms of agency and psychological motivation. The issue here is never assertion of human embodied subjectivity against an alien, or technological threat, but rather an assertion of it as it is; whereas *2001*, for example, open up imaginary frontiers, in *Gravity* there is only the great void which can stand in no relationship to the creature that is. Like in *2001* and *TRON* the body here becomes a “rhetorical figure” but a figure of itself more than anything else, of the immediacy and urgency of the bodily.

It is tempting in this scenario to prescribe to Roof’s argument; the insistence on embodiment as a technique of conveying “thereness,” when in fact, the ‘real’ body is further away than ever. In less hyperbolic terms, J. Hoberman has suggested (whilst criticising arguments similar to Roof’s as a “hysterical” reaction to the “digital turn”) that digital cinema often employs an overt emphasising of the bodily as some last integer of reality, in equal measures anxious about the virtuality of the digital.<sup>155</sup> Yet, in perpetuating the separation between the real and its representation, and the reality of representation as determined on its closeness to a “trace” in Bazin’s sense,<sup>156</sup> these theorists negate the technicity of the body and does not take into account both the constructed-ness of its ‘reality’ and other processes by which it is coded (they also ascribe to a psychoanalytic reading of cinema as compensating for its objects’ “lack”). In *Gravity*, rather, the human figure emerges *as* the

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<sup>150</sup> Roof, “The Actor Who Wasn’t There: Economies of Absence in Virtual Ecologies.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 83, 3 (2014): 626-627, 629.

<sup>151</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 79.

<sup>152</sup> Fore, 43.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 11. See chapter I.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 25. See chapter II.

<sup>155</sup> Hoberman, esp. 17-34.

<sup>156</sup> Gunning, “Moving Away,” 32; Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* Volumes 1 (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005), 18.

technological engagement. That is, the technological engagement which Bukatman and others have seen spatialised in the separation of human figures and technological objects on screen, is here internalised and played out by a figure that emphasises at once the bodily and a set of highly technologised cinematic operations.

The human figure performs a similar integrative function to the one in *2001*, in the psycho-spatial sense that is indicated by Bukatman and Doane, but surpassing a centred perspective in organising access to the diegesis. In a sense, it comes to function as a *dispositif*; providing continuity, not simply between a physical body and a digital environment, but between the visual (image) and structural (camera movement). Yet, the possibilities for the human figure to do this, I would argue, also depends on how it *is* a body; the presentation of the bodily determining the figure (and character) in the film-world.

This demonstrates the importance of the bodily in relation to the concept of the human figure; the extent to which the potential of the figure to organise an image is inseparable from its extension as body. I have already talked about the technicity of the body, but in order to make sense of what this might mean for a figurative approach I want to take another theoretical detour. How is figurative thinking to take up the body as an element which determines the human figure? In what follows, I will briefly try to take account of some of the ways in which the body has been theorised that could impact on my concept of the figure, to be further extended in the next case-study.

## Body Work

I suggested earlier that the interest in thinking about the human figure in art-theory and figuration in film-theory could be contextualised with the “visual turn” and a certain re-appropriation of aesthetic theory. Yet this re-conceptualisation of the human figure can also be configured in terms of a scholarly engagement with *the body*, emerging from the very depths of the poststructuralist context and, as such, one of the cornerstones of visual culture studies.<sup>157</sup>

Peter Brooks, writing in the early 1990s, saw the work of feminist scholars and Foucault, along with a renewed concern for anthropology, as culminating in “investigations of the ways in which natural bodies are marked, organized, and produced as cultural bodies.”<sup>158</sup> The concern with representation is key here, with texts like those of the anthology *The Body Imaged* (published in 1990) being emblematic of such research. Here the represented body is articulated “both as a site of particular

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<sup>157</sup> The “academic engagement with the body” since the 1980s as described in the introduction to *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*, eds. Detsi-Diamanti, Kitsi-Mitakou, and Yiannopoulou (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2. See also introduction to *The Body in Everyday Life*, eds. Nettleton and Watson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-24.

<sup>158</sup> Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), xii.

historical processes of physiological identification and as a site for myth and discourse.”<sup>159</sup> Its essays provide examples of how painted and sculpted bodies define and reinforce, both metaphorically and structurally, social beliefs and practices. Whereas mostly concerned with how meaning is “mapped” onto bodies as forms where the spectator recognises norms and conventions (or the Other), the anthology also looks to the constellation of bodies as a form of visual rhetoric. In a short note on photography, for example, editors Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pointon bypass discussions of mimesis in favour of a dialectic of the body as it emerges “both [as] an object represented in two dimensions [...] and as an organism that is organised to represent concepts and desires.”<sup>160</sup> The body is thus conceptualised as a primary component for meaning- and sense-making, as a unit both heavily constructed and affirmative of embodiment. For Adler and Pointon, as well as other writers in their anthology, the appearance of the body in images speaks just as much of a subject-position as do linear perspective for Althusser.

These positions are a move away from Brooks’ own psychoanalytic and constructivist conception of the body, where the body is ultimately constructed as a result of desire through language. As Elsaesser and Warren have described, this move indicated a shift from concerns with subjectivity and identity towards the body as a “site of discourses, images, and intensities.”<sup>161</sup> Braidotti puts this in terms of how the body in theory became increasingly configured in terms of a “nature-culture continuum,” where the separation of the body as biological material and cultural symbol was not so straightforward.<sup>162</sup>

For Braidotti, the various engagements of poststructuralism culminate in the theoretical emergence of the concept of the “posthuman,” indicative both of a historical moment and an academic critical approach. More than anything else this approach embodies a critique of Humanist notions of humanity, the subject, agency, and history. Through a focus on bodies as “living matter” matter *as well as* cultural, social, and political relationships in a situated manner, such theorising often emerges as materialist, in opposition to transcendentalist metaphysics – even though actively involved with the deconstruction of such branches of philosophy.<sup>163</sup> It is through such theorising and contextualising, then, that the texts of especially Fore and Graw can be properly placed, and their concern with the figure conceived of not merely as a concern with formalism but with the material relations of epistemology. Theirs are attempts to engage with this “site” that is the figure of a human body *without* the notion that we are dealing with either (exclusively) a copy or a symbol, but rather a *discourse* wherein the body is variously defined in terms of the relations/properties it is positioned through – or

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<sup>159</sup> Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pointon, introduction to Part III of *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture since the Renaissance*, eds. Adler and Pointon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 85.

<sup>160</sup> Adler and Pointon, introduction to Part IV of *The Body Imaged*, 125.

<sup>161</sup> Elsaesser and Warren, *Studying Contemporary American Film*, 281.

<sup>162</sup> Braidotti, 2.

<sup>163</sup> See Braidotti’s book on the posthuman, esp. introduction, 1-12, and chapter 1, 13-54. Quote from page 3.

even transcend them through the workings of the figural. A major point made by Fore is precisely this; whilst the represented body is often thoroughly constructed and carefully maintained ideologically, it is also a site of resistance, liable to deconstruction and expropriation. All the artists he brings up in his book *Realism after Modernism* (2013) uses the human figure specifically to deconstruct the “epistemological framework” that it initially belonged to – these artists are, in a sense, posthuman before their time.

This critical and philosophical framework emphasises the possibility “to focus on the [...] body as a figure in discourse without disregarding material effects (or the material practices of which this figure is itself an effect).”<sup>164</sup> Tracing a film’s figurative work, especially its articulations of human figures, then, it is necessary to consider both analogy (the body as body) and technology (cinematic operations) as elements which serve to make it discursive and accessible. Talking about the representation of “nature-spaces,” Molloy emphasise that “how it is named is less important than the way it is coded as a particular type [...] onscreen.”<sup>165</sup> It seems to me that this is the prime objective for a figurative analysis; the see how entities (such as human figures) are *coded* in specific cinematic instances, as to enable criticisms of the representative practices they form part of, but also to locate instances where the coding perhaps does not work so smoothly.

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This philosophical and critical work on the body shows how bodies are always figured, but also how the human figure always contains and is contaminated by the body. The body, as written out here, emerges as an elementary example of Lyotard’s notion of the figure; as per Foucault it is the ultimate discursive object, “imbricated in the matrices of power at all levels,”<sup>166</sup> yet it also goes beyond that as affective matter, as containing a sensory immediacy.

Focusing on a situated human figure, then, complicates a purely formal framework because it brings the “hybrid materialities” of a film-world to the fore;<sup>167</sup> not merely in its connections to the ‘human’ trope but in its allusions to the body and its technological mediation. Yet, in relation to a film like *Gravity* this also brings up questions regarding representations; seeing as it centres around a sense of physical immediacy and biological functionality – the body as affective matter – how is this in turn taken up by a representative schema? Although I do not have space here to take the figurative approach to this level, I want to indicate the kinds of questions it can open up.

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<sup>164</sup> Jacobus, Keller, and Shuttleworth, introduction to *Body Politics*, 4.

<sup>165</sup> Molloy, 182-183.

<sup>166</sup> Jacobus, Keller, and Shuttleworth, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Wood, “*Inception*’s Timespaces,” 254.

## IV:

### Figuring the Human in

#### *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*

In relation to *Gravity*, I wanted to exemplify a figurative framework by showing how the human figure functions as a main actant that organises and brings processes of figuration to the fore (in a hierarchical and/or rhetorical manner). I have argued that part of the force of the human figure comes from its close association with the bodily, yet how it also brings attention to the situated technicity of a cinematic body (which also leads to a consideration of its technicity in general). Thusly, using the human figure as a theoretical tool sutures what has traditionally been considered two separate realms of the film-work – its technological mode of production and its representative depictions – as both being part of a figuration;<sup>168</sup> an organisation of elements that make a film (quite literally) accessible in terms of visual and referential parameters.

Having so far mainly focused on conceptual, theoretical, and formal issues to do with figuration, I am now going to turn more thoroughly to what Wood refer to as “materialised figurations” in and of themselves;<sup>169</sup> I will expand on some more practical aspects of the technology of a particular film, in order to see what this adds to an understanding of the human figure. By focusing on *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* in this chapter, I come back to the initial situation of interest. If with *Gravity* I had to take a detour to complicate an easy distinction between body and technology in cinematic human figures, here I want to pay particular attention to the “arrangements and assemblages that make film happen in the way that it does,”<sup>170</sup> in terms of the technologies that facilitate and mediate representation. This is not to argue that mediation is more of an ‘issue’ with digital technologies, but rather to look at the specificities of how the human figure is taken up in this instance of digital film-making and to consider how that plays a part in organising visuality. Whereas I have already shown how the cinematic body can be considered an always mediated unit (as pertaining to a wider cultural conception of the body), the issue here is rather the formal-technical terms of its mediated presence, of its so-called indexicality. I begin, in a sense, from the same position as Balcerzak, but look to complicate it and propose other ways in which digital characters assume the bodily and the human.

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<sup>168</sup> As Wood shows in “*Inception*’s Timespaces.”

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>170</sup> Warwick Mules, “The Figural as Interface,” section III.

Like *Gravity*, *Dawn* was heavily promoted in terms of its visual effects, especially the deployment of motion-capture and CGI which allowed human actors to perform its ape-characters. A recurrent feature in the film's promotional material was a split-screen video showing an actor performing in a motion-capture suit on one side and a fully animated ape, with the same movements, on the other.<sup>171</sup> This paratextual concentration on motion-capture and the creation of the apes parallels the film's visual and narrative focus on the apes and their interrelations; like in *Gravity*, the figures of the apes are indicative of the film's "technological engagement,"<sup>172</sup> a prime point through which figuration can be engaged with. However, whereas in relation to *Gravity* the performance of Bullock was often posed as an addition to a digital environment,<sup>173</sup> in *Dawn*'s paratexts actors' performances and the production of characters are presented as fully enmeshed in digital imaging processes.<sup>174</sup> Both actors and technicians emphasise the role of various imaging technologies (that is, apart from camera-work) that enabled them to sustain not simply 'realistic' movement, but rather interiority and personality; the emotional details of live-action performance.<sup>175</sup> Although, as Lisa Bode and Lisa Purse have pointed out, this is an important rhetoric for films that rely on digital imaging technologies,<sup>176</sup> it nonetheless highlights a focus on correspondence and individuality, attentive above all towards a continuity of behavioural and individualistic traits.<sup>177</sup> The technicians involved with *Dawn* continually point out the importance of "translating" actors' physical traits as well as emotional states for the creation of CGI-characters as fully realised subjects.<sup>178</sup> Because of the extent to which digital imaging technologies are, then, embroiled not only with perceptual 'reality-effects', (i.e. making movement looking more authentic) but with the articulation of a figure as a subject (as a fully psychologised character) I want to follow Wood's suggestion and take a closer look at how this works as part of a figuration.

It might seem at odds to discuss a film focused on non-human characters for a study of the human figure in cinema. Yet this film draws several issues that this thesis aims to explore into sharp relief; not least by drawing attention to the human in the presentation of it through evolutionary tropes, but also via its stakes in featuring 'naturalistic' (ape-) bodies as a result of 'human' performance, and by doing so providing a simultaneous foregrounding of specific digital technologies. Further, as Sherryl Vint has summarised, animals are frequently engaged by representative practices as figures against

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<sup>171</sup> For this kind of material, visit the film's website, *Dawn of Apes*, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Official Website, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://moments.dawnofapes.com/>.

<sup>172</sup> Bukatman, introduction to *Special Effects*, x. See chapter III.

<sup>173</sup> As Wood sums up her review, "*Gravity*," 441-444.

<sup>174</sup> See e.g. interviews with Simon Clutterbuck, Joe Letteri, and Kevin Norris, "A New Generation of Apes." extra on *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* blue-ray.

<sup>175</sup> See Barbara Robertson, "Evolution: Weta Digital Advances the State of the Art of Creature Creation," *Computer Graphics World*, July/August, 2014 for a range of interviews.

<sup>176</sup> Bode, "Fleshing It Out: Prosthetic Make-Up Effects, Motion Capture and the Reception of Performance," in *Special Effects*, esp. 37-39; Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 53-56.

<sup>177</sup> A discourse that can be seen already in relation to Gollum, see especially Andy Serkis, *Gollum: How We Made Movie Magic* (London: Collins, 2003).

<sup>178</sup> Robertson, esp. 19.

which “humanity” is measured, where “they simultaneously serve to mark the outside of what constitute ‘the human’ and as uncanny mirrors for humanity.”<sup>179</sup> Thusly it is not so much the representation of an animal which is of interest, but rather the parameters along which it is figured, necessarily, in this case, implicating the human form and, as we shall see, its ‘epistemological’ commitments. Looking at this type of figure, then, can hopefully further the notion of ‘situated figuration’ as a critical enterprise, and I will finish this chapter by suggesting a more critical approach.

### The “Technological Ecology” of *Dawn*

Motion-capture is mainly understood in Balcerzak’s account as a facilitator for special effects, and thusly not a technology of cinematic representation per se.<sup>180</sup> However, as Gunning has pointed out, such a distinction is at best arbitrary; he shows how movement as arguably been considered as the foundation for cinema for longer than photographic visual correspondence.<sup>181</sup> The editors of recent anthology *Special Effects* also point out the flaws with an approach that separates so-called “effects” from “the rest of cinema,” as if the latter engages in an unmediated representation of the real world to which the former is merely an artificial addition, and as such somehow less meaningful.<sup>182</sup> This echoes the criticism Rodowick levels at several disciplines (which he groups under a concern with “aesthetics”) wherein the visual is only made meaningful if it can participate in a presentation of the world to a linguistic realm of discourse – indeed, the visual effect is rather something that brings attention, as Bukatman says, to the “act of seeing.”<sup>183</sup> Following Rodowick, it is a prime example of how media, and especially digital media, can and should be thought of according to other systems of thought than that of photographic indexicality and linguistic signification.<sup>184</sup>

Both Wood (as I have relied on throughout the study so far) and Angela Ndaliansis have written on how to include, in particular, digital imaging technologies and their products into a more expansive notion of a “cinematic apparatus,” much in the ‘meaning-making’ sense as indicated by Aumont.<sup>185</sup> Wood emphasises that technologies and the “paratexts” about them form their own “narratives” and discourses, which then are brought into play in film-works, adding layers of meaning besides those articulated by the story or characters’ visual coding (as female, as hero, etc).<sup>186</sup> Ndaliansis argues the same point but adds that visual effects even in their final, optical form both “parallel the concerns of

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<sup>179</sup> Vint, “Simians, Subjectivity and Sociality: 2001: A Space Odyssey and Two Versions of *Planet of the Apes*.” *Science Fiction Film and Television 2* (2009): 225.

<sup>180</sup> Balcerzak, 195-198.

<sup>181</sup> Gunning, “Moving Away,” 33-34; “Gollum and Golem,” 320-322. The idea of cinema as belonging to an “expanded field” is also an important argument of Elsaesser’s “Early Film Theory,” 20.

<sup>182</sup> North, Rehak and Duffy, introduction to *Special Effects, 2*.

<sup>183</sup> Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 13.

<sup>184</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, esp. 203-234.

<sup>185</sup> Aumont, *The Image*, 99-143. See chapter II, part 2.

<sup>186</sup> Wood, “*Inception*’s Timespaces.”



the narrative” and drive larger “metaphysical question[s] that exits the diegetic world.”<sup>187</sup> In this sense, technology is never invisible but adds, as Ndaliansis seems to suggest, epistemic ‘weight’ to visual images for them to be perceived as representative. Wood uses the phrase “ecology of technology” to describe the interconnections between different elements;<sup>188</sup> by seeing how an ‘effect’ is produced *as well as* what relations it partakes of in the final image, enables, for her, a different perspective on a figuration as it dislocates actions and characters from a narrative flow and instead consider their functionality within a “cinematic reality” (defined by Wood in a similar manner to Yacavone’s “world”).<sup>189</sup> This is an approach to figures that does not rely on, or at least not as much, a ‘scopic’ mode of interpretation; in contrast to what I did with *Gravity*, I will here start with aspects of *Dawn*’s ecology, and thusly hope to approach its ‘visuality’ differently.

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Motion-capture is neither a new technology nor is it exclusively a cinematic one; it exists across a variety of fields as a system for tracking and processing movement into digital data. In most instances, a subject/performer is fitted in a light-weight suit, upon which markers are placed in key positions. These are either a light-source in themselves (active) or reflective (passive), corresponding to either optical or non-optical systems. In *Dawn*, a mixture is often used with a noticeable drive towards set-ups that does not rely on a well-lit sound stage (as do passive markers). Depending on whether the markers are passive or active the recording a subject’s performance varies slightly. If passive, light is reflected by the markers and picked up by the cameras, which often are set as to ‘see’ only these dots of light. Different cameras have different functions; some can track body markers and others facial ones, but as they also record all the markers visible in every instance this enables the computer to triangulate the marker positions and create a 3D “marker cloud.”<sup>190</sup> Active markers work similarly but allow for greater integration of a subject in an environment; for *Dawn* Weta Digital developed a wireless system which meant they could shoot on location.<sup>191</sup>

Each marker serves as a point of correspondence for the visualisation of movement in digital form. As they are recording the movements of a subject via their (digital) sensors, the cameras send their *data* to computers where it can be processed by software, which automatically interprets the data and creates a visual model. In short, then, with motion-capture human movement can be “captured” in

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<sup>187</sup> Ndaliansis, “Baroque Façades: Jeff Bridges’s Face and *TRON: Legacy*,” in *Special Effects*, 154.

<sup>188</sup> Wood, “*Inception*’s Timespaces,” 255.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>190</sup> The information in this paragraph have been extracted from a variety of sources; Sutil, Balcerzak; Jenna Ng, “Seeing Movement: On Motion Capture Animation and James Cameron’s *Avatar*,” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7, 3 (2012): 273-286; Alberto Menache, *Understanding Motion Capture for Computer Animation and Video Games* (San Diego and London: Academic Press, 2000); Maureen Furniss, “Motion Capture,” *MIT Communications Forum*, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/furniss.html>; and Tom Sito, *Moving Innovation: A History of Computer Animation* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>191</sup> See Robertson.

real-time via multi-layered and simultaneous processes, which essentially consists of signals and data. Bearing this in mind enables a detachment from the idea of a representative practice to a processing one; ultimately, motion-capture functions as an interface between performance (motion) and its reproduction as image. This accounts for some of the difficulty in incorporating motion-capture into film-theory, which relies on the visuality on images (and especially if they assume the integrity of the photographic trace). Writers on the technology highlight the difficulty in finding a consensus regarding what it does; the opinions divide on whether it is a tool for analysis and performance or visualisation and animation.<sup>192</sup> Sutil, approaching motion-capture from a non-cinematic perspective, suggest that motion-capture be thought of as a medium in its own right. But he does not distinguish it on the same terms as Balcerzak; rather he sees it as containing a radically different “continuity function,” which results not so much in the positions of objects but rather of the creation of trajectories, the “communicational, instrumental, and affective traffic of the body and bodily movement.”<sup>193</sup>

There is, however, some risk in putting too much emphasis on the possibilities of motion-capture’s supposed transcending of the human form (as object and subject). In a film like *Dawn* motion-capture is accompanied by a range of other technologies which work to integrate into conventional methods of filmic image-production. Not only is there extensive work done in animation (CGI), often more so than performance-oriented paratexts let on; as Dan Barrett, animation supervisor for *Dawn*, explains, animating the apes was not simply about putting a complete image of an ape over an actor’s performance, but rather about integrating minute details from different fields; the facial expressions of the actor, human variations on mouth shapes (for convincing dialogue), studies of how fur reacts when wet, an integration of gaits and gestures between the actor’s, what an actual ape would do, and what make sense for the final image – and so on.<sup>194</sup> These variables are not mounted ‘onto’ the image of the actor, but rather built up through visualisations of ape skeletons and musculature – derived from biological studies of ape anatomy – integrated, in turn, with the movements, gestures, and expressions derived from the motion-capture data.<sup>195</sup> Neither are these kinds of digital imaging processes simply added to more conventional camera work, but there is a range of intermediate processes, revolved around collecting data from shoots so that animated objects can be integrated into a synthesised image,<sup>196</sup> most often determined as such by a paradigm of “photorealism.”<sup>197</sup> In *Dawn* this is evinced

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<sup>192</sup> As Furniss explains in “Motion Capture.”

<sup>193</sup> Sutil, 202 and 205.

<sup>194</sup> Robertson, esp. 19.

<sup>195</sup> Bode, 32.

<sup>196</sup> For an account of such processes, see Christopher Cram, “Digital Cinema: The Role of the Visual Effects Supervisor,” *Film History* 24 (2012): 169-186.

<sup>197</sup> As Elsaesser and Buckland point out in *Studying Contemporary American Film*, 210-213. This integration by means of a photographic, visual, paradigm points toward another interesting assemblage, which unfortunately I do not have the space to go into here.

through a range of techniques which recall photographic work; the frequent usage of pull-focus for example, or the play of light and shadows across characters and spaces.

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For Gunning, these kinds of “non-photographic” technologies reveal that cinema exists in a more expanded field of practices than “traditional film theory” might suggest, and rather connects with a cinematic tradition that “focused less on the recreation of the world than on reproducing human figures.”<sup>198</sup> He brings up Thomas Edison on the one hand and Étienne-Jules Marey on the other, to show how cinema emerged (also) from technologies that in the first instance used the human body as a base to present certain phenomena to vision; fantastic juxtapositions for Edison and the imperceptible aspects of movement for Marey. Gunning discusses the motion-capture and CGI-character Gollum (from *Lord of the Rings*) in particular to show that whilst these characters exceed Bazin’s specular conception of realism, they are both materially grounded and ideologically motivated, like most figures in the cinema, human or not. As such, for Gunning they are still part of a referential world and appeal in a similar way as bodies to “the effect of realism, or even the sensation of physical presence.”<sup>199</sup> In short, these kinds of characters still “exemplify” in a multitude of ways.<sup>200</sup>

However, as Bode points out, the CGI-characters of *Dawn* and its predecessor *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Rupert Wyatt, 2011) are not constructed as fantastical creatures, but rather through appeals to ‘naturalistic’ ape physiology and behaviour. Drawing on paratexts she explains how an awareness of biology and anatomy guided the animators; “fleshing out our impression of Caesar’s body with biological detail [was] the film’s major technological and aesthetic point of departure from the earlier films.”<sup>201</sup> The issue with *Dawn*, then, is how these characters are inscribed by a logic of resemblance to exemplify the natural and biological, but at the same time articulated as different, as more ‘realistic’ than the previous film-cycle due to advanced digital imaging technologies.

‘Naturalism’ and ‘realism’ are complicated terms to handle in relation to cinema. However, considered as proposals of an individual film-work, as something situated and exemplified, affected through the “ecology of technology,” they can also be considered in terms of a figurative rhetoric circulated in a film-world. Here, motion-capture in particular features rhetorically as a way of imbuing physicality (carrying on what Mulvey has called the “phenomenon of the Star”<sup>202</sup>) but also it features as a key in the circulation of the bodily, which is taken up in a similar way as in *Gravity*; as pertaining to the immediate but nonetheless being sedimented and thus naturalising a certain

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<sup>198</sup> Gunning, “Gollum and Golem,” 321 and 325.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 347.

<sup>200</sup> In Yacavone’s sense, 117. See chapter II.

<sup>201</sup> Bode, 32.

<sup>202</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London, Reaktion, 2006), esp. 54-66.

proposition of subjectivity (as we shall see). How does this connect to other elements? How can this materialised figuration help us look at motifs and their visual unfolding?

### Animal Motif, Anthropocentric Figure

What Bode describes as *Dawn*'s difference is paralleled by certain elements in the narrative and diegetic universe. I will highlight a few that I find particularly relevant for articulating the possibilities of a more critical figurative approach to *Dawn* and its figures.

*Dawn* opens with a credit sequence that features an 'infographic' of the spread of the so-called "simian flu;" travelling lines and lights superimposed over a globe, across which news footage is projected, illustrates both its spread and providing a recap of where the previous film left off. As the virus spreads, 'official' voices and images give way to more individual expressions of panic and disarray; eventually, these images fade out as do the various lights on the globe. Fade-in to a close-up of a pair of green eyes; a pan-out from which reveals the main protagonist – the chimpanzee Caesar – and a large group of other apes sitting on branches in a lush forest. Cuts reveal other characters from the previous film; they communicate with Caesar through sign-language, which is subtitled. The soundtrack is hushed, featuring the 'natural' sounds of a forest, breathing and grunts from the apes. Suddenly they spring into action; the apes are hunting a herd of deer. A scene follows with a quick succession of shots demonstrate the apes' at-one-ness with their environment; they move around eminently through the trees and they hunt methodically and not unnecessarily. After a brief altercation with a bear (which they kill), they go back to their village, where the females of the group are. This sequence culminates with Caesar's mate giving birth; we see a burgeoning society at peace – a society which has not seen humans in over ten years and displays a general disinterestedness in their affairs.

This 'introductory' sequence announces the filmic world of *Dawn*. There is a diegetic universe that is presented as *for* and *through* the apes which, unlike the humans, can move around unhindered. These scenes also establish kinds of interaction between the apes (hierarchical, familial, gendered), as well as with the human characters, the first meeting with whom is played out from the apes' perspective. The film's story-arch details a group of humans' attempt, and failure, at re-constructing a power plant on the apes' territory. Whilst *Dawn* starts in the ape community, it continues in sets of scenes where the effects of interactions between the groups are mirrored from each one's perspective, before finally mounting to a battle. This mirroring emphasises similarities – the apes argue about how to handle the humans and vice versa, both 'sides' have 'good' characters and 'bad' characters, where the good ones want to protect their families at all costs, whereas the bad ones want war – with an apogee sustained between the lead males of the two groups, both battling with a moral dilemma. However, as this unfolds, the apes are given a greater scope than their human counterparts; narrative and visual arrangements attribute a greater sense of agency and collective power to the apes, and often treat them

more favourably in terms of emotional and optical density. For example, the frequent close-up of apes' eyes and faces find no equivalent in relation to the human characters, and dramatic peaks in the ape community are given both more time and more spectacular imagery.

The animal is often represented in cinema as a “figure of alterity,”<sup>203</sup> which defines the human by coming into proximity with characters coded as such; this is a status often extended to CGI-characters, be they organically or mechanically oriented. As Molloy has argued in relation to *Avatar*, the CGI-characters are othered and thusly provide a kind of fence against which normative and/or ideal ‘human’ values can be ascribed, at the same time as they function mainly as enablers of the main protagonist’s – a white male – journey of self-discovery.<sup>204</sup> Yet, in *Dawn*, whilst the apes are differentiated from the human, this occurs on contrasting terms. Because in staging their separation (rather than coming together) from the human characters, I would argue, the film assures their independence from the kind of alterity given the Na’vi tribe in *Avatar*; and even though the film present a dialectic between species, this is not figured through the scopic terms as Bukatman describes of, for example, *2001*, which asserts agency to a normative human embodied subject.

For Purse, who puts *Avatar* and *Dawn*’s predecessor, *Rise*, on equal terms, argues that here “the digital body takes the place of the human agent, and must therefore take its place within the film world, embedded in the narrative flow.”<sup>205</sup> The digital apes in *Dawn* take this one step further because they overtake their human counterparts; figuratively (as I describe above) as well as narratively. Bukatman has described how science-fiction often stages assurances of the continuity of subjectivity and agency by threatening it and then re-stabilising it.<sup>206</sup> Rehling has argued further that such reassurances do not necessarily depend on the human body as a motif; rather, by locating hegemonic notions of subjectivity and agency (often coded as male) in othered entities, they can be presented as universal, ‘hidden’ in the epistemological framework, as it were, that determines a actions and continuities in a cinematic reality.<sup>207</sup>

In *Dawn*, then, rather than a coding of the body (through the bodily) as in *Gravity*, is concerned with a coding of the natural and/as universal; defined in equal measures through nature-biology and the way it is accessed as optical. The anthropocentric is here internalised as epistemological framework which guides the film-world, and emerges in several tropes and motifs (for example, the ‘noble savage’, the hero, community). I offer this more as a suggestion for further research and as an example of how a figurative approach opens up familiar critical problematics, but from another perspective. To consider a film’s “material figurations” as an approach to its situated human figures enables an engagement not

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<sup>203</sup> Vint, 225. Also, for more context, Linda Williams, “Modernity and the *Other* Body: The Human Contract with Mute Animality,” in *The Future of Flesh*, 221-239.

<sup>204</sup> Molloy, esp. 179 and 184.

<sup>205</sup> Purse, *Digital Imaging*, 56.

<sup>206</sup> Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 1-23. Also *Matters of Gravity*, 24-30.

<sup>207</sup> Rehling, 182-193.

so much with what a motif represents (even though this figures) but rather the epistemological stakes motif are inscribed through.

## V:

# Conclusion

“A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand.”<sup>208</sup> Even though this study have elaborated a context against Christian Metz’s preferred modes of analysis, psychoanalysis, and semiotics, he with this sentence captures well the notion that (or even how) a film unfolds figurally; that it makes *sense* and that it is *sense-making* outside a sphere of linguistic interpretation. Following Shaviro’s criticism of Metz, this might be indicative of a “phobia” of images as always escaping, never being able to be assimilated completely into a theoretical structure that aims to define them.<sup>209</sup> Although I make myself guilty of subjecting a porous and supremely visual (in Lyotard’s sense) entity to linguistic explanation, rationalisation, and configuration, I have in this study nonetheless attempted not to be restrictive. Rather, I have found myself wanting to engage with a concept both as a historical and theoretical construct and as something found, as something that suggests itself in the ways it ‘appears’ in situated circumstances. I do not think one can come without the other; as Routt emphasises, interpretation is unavoidable,<sup>210</sup> and therefore I have found it more productive to explore the parameters (historical and theoretical) of an entity one assumes to find in the film-image. As Haraway has likewise shown, aspiring to understand a phenomenon in a more “objective” (i.e. explanatory, deductive) manner is a strategy in itself, but a strategy which carefully has to take into account the phenomenon as “situated.”<sup>211</sup> This is what I wanted to do here; show the concept of the human figure is embedded in a tradition of thought, but also it ‘exists’ in practice. I have attempted to be precise, but at the same time leave questions open rather than closed. The human figure is a concept that similarly is difficult to explain but easy to understand; however, this is, I find, what made it an intriguing prism to look at cinema through.

This has essentially been a study of methodology, of how to adapt a largely philosophical concept for use with regards to cinema. I have, however, attempted to do so not from a philosophical position, or from the idea that ‘film does philosophy’,<sup>212</sup> but rather from a “cultural studies” standpoint,<sup>213</sup> which proceeds from asking critical questions about cultural practices and their representations. Within this, I have nonetheless chosen to focus on formal and technological concerns, an area often neglected

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<sup>208</sup> Metz, quoted in Elsaesser and Warren, *Studying Contemporary American Film*, 1.

<sup>209</sup> Shaviro, 13-19.

<sup>210</sup> Routt, “*De la figure*,” under section ‘Figure and generation’.

<sup>211</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, esp. chapter 9, “Situated Knowledges,” 183-202.

<sup>212</sup> As in, for example, Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006).

<sup>213</sup> As Yacavone describes a porous discipline which has a “socio-ideological [approach] centered on any film’s position as symptom or influence in social processes.” *Film Worlds*, xv-xvi.

from this standpoint, as Rodowick points out.<sup>214</sup> I have concentrated my efforts around the notion that cinematic visuality (as in the surface of the screen) is organised and constructed through material, plastic, and ideological processes. Finally, I have attempted, in two case-studies, to show different approaches in how such visuality might be deconstructed by pointing out the “assemblages”<sup>215</sup> and “hybrid materialities”<sup>216</sup> that are embedded within film-images, and also to show how they contribute in inscribing epistemic proposals regarding ideas of the human.

Looking at situated human figures, I came to the conclusion that it is never a straightforward entity, but always sprawls in a multitude of directions, that all could engender interesting points of discussion. My focus on digital technologies came from a desire of wanting to integrate ‘new’ methods of organising and providing representations into a framework that did not exactly differ them, but nonetheless could consider them as providing new means of mediation. In relation to *Gravity* and *Dawn* the human figure emerges as a topographical site that never contains only one meaning but at the same time something quite specific that can be engaged with and deconstructed. Presentation of embodiment and a biological ‘real’ emerged as key here; issues that in themselves open cinema up to a contemporary philosophical discussion regarding realism as pertaining less to spatio-temporal dimensions than to bodies, embodied knowledge, and experience<sup>217</sup> – as well as the problematic surrounding the ‘posthuman’, which Braidotti and Rehling sees as (as well as providing a critical standpoint) often engendering a rhetoric which re-inscribes a classical humanist idea of the subject; as a universal entity “equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour.”<sup>218</sup>

Although I have not gone into it in detail here – being more concerned with the sedimentation of figuration, how human figures are made definitive and available – the human figure, even as it is taken up by digital processing and imaging technologies, also contains a radical potential, in its association with what could be called, variously, the figural or matter. As a philosophical concept well engaged through cinema, the notion of the figure, and a figurative approach can hopefully also be utilised to explore film-works which, like the artists Fore brings up, attempt to deconstruct the epistemologies they are caught up with.

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<sup>214</sup> Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 30-44. Also argued by Yacavone, xv-xvi.

<sup>215</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 4. See chapter II, part 1.

<sup>216</sup> Wood, “*Inception*’s Timespaces,” 255.

<sup>217</sup> I am mainly referring to the impact of “speculative realism.” See Lesley Stern’s discussion of this in relation to film-theory, *Dead and Alive: The Body as Cinematic Thing*. Montreal: Caboose, 2012), esp. 9-21

<sup>218</sup> Braidotti, 15.



# Filmography

*2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

*Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009)

*Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (J. Lee Thompson, 1973)

*Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (Ted Post, 1970)

*Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (J. Lee Thompson, 1972)

*Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (Matt Reeves, 2014)

*Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (Don Taylor, 1971)

*Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013)

*King Kong* (Peter Jackson, 2005)

*Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Rupert Wyatt, 2011)

*Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991)

*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001)

*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003)

*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002)

*The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999)

*The Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968)

*Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982)

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