

Mysterious Proposal

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Dedicated to my Family, Friends and Lou, who checks all the boxes.

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My years at Bard have been remarkable. Thank you for deepening my curiosity.

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Introduction

In my memory of it, she put me in the kitchen sink. The cubby was full of warm water, *The Kid* was on the screen at the end of the light-less room. Submerged in warm-water hypnosis, the film ruled. What wonder she harbored on those empty afternoons! That initial excitement rooted my young self in contemplations of character, of movement, of the self.

In the vagueness of my younger life, I gave in to the shifting projections without anything between. The world felt far-off. I lived on a hill and was geographically contained; I had no role in society. Soft and impressionable, my mind traveled immeasurable lengths when a movie flickered on. The cinema proposed the solidity of an image, an expression or sound, concretizing emotional vagaries. It contained, within it, life's chaotic continuum. In the space of darkness, the forms of my life perspired to concentration. I was carried into the following hours with only the beat of images — I couldn't grasp what I was seeing. I couldn't make any sense of it.

Certain films challenged and diverged from these realities by giving voice to disorder. The world was demystified, or, maybe it was pushed astray, furtherly insufficient. Either way, a bent vision of life arose after certain, cinematic experiences. There, in the 'sprawl of images,'¹ I found communicability of something incommunicable. The internal rhythms of the world began to take shape and to matter. I was searching for myself; for some ability to communicate.² The film experience harnessed those aimless, inexplicable passages which occur in life. Film bore witness to the phantom.

¹ *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag

² Not unlike Ishmael

In life, so much remains unspeakable, unknowable, unstable. We implement human methods to contain and understand—we summarize, label, simplify. We see the function of the object, the advantage of the sentiment, and nothing else, alert for the quickest route to sensory satisfaction. In my observation, the current era has grown indifferent to the cultivation of inner-value and authentic connectivity. Generally, popular movies have been diminished to appearances, celebrity-gazing, good looks, and sound plots which, in the end, wrap up in a bow. Out there, in the deafening hurl of society, our human energies tend to the most superficial achievements. Going to a film is primarily a self-contained experience. There is less awareness for the lingering quality of a film, to disrupt and disturb, beyond the limits of the theatre. This depleting sense (a sense which I feel within me) has pioneered my interest in the traction of a work that may drag the spectator through some shadier region of the unknown and arrest one there, for a while.

When I was nine years old, my parents took me to an independent movie house. The sun was out when we entered—dark by the time we left. The transition took an ominous hold over me. The air was stiller, the shadows were sharper and everything that made up my ‘sense of real’ was ‘eerie and questionable.’³ Certain films, — especially in the theatre— have this power to re-negotiate, as if all the world had been struck, mysteriously dethroned, up-rooted, quivering like estrangement. I found myself removed from that terrain I had previously, inhabited.

Through the incorporation of certain cinematic elements, (slowness, insinuation, shifting light, passing time, fragments, indirection, obstruction) the space of the frame in that film⁴ reflects the experience of space in the human mind. The cinema has this capacity to become a

³ *Devotional Cinema*, Nathaniel Dhorsky.

⁴ I don't remember which film. I was too young.

space of ‘overcoming,’ where each physical object, idea, image is displaced from its original stasis and involved in a shifting elaboration. The material becomes, the film-vision breeds becoming, outdoing its own arrangement. The exploration pertains to the existence of the irresolute in matters of reality. I gave myself to this world of intangible relinquishment, to space, tension, and gesture. Whatever it was, it lived in film directly before my eyes. I was small, observant, and primarily thoughtless. The film absorbed me as I absorbed it, as a traveler takes on the passing landscape. In fact, I had not left my house and considered the flaws in ‘hiding,’ as I hid. I inevitably questioned, was I taking some backseat to life? Where was it leading?

Films set the pace and the rhythm of life, performing first encounters with unknown aspects. I was in elementary school and began seeing all kinds of films— Jacques Tati’s films, Herzog, *Cooley High*, *Paper Moon*. I was learning about myself by watching others. I learned about who I wasn’t. They presented distant histories, memories, and relations which stained a mind and heart with beautiful, ‘otherness,’ as if these distant visions were my own. It was a great accomplishment for the cinema to ensure my occupation of someone else’s subject position. Despite the distance between your own life and the subject, on screen, you see the world from their space, at least for a few hours. In a sense, the difference stayed with me like some patchwork of a half-realized dream. They lead me as I wandered. They arised in peculiar ways, like recognitions or openings— our humanity relies on our ability to process the other.⁵ I saw things, distant from my reality. Like some magical detour, the cinema reached out willingly and intimately. My idea of what film could do was as young as I was. If film could be more than

⁵ Arthur Jafa (Interview), says something like, the one thing film ensures is that it makes it harder to oppress or neglect other humanity because you inhabit another perspective.

‘entertainment,’ if film was more than a medium to pass time, what was it? How do films operate beyond the frame? How do films inhabit your mental space?

The other day, I saw *To Have and Have Not*, a 1944 Hemingway adaptation.⁶ I left satisfied, aspiring to incorporate some of Humphrey Bogart’s hard charm and a strong sense of moral character into my own nature. The sets were sharp, the characters were wise and fresh. I loved the style, the strength of Bogart and Bacall, the vulnerable Walter Brennan, the active resistance, and the underground. Bogart dips in and out of these worlds seamlessly, untouched by the danger at work all around him. He maintains all that certainty of his character. His maneuverability is infectious. As he is further engaged in the French Resistance, his intention remains simple—he wants to make enough money to get him and his people out of town. He finds himself, in noir-like fashion, further entrenched by the simmering plot. Only, the film narrative resists the out-of-control quality of noir as Bogart remains one step ahead of everyone else (In a noir, the plot maybe three steps ahead of him, and to the side). This was a charming movie with a happy ending. I have these kinds of pleasing film viewings all the time, though, they remain at a surface level. This is not to condemn, but to distinguish one experience from another.

Later that week, I attended Bela Tarr’s *Werckmeister Harmonies*. I was troubled and torn and left the theatre with an altogether different sense than I had a few days earlier. The film moves according to its own, hidden motivations as if some absolute naturalness of cadence

⁶ Professor Suchenski’s Screening

exists. It takes place as a bleak-winter desolation has befallen a Hungarian town, located somewhere in the Hungarian plains. Hopelessness clogs the drains, services have abandoned them, the people are mostly drunk and ruffled; everything seems to be headed towards a long and dull sleep. And then a traveling show arrives in town. They come bearing a stuffed whale. The whale is from another world, far from the inland town where most inhabitants have never seen the ocean. It shocks the town from its weariness. It electrifies the place. The truck docks in the town square and people begin to congregate. Tarr sees this simply as a story about a man who goes on this walk up and down the village and has seen this whale.

The film feels like some rebellion, yet, there is no definite symbolism — the film movement is often secondary to hard-servings of interpretive depletion, signs, and symbols. In this case, the mystery is as important as the information. *Werkmeister Harmonies* shocked me into a new awareness of old things. When I left the theatre, I began to experience my own mundane as extraordinary. The film's careful treatment of time— film's most brutalized element in the age of MTV and blockbuster, has an elemental sense— manifested an upheaval of my own temporal 'metabolism.'⁷ It's as if to say our own awareness and internalizations are remodeled on the basis of Tarr's poetic rebellion. The film does more than manipulate time. It engages an alternative experience of perception. We could never see the whale in its entirety— it is too large, its markings too distinct to conceive of the whole beast. A man approaches the creature, walks up to it, around, then beyond the frame in a single take. The vision unravels in gradual undoing and shows a fleeting, snapshot view in transition. We are left with the unstable approach. There are

⁷ Phrased by Robert Kelly in a meeting

always concealed aspects of the whale. We cannot make sense of its reason for existence. The audience is left with a felt sense of instability.



Figure 1: Still from *Werckmeister Harmonies*



Figure 2

It is this inherently formless quality that lingers and carries over into life. In the image above, [fig. 1] the man looks into the eye of the beast. Even in the direct confrontation, nothing is communicated or transferred over. The creature offers no resolution. It is the walk, and the whale itself, the essential movement which conjures the inner-shifting mystery. A sense of the invisible persists. Upon fading in shades of blending grey, the whale is left in the open.⁸ In the battered and decrepit world that the film proposes, there is a lasting feeling of hope. Hope is wrapped up in noticing time itself. The film teaches us not to watch for meaning, but to watch for a sense of something unfulfilled; an alien world erupting in perspectival upheaval.

The film is not about the distance covered, but the moments of simple, everyday experience so that the most boring parts of life have the chance to turn into music. A similar experience is masterfully orchestrated by Chantal Ackerman in her film *Jeanne Dielman*. The film is deeply concerned with the routine of Dielman's life. We see her whole life in the duration of a few days, in a three hour film. The monotonous task, (cleaning dishes, cooking, laundry,

⁸ There is an earlier scene where the protagonist sneaks into the truck to lay his eyes on the whale. The whale is kept within the truck. Here, at the end, the truck is nowhere to be seen. Still, one cannot grasp the thing.

eating, errands), is infused with the slight infuriation of her inner activity. The impression of a surface arises in patterns and in repetition. The uninterrupted time we spend with Dielmen reveals the flip side of things. We read her gestures and look through them, searching for attunement with her unseen position. The simple absorbs ‘immaterial designs’ and ‘mouldings’⁹ of her internal, hidden world. The film experience harbors energy, moving our unseen interiors to leap for wholeness and to notice how we tried, for it is a wholeness that can never be attained. It is wholeness, captured in the subtleties of gesture and in the interlocking seam-space of the movement.

Likewise, in Charles Burnett’s, *Killer of Sheep*, the film does not offer solutions. It presents life as it is. Stan, the protagonist, finds removal from life in moments of simple and precise clarity which may exist anywhere, in anything.¹⁰ Our ‘map-making’ attempts begin to reveal a track to follow, in correspondence with the film. It gives shape to the shapeless. It is not clear in a precious sense. Tarr, Ackerman, Burnett push the viewer to consider a multiplicity of possibilities, in the precision of mundane moments. These films do not pledge our allegiance to any dogma. They do, however, obtain a logic of vitality. Presiding in the space of the obsolete, the films transcend their content as they flit out from themselves. It is a similar sensation which takes hold in the films of the following chapters...

What happens, when we slow down and consider the shapes in the shadows? What happens when we see the duplicitous nature of things? What happens when we become aware of our movements from the outside?

⁹ Drawn from *Moby-Dick*, The Quarter Deck. To be Introduced in a page.

¹⁰ There are many examples of this in film or the other arts

We can begin to understand these formations by giving time to awareness, towards the world. Form exists all around you; bring it into the room of your mind. There is this misconception that humanity has no patience for the incomprehensible. If the indeterminable exists, we attempt to cover it up so as to move on. I will explore a dynamic in the three films, which, over the course of three chapters, deals with the progression of a subjective vision as it relates to understanding. *A Man There Was*, (1917), a Swedish film directed by Victor Sjöström, provides a narrative framework for looking back. *The Intruder* (2004) by Claire Denis and *Leviathan* (2012) directed by Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, expand and diverge from the classic storytelling framework established in the silent era. The essence of abstraction employed in the films is not meant to confuse the viewer, but functions with precise and logical internal intentions that push the viewer to let go from attachments, then to reflect.

Tarr, Ackerman, Burnett, as well as Sjöström, Denis, and the Paravel, Castaing-Taylor duo, all move, unconstrained by cinematic convention and prior schematics in their fearless pursuit, in the creation of form. In the case of Sjöström, Denis, and the Paravel, Castaing-Taylor, there is a further exploration of the ultimate, the unconquerable, uncontainable. Interestingly, a useful point of reference that informs their cinematic language is Melville's *Moby-Dick*.¹¹ Melville innovated a mode of narrative that revolutionized storytelling, both via a unique approach to conveying time passing, the convoluted and complex relationship between humans and nature, and the ineffable reach into profound philosophical questions about being, life, and death. An infamous speech given by captain Ahab, aboard *The Pequod* provides philosophical perspective:

¹¹ Claire Denis, the director of the film from chapter 2, has noted her influence from Herman Melville. Her best-known film attempts to capture and reinterpret Melville's final work, *Billy Budd*.

Hark ye yet again—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? ... Truth hath no confines... He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.¹²

The text of *Moby-Dick* is concerned with the terrain I'm trying to locate in this trio of films. I find common sensibility, content and form in Melville, existing in the films, (in different ways). In Ahab's mind, the universe has turned on him. He is a prisoner to his subjective mind.¹³ Likewise, there is contentious disagreement in his speech between 'truth [which] hath no confines,' and 'I see...' Ahab leans into his private convictions, despite his awareness that truth is unstable. Furthermore, his convictions illuminate his fixation with the invisible, 'some unknown but still reasoning thing.' He stakes his suspicion in all the material of the world—dimensionless, volume-lacking, unfulfilling 'pasteboard mask(s)' concealing further and devious aspects. How do we access 'the more'? How do we know it is there?

This is precisely the phenomenon I am interested in. As I watched these films, I feel the presence of 'some unknown but still reasoning thing.' The experience arouses unconscious depths and shares this experience of seeing through the mask, illuminating the dualism of things

¹² Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale*, (New York: Norton, 1976), 133.

¹³ A consistent theme of the essay. Multiple characters experience this.

and things unseen. The ocean summons the experience of the ultimate, but it remains impossible to know, to capture, or conquer. I aim to demask the under-lurking features that these films suggest, or to effectively allude to their existence.

As Melville drops some hints, such as the ‘pasteboard mask,’ everything reads in a new light. We seek out that which isn’t visibly there. We attempt to comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible. The works fluctuate in this way, between precision and the boundlessness which it may cover-up. Sometimes, there is a deliberate gap intended to invigorate these ‘accidental’ projections. No matter what, it is expected that the ‘reading,’ whether a film or a novel, will be worth your while and that you will come away with something by the time it is over. The ‘atypical experience’ may invert your sense of what is worthwhile by altering expectations or diverging from the traditional means of sense-making.¹⁴ An emphasis remains on the thing which doesn’t amount in meaning; it may dwell in this unreasonable, overtly simple place to stress possibility.

There is an invisible essence. The film experience I am writing about challenges us to ‘strike through the wall’ and notice the energized innerworkings. In the case of *The Intruder* (chapter two) and in *Leviathan*, (chapter three) it is difficult to see the film and not be involved in the narrative process. We must engage in these worlds of duplicitous shades, otherwise, meaning runs rampant and we grow weary with the process. There is the world of the novel or the film, presented to us which we must navigate on the basis of the plot. Then there is the mysterious proposal of the work, residing in an unattainable nature and captured in the internal relations, recognizable in life. There is a third- attunement required, where we engage in a delicate

¹⁴ Having to do with linear movement, plot, narrative structure

inference of projection — where literary or cinematic devices deliver us to contemplation and thought- activity through articulating unmended gaps.

When we see a film subject think, we are pushed towards our own contemplations. In *A Man There Was*, adapted from an Ibsen poem, there is a pioneering use of the flashback space. We see the subject and he thinks. Then we are shown what the subject is thinking about in a flashback. We are not merely seeing images from the ‘past.’ The images are immediate from the thinking subject’s mind, (his memory) and the story begins. In our frantic world, it is important to experience this focused story, tracking the inner life of a single character who works through his deep engravings. He is not afraid to be alone. He is quiet, in a silent world.¹⁵ In the distance, we hear the sea and his indecipherable, echoing thoughts. *A Man There Was* deals with the experience of working through memory in a painterly expression. We care for his humanity.

The next film is *The Intruder*, a film of several threads. The experience of watching the film is jarring as it involves all different types of movement, intrusions, and dislocations. Gaping rearrangements disrupt the linear course. Seemingly insignificant things happen. Death is treated with the same rhythm and focus as anything else, as part of the natural flow. It does not wait for you. We are constantly having to look back and reassess, activating our memory space. Our memory reconfigures space. The approach changes the way we look. Denis uses a wide-array of technique including POV, dream-visions, unrhythmic beats in jutting juxtaposition, flashback, with a sparse-use of guitar strings and percussion which all amounts to an original cadence and style. There is a sense of incoherent travel driven by restlessness. What does she spend time

¹⁵ It is a silent movie

with? Why? In the avid directionless of her work, Denis engages the independent viewer, like the main character, to fill the holes, to rearrange and discover for oneself.

Leviathan presents a further mutation of perspectival upheaval which is inexplicably jarring to experience. Thrown to a wild, dark night on an ocean fishing vessel, the ethnographic immersion rumbles with ocean-blasts, coalescing the sound of machines. The theatre becomes a chapel of disorientation. *Leviathan* is completely uninhibited, served-rough like cold truth. Its unpredictable nature is the energy of the film. The cameras are mounted to the bodies of fishermen or to the boat itself, communicating an untampered, marginal vision, which is part of the action. It feels like another world. The camera, like a toy, is thrown around, mishandled, and even at points drowned and lost at sea. Meditations on fish, on parts of men or the seascape, bring us far from the self and closer to an alien perspective. We bask in the active senselessness of our surroundings, more at ease with the truth of it. The mystery of the Leviathan, itself, is called into question. The thought of the creature looms over the entirety of the experience.

There is some kind of film trajectory that challenges the more traditional structures of linear movement, narrativity, and drama scheme. I aim to communicate the cinematic elements found through a close-reading of *A Man There Was*, *The Intruder*, and *Leviathan*, which articulate inner landscapes troubled by worldly mystery.¹⁶ I leap from Sjöström's 1917, *A Man There Was*, to two contemporary examples in order to capture a full breadth of obscure permutations having to do with this proposal. This project tracks the worlds within the frame which often leads the mind outwards into that grainy ocean-darkness. As in *Moby-Dick*, all of the films involve the ocean in some capacity.

¹⁶ The ocean, death, sea creatures, natural evil, the natural world, etc...

“Ocean” provides a powerful experience--both real and metaphorical--that conveys the central tension. This tension manifests in Melville, in the films I will be exploring, and in the possibly apocryphal tale about the artist JMW Turner's¹⁷ attempt to best comprehend the sea. The story tells that Turner strapped himself to the main mast of a ship, in the heat of a storm. In order to observe the extremity of nature, Turner hoped his immersion into the storm would amplify his understanding. He was often criticized for the murkiness of his work which, in fact, was closer to the reality of experience. Like Turner, humans find themselves in the wrath of a great storm at certain points in life— we lose track of what we care about, momentarily losing that register of purpose. In these moments of tempestuous obscurity, all the clarity of form is in frenzy, mystified to the point that there are no clear boundaries and no place for the eye or the mind to rest. Turner was interested in this encompassing sensation, which strayed from the structural purity of other artists' images. *The Winter Storm* is an example of his attempt to translate the subjective experience of vivid indecipherability to others. There is little resolve that can be drawn from his radically personal vision, but all the while, it communicates.

¹⁷ Herman Melville was also known to be a great appreciator of Turner's paintings and went to see his work in London



Figure 3. *The Winter Storm* (1841) J.M.W. Turner [de Young Museum in San Francisco]

In *The Winter Storm*, 1841, [Fig.3], Turner depicts the undeniable chaos of the universe. A perspective tunnel draws the eye in from the surrounding tempest. Through the tunnel, the forms and colors are sharpest. All around the focused center point, a formless abstraction whirls. The frantic surface with grays and dulled blues push and pull in all different directions. Some pining strokes dash through all the rest like piercing bolts. It all keeps the eye in motion. As the eye turns the perimeter of the painting, it is drawn back towards that open portal, penetrating through and then back out into the turning storm—the image reinvigorates itself. There is some large and daunting stroke of madness that looks like a red goose, or the off-shoot of smoke and fire in the suggestion of ruin. The smoke and the ship obstruct the clear horizon and the expanse of the open sea. The obstruction of the vast space, beyond the framing mechanism, brings up

some idea of the ‘sublime,’— that which cannot be attained or reckoned with but is nonetheless, sought after. The portal frames the sea and contains the eye within its set boundaries. Yet, as the eye settles around the perimeter, the structure of the painting begins to gradually make formal sense. Still, the viewer cannot grasp it. The eye cannot settle, much less the mind— there is a constancy of meaning, and form in flux; the suspense of the unrevealed. What are the darker patches? The shaded regions? The entire image is at a slant, furthering the sense of instability. The sea and the sky converge and create the sense of ceaseless shifting. The shifting perception of light-obstructed space and the nature of the sea relate to the psychological variants that inform the landscapes of this mysterious proposal.

A Man There Was

“There lived a remarkably grizzled man on the uttermost barren isle.” The film begins in darkness— the image of a man in a small and dark cabin fades into focus. He rests his head against his hand and ponders. The fire sheds light against his face. A grated window, half-covered by a shade with a chair below sits against the wall, uninhabited behind him. Gusts of smoke paint the foreground. Wooden supports recede into the back of the dark room for the eye to penetrate, converging behind the subject. His expression, bathed in hot light, is striking and coarse with heavy sadness. In a deeply contemplative mood, the glow of the fire is cast upon his stone gaze — an intonation of his formless soul materializes through the smoke, the lighting, the quiet. We draw poetic inspiration from form; draw emotional truth from his expression. The man looks up and his eyes widen with realization. He has thought of something. It stirs him and he looks behind [fig.1]—the frame cuts to meet his view [fig.2].



Fig. 1: Still from A Man There Was



Fig. 2

From the tides of his mind, the sullen man ‘returns from thought’ and walks to the dark, tunneling space. He turns and peers out.

The window frames Terje and the storm is beyond him. He braces himself in the window-pane where the waves roll out from his head. The mad wind is blowing. Waves erupt as they contact rocks. As the ocean seethes with rage, an effect is cast over Terje whose, “eyes, though, sometimes would blaze and fret - most when the storm was nigh.” The ocean expresses Terje’s emotional distress.

Throughout the opening sequence, a set of questions and expectations are posed. As the subject before us appears weakened by thought, hardened by experience, the viewer is challenged to infer as to ‘why?’ What causes him to look off in the distance? Why is he alone? In bold translation, the treatment of the ocean-scape animates the inaccessible terrain of his thoughts and feelings (his interiority). Instead of explaining, the film motivates the viewer to ‘read into’ the fabric of the film through a series of associations and emerging gaps in the story. What does the ocean arouse in this man? Why? What can we make of it? Without knowing what happened, we come to understand his character through a few, simplistic strokes of cinematic poetry and the enunciation of expressive forms (the smoke from the fire, the gaze, the dark, receding room, the objects)—the activity of the set reflects an activity of the mind. We also come to a further understanding of what isn’t there. There are no other people. There are no traces of civilization. It is a lawless sea.

Sjöström uses cinema to express internal states, animated by the natural world. This was a fresh invention in a new art form. Of course, it had long been a terrain that was explored by masterful writers. In Herman Melville’s, *Moby-Dick*, the sermon in which Father Mapple recalls the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale is explored in literary terms what Sjöström’s is trying

to express, cinematically. The following quote shows how Melville uses a character's internal state to shape what he sees around him.

Screwed at its axis against the side, a swinging lamp slightly oscillates in Jonah's room; and the ship, heeling over towards the wharf with the weight of the last bales received, the lamp, flame and all, though in slight motion, still maintains a permanent obliquity with reference to the room; though, in truth, infallibly straight itself it but made obvious the false, lying levels among which it hung. The lamp alarms and frightens Jonah; as lying in his berth his tormented eyes roll around the place, and this far successful fugitive finds no refuge for his restless glance. But that contradiction in the lamp more and more appeals him. The floor, the ceiling, and the side, are all awry. Oh! So my conscience hangs in me!' He groans, 'straight upward, so it burns; but the chambers of my soul are all in crookedness.'¹⁸

Jonah, who disobeys and runs from God, is lying down in bed. His vision is distorted by torment. His conscience arouses him from within, striking him from sleep. The room comes alive. Melville persists and prods at Jonah's sensitivity. The tantalizing lure of these seemingly 'normal' occurrences in the room exemplify Jonah's mania. The objects, embodied by Jonah's torment, lend a 'deeper, phantom- truth' to the sterile surface. As he gazes through the slight movements of the flame and the lamp, it's as if he sees his crooked soul in uncanny rapture. The passage demonstrates the possibility to reinterpret objects, as if they reveal Jonah's inner turmoil. The recurrence of slight deviations drives Jonah mad. He 'finds no refuge for his restless glance.' It is the 'slight motion,' the 'permanent obliquity' which is otherwise insignificant, but begins to orchestrate a haunting furtherness in the room. His torment shines through the material. "Oh! So my conscience hangs in me!' He groans, 'straight upward, so it burns; but the chambers

¹⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale*, (New York: Norton, 1976), 47.

of my soul are all in crookedness.” The same way that Melville engages Jonah to read the contents of the room in their ‘obliquity,’ emboldening that which burns within; Sjöström has Terje read the sea. And further, we, the viewers, as well as the ‘readers,’ are seduced into reading the silence of the scene. The literary passage and the film sequence embolden the anticipatory period, prior to action. Overcome by thought, the subject is physically paralyzed, while the world around twists and howls on her axis.

The *Moby-Dick* quote sums up the importance of reading into the particularity of the scene.¹⁹ The space at which Terje looks is beyond the frame. His vision activates the space outside of our visible reach. The director has pushed the viewer to be a part of the narrative process. One finds oneself arranging and rearranging, based on what is seen and what is not. A second narrative is created. The mind makes up for any found deficiencies. A tension exists between where we are and how we got there. The internal space of his home is dark and vague. In a remote location at the brink of the civilized world, Terje has removed himself from society. The storm surges; it all suggests his incomprehensible sorrow.

It is said that Melville, in a mad flurry of inspiration while writing *Moby-Dick*, turned to Shakespeare and the Bible which enhanced his intensity of language and influenced his thinking. The following passage from *King Lear* depicts a subject who finds respite in natural chaos, from the terrible ruminations of his mind. The passage shows a human relationship to the chaos of the natural world as Lear’s pain is subdued by the vast activity.

Thou thinks ’tis much that this contentious storm
Invades us to the skin: so ’tis to thee ;
But where the greater malady is fix’d,

¹⁹ It is also in the character of the silent film to read

him. He clings to the “barren remote islet,” a place of inner-vision, paired with the turbulent nature. The elements and the objects demonstrate his concealed grief.

With these few images of Terje, Sjöström has articulated the scope of his narrative interest. The passage from *Moby-Dick* frames our role over the span of the film. We are not passive onlookers, but readers, both carried by and at times striving into the compositions. The images presented to us, like ‘pasteboard masks,’ are physically flat as they exist on the screen. In the tireless imagination, the images, altered with the element of ‘time’ are imbued with ‘volume, depth, and vitality.’²¹ The passage from *King Lear* is used here to express the character’s draw to the sea. The sea conjures and matches Lear’s disarray. The romantic image of Terje at the window, looking out, places him in a romantic tradition, defined by insatiable fixation.²² In the classically romantic image, Terje looks to the sea and watches intently as if he aspires for something lost in its depths. Observing him, we come to ponder our ancient, human attachment with matters of the sea, its experience of time, our lost histories and memories. The image of him watching is melancholic. The world of opportunity withers under his cold, retrospective gaze. Happiness is swallowed below the surface of possibility. He does not take part in life, as the reality of his youth has frozen everything, halting all progress (we have yet to know what happened.) He is at a worthless war with himself— all avenues of escape, lost in his despondence, hollowed in leeching-misery. He watches intently as if the ocean contains direction for his agony. He watches for that which is lost.

Through a shot-countershot dialectic from both sides of the window, a parallel forms. The exterior ocean space and the interior of his home are orchestrated in conversation. In a sea-ward

²¹ Wallace, Robert K. Frank Stella’s *Moby Dick: Words and Shapes*. University of Michigan Press, 2000, 47.

²² longing

view from within the house, Terje's back is in silhouette, framed against the waves. Then, from outside the window looking in, he's engulfed in the frame of the dark space as the light of the fire flickers on the wall. Terje fixes his sight somewhere beyond the parameters of the frame towards that which we cannot see. He looks for that which isn't, or at what was, but never proceeds on to what to make of it, at present.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

In the shot-counter-shot dialectic, Terje is braced by the frame and in limbo between two spaces. Each shot represents an opposing world—one inside, the other outside. He looks out at the world of ceaseless shifting and transcendence [fig.3] which he longs to take hold of. The dialectic of form in opposition captures Terje's 'psychological limbo.' The opposing view, the view looking into the window [fig.4], conjures the room of his mind with fire-light flickering across the wall—a world occupied by shadows. Here, conclusions are never reached as he treads a perpetual discontent, restrained from moving on. As he looks beyond the frame, our imagination is activated; we crave to see whatever it is, yet, we are bound to his world; the warm-low light interior alights the world of memory, dream, the begging-life of the mind and the

fire flickers windedly behind. As he looks beyond the frame, it's as if he looks back, yet, a framed ocean is an irony. The Ocean and its mystery cannot be circumscribed. Terje's thoughts are distant, as the ocean is deep. We watch in silence as the mystery of both commingle and accentuate the other. The depths of his inner-working mind rise to the surface of his grief-stricken face.

The man at the window is Victor Sjöström himself, a pioneer director of the Swedish cinema. He thrived in the years later known to be the 'Golden age of Silent- Film.' Sjöström directed and starred in the film titled, *Terje Vichen* — the title translates to '*A Man There Was*.' The story and the intertitles are based on the poem by the same name written by Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen. As far as literary adaptations go, the film captures the lyrical qualities of the poem. The man thinks deeply about his past and simmers with uncommunicable longing—expressed in the film images and flashback structure. *A Man There Was* provides an early cinematic framework for looking back, in order to open up the psychological realm of the character. In the film, inner life is the driving force for the story and plot.

A Man There Was is made up of a series of returns. A man is introduced at the end of his life. We (1) meet the subject, then we (2) enter the space of his memory in a flashback expansion, made possible by the medium. It is after a mere minute and a half that the intertitle reads, "And now, all I've heard about Terje, I will *try*— to tell you from first to last," and we are propelled into his memories. His younger life, in flashback, makes up the majority of the film. It is retold in the manner of myth through a mysterious, poetic narration. The following shot is a close-up of the waves rolling in. It is the first shot detached from the subject, where Terje does not appear. The separation of the subject from the film vision implies the poetry of the natural world. As the

ocean embodies some irrepressible, battered force — a fluent, surging space, where the mind can travel beyond its own reach. The ocean brims with sunken stories and some further mental atmosphere. It activates Terje's memory. The claim, 'All I've heard of Terje,' followed by a lasting image of the ocean fuses narrative to collective memory. Terje cannot mimic the way of the maneuvering ocean current, its frightful eruptions, or its capacity for erasure. He is mentally blocked, cemented in a mythic frame, in the story. Terje is caught between the desire to rehash his old life and the reality of his humanity, within nature. The ocean's turbulence suggests his own resistance to let go, forget. Terje cannot get a grip. The water falls through his fingers.

We watch Terje look; the direction of his gaze is important. The sets are quaint. We learn to see more, to feel, and hear more in the absence of distraction. In this way, we become sensitive viewers and in the case of *A Man There Was*, authors of connectivity from image to word to image. A spiritual exploration occurs within the formal structure of the film where the space and the mind can breathe. The form of the flashback is itself an 'aberration,' but also a deepening. We dive into the anguish of his heart and mind through the repetition of space and form in shifting light.²³ The entire work circumambulates his space of mind, distilling an outlook on the world around him. During the decline of his well-being, he eventually arrives at solitary ease within his pain. We see the ocean waves anew as he is revitalized with some form of hope.

²³ In other words, new perspective, based on context



Fig. 5

In the flashback, he has no obligations (that we know of) sailing the ‘billowing sea’ and maintaining a light nature. There is an orange tint of lightness. As he moves, it can be recognized that he is unburdened by life’s heavy complexities and is far from the hard brood of his later years.²⁴ He is certain that he loves the sea. Untethered to responsibility, Terje climbs the main-mast with an untangling spirit, [fig. 5]. He follows the pillar out, afloat and suspended in the open air. He is alone here, too, but with an altogether different way about him. In this image, Terje does not watch the ocean. He is focused on tying down the sail. We quickly learn about his preference as we read, “With land underfoot, he was never at ease. Who is he on land? Where is his identity? Where is the self located? A number of actions show his easy nature. Free from penetrating thoughts, his life onboard is full.

When a flock of winter geese fly-by ‘A heaviness fell upon his breast.’ The geese are a sign of oncoming winter and remind him of return— he must go home. The others on board are happy with the sign. They dock on land and Terje is torn from the group. He believes that his life

²⁴ We witness his ‘heaviness’ in the first scene as he sits by the fire and thinks.

aboard, “lay astern with fire and zest, and ahead lay winter’s gloom.” Docked for the Winter, Terje watches his shipmates bound over the hill without an inkling of worry. He longs to bound away too. Terje stands alone outside his silent house.

It is then that Terje steps up to the window. He peers inward. Then, we see him at the window from inside the cabin and a woman, in the foreground, in front of a carriage. When Terje sees his wife and another, his eyes grow wide. He steps inside and approaches his little girl. His love for the “rosy, healthy little mite,” changes him. With the strike of a single sight, his life purpose is rerouted. His view on what matters takes a dramatic, (or rather, an undramatic) shift. He takes the child's hand and plays and smiles, alight with happiness for the little creature. Then, he embraces his wife, revitalized with energy and the freshness of an outlook. He finds all the world in his little cabin by the sea; “Terje’s mind, men say, turned sober upon the spot.” Terje stays, overcome by fatherhood, in the sanctuary of his home. The contents of the inside rule his heart now. The moment captures something greater than mere context. I am reminded of life, and of the movies. The way stories surprise us. How we stumble and we fall in love. Yet, the image of him alone at the end of his life haunts the scene.²⁵ Now he has something to lose.

Some time passes. The war of 1809 (the Napoleonic Wars) inflicts itself upon the families of innocents. At [8:36] the crowd disperses around him, he stares off, lost in thought. He is motionless in the midst of motion as a grave reality settles in on him. He is alone amongst the crowd, as we are, watching him. Terje returns home as he did before, burdened and solemn, for the “crops fell, there was great want,” and “Death and starvation are at the door.” His wife and his child are dependent on his action (or inaction.) Again, the subject thinks. Terje thinks for a

²⁵ Fatalistic and inevitable

day, or two, looking into the fire [11:42] and the sea [11:47]. His pondering image is reminiscent of the first shot, a foreshadowing of his days spent in grief. ‘Then he tossed grief aside,’ and ‘thought of a comrade ancient and true— the great ebb and flow.’” The open avenues are adrift in possibility. He turns his back to the water and faces home. He associates the sea with freedom, where his will makes the way and Terje plans to search for food. With the expression of his early courage, Terje stands broad-chested before the massive sea. When he reports his plan to his wife, she collapses, for there is danger that lurks out of sight. He holds his wife dear to him and whispers to her promising words. We listen closely but there is nothing to hear. She lets go and watches as he rows away in the waning light.

At [15:08] “When the wind subsided, he rowed across the sea for his wife and child.” We can hardly make her out in the small light and she wears a hood, like an omen. This sea is less promising than before. The deep blue-silver sea and the sky, the white of her sleeve highlight the darker masses in the slight horizon of the distance. The wife casts a holy gaze upon that mysterious range. She waves goodbye to Terje, repeatedly. He does not see. Like a silent sentinel, she watches him as he turns the mouth of the rock. When he turns, he waves and disappears. She sees him for the last time. He is swallowed by the massive, jutting form, drifting beyond the frame. She stands there for a moment in front of the emptiness. Then, Terje’s wife steps away from the scene. One feels the devastating allure of the ocean. The length of the shot (lasting over a minute) illuminates the poetry of their goodbye. Time illuminates ‘further possibility,’ pushing us to consider what will come of it. There is an irresistible mysticism that arises from this quality of stillness; an intentional stillness after days of his pondering. Decisions are ingrained with weight, like the heavy and protruding land. We are given a moment to

consider what we want— how reality weighs up to our expectations, hopes, and fears. This ‘goodbye’ marks the film like a stain; two backs burning in memory, [fig. 6].



Fig. 6

Terje takes to the sea in stride and with alacrity. He possesses an absolute faith in his sea-faring. In challenging the currents of fate during wartime, he risks the safety of himself and his family. Some time passes and he has sacks of food. He comes near to home, onshore. Terje leans back as he sees the destination. A smile emerges. All the tension is swept off. Then, he sees the warship— the men aboard spot him. A chase ensues. He struggles against the men, but eventually, is overpowered and captured. We see his boat, ‘In two feet depth.’ [27:40] It drifts idly, passenger-less, and floods. The food for his family sinks in shallow water. Onboard, Terje begs to be released. He is on his knees when the captain shoots a single glance, stone with cold menace. Terje reads in a grim, unflickering eye he has no chance. We witness the hope flush from Terje’s face. The captain turns his back and casts him off to prison.

In this case, the relentless, lawlessness of the ocean allows for unmeasured cruelty, alive in the human heart. In the position of power, the captain is free to act, at bay to his whims. Law, morality, and reason have no place in the vast and violent place. The story turns in the direction we dread. Terje does not save his family. In his cell, he paces in worry, “His neck grew bent, his hair grew grey with his dreams of home.” He stands with immeasurable longing. A medium shot reveals his broken heart, [fig. 7], with the expression of sadness in his eyes, as he is contained. Here, time wastes the years from him. Here, he comes into contact with the conflicting world within. He bears this burden alone not knowing of the world or the reality beyond the cell.



Fig. 7

After this image, [fig.7], there is the repeated image of Terje playing with his baby. There is a flashback within the greater flashback, further communicating the space of his troubled mind. His thoughts are with his wife and child, back home. After years in prison, there is an agreement of peace that marks the start of a new era. The war is over and the prisoners, set free. Terje heads ‘home’ where he hopes to reunite with his family. He left a young seaman and returned “remarkably grizzled,”²⁶ going unrecognized. We recall that he spent years adrift,

²⁶ Echoing Odysseus’s homecoming in *The Odyssey*

evading the solidity of an identity. The disconnected nature of his sea-faring life catches up to him and the sense of his home is severed —*It is a terrible thing to not be remembered*. “The husband left and none cared for them,” the man tells Terje, “They were buried in a grave for poor folks,” as the myth-like rumor goes. He looks around driven mad in disbelief. He listens to his own, mythologized story as it is told back to him in the form of some, estranged narrativization by the new occupant of his former home. It must sound distant to him. He learns that in his absence, there was no one there for Terje’s wife and child, for he had chosen this life of alienated sea-faring. Terje collapses, reminiscent of his collapse in a submission to the captain — Terje leaves to seek further shores. The film jump-cuts forward where an intertitle stands for the length of years. He appears older. Here, he has retreated from the world and his purpose is amiss. In the twilight of his life, he surrenders his energy to static thoughts, having lost his ‘Eden’ of possibility. He bolts the rest of life to the anchor of his memories, as it sinks. Terje doesn’t overcome his sadness. He wallows in it.

In each partitioned section of the film, we experience time differently. We initially meet Terje at the far end of life. His shack is nestled along the cliffside in some borderland of life and death, phantom and material. His night-marish reality contrasts with his lighter years of aimlessness, assessed in flashback. There, at sea, time obeys his whim as it is made up from experience. Eventually, he is swept up in familial obligations and is swift to take on the role. His time is ‘dedicated.’ The second act manifests his failure. Reality strikes —Terje perseveres a prolonged separation from home.²⁷ In jail, Terje’s relationship to time shifts. Lost- time sickens him - time is a plague that eats at him. Each moment feasts on his pre-ordained misery as he is

²⁷ As Odysseus must

constantly reminded of what he is missing. Here begins a life of reconsideration and looking back into the black hole of his memory— a life of loss. Each moment is a worry, a prayer, devastation and he is punished for years by the endless repetition of thoughts, straining the present. In the third act, time loses its traction. There is no longer urgency in his movements, nor an ambition to make or find life. He is a futureless thing. Set adrift, and condemned by his own internal repetitions, he goes nowhere. He broods; the fire flickers windedly behind him, shaping the light as it touches the walls. His mind is active. He is half-alive, in-between, and drowning in sadness. In silence, we watch the expressive degradation of a beautiful man, far from the heroics of modern stories. In a short film (under an hour) we feel years. So fiercely a grand spectrum of emotion is explored from his youth, and into his later years. The film language makes possible an expression of Terje's inner world.



Fig. 8

After the flashback, the first sequence of the film repeats [fig. 8], frame for frame. The viewer reads the same sequence, now, with the events of Terje's life given in context. His memories are trapped between the image of Terje brooding in the dark room. Terje sits by the

fire and thinks. He walks to the window and stands in the frame as he once had, but something draws him out. The narrative continues, born from this initial sequence. He is drawn to the commotion on the shore—a group of people watch a ship, troubled by the onslaught of waves. Terje gets in a boat of his own and makes way towards the ship, [fig.12]. Onboard, he takes hold of the wheel and captains the puzzled sea-farers. He is absorbed in the action. The true captain stands nearby, voicing out. Terje turns to the captain in a moment of eerie recognition and in a single instance, his world turns. He lets go of the wheel like a hot coal and remembers. He sees himself on his knees before the man in a flaring flashback image of submission and defeat. When he realizes this boat belongs to the ‘marplot of [his] Eden,’²⁸ the man that imprisoned him and willingly starved his family, “His cheeks, they went white and his mouth shaped a sound, like a smile that at last can break free.” [42:08] In an instance of pure chance, the glacier of his soul has touched the warmth of crooked hope. All of Terje’s grief is reinvigorated towards vengeance. It is his opportunity to ‘inflict a life of grief’ back on the Captain. As he realizes, his face moves in and out of shadow. He springs back into action with malice and ruin on his mind. The film communicates his internal rage, as he is framed before the ocean, clenching his fists. Our understanding of the ocean shifts, as Terje’s emotions take hold of him.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

²⁸ The marplot of Eden is Satan

They abandon ship. Terje leads the family to a calm inlet, away from the storm. Terje's mind is the danger, not the threat of the storm. The two look at one another, [fig.9]. In a glance, [the captain],” knew, now, the sailor that on his knee had crouched on his deck and wept.” [47:02] Furious energy takes hold of Terje, [fig. 10], as he rips at the child and wife. He holds them in his grip and threatens to heave them into the sea as he snarls and bites. Then, he turns towards the child. She looks up at him. They are engaged in looking. At the moment of interchange, something in his menace drops. We watch a shift take hold of him. His eye turns; his expression softens. There is an unspoken transference that takes place between them. Again, we cannot see the thing. The unseen element is undoubtedly there— an invisible truce; love occurs. It is powerful as it is concealed. The imagination tends to the arising ‘wound.’



Fig. 11

The thickets which have run rampant over his heart, clear away. Suddenly, he is removed from his vengeance in the height of tension. He grips her arm, as he sees his own, near-disastrous cruelty for the first time, [fig.11].²⁹ He has spent a life consumed by the enacted cruelty he

²⁹Delusional like Ahab, only, he breaks from it.

experienced. The curtains drop. It is the child who saves the family. Who is he to take this child from the world? Who is he to break up the three of them?

Beaten down by life, Terje perseveres in his small, changeless position. He breaks free from years of bitter uncertainty, judgment, and condemnation as resolve winds back through him. In his action, we read that he overcomes the constrictions of his private torment and he accepts the past. Revitalized and unchained, we can assume that Terje meets death with a gentler view of 'his mistakes' in a calm truce with the world. He is buried on a hill in a field of wildflowers. There, next to his family, they all rest before the vast ocean, [fig.13]. In this story of revisitation, one travels so far from oneself. In the end, there is still a lot that is missing for him. He doesn't fill the void of his psychological search; his family is gone. Terje is more or less unrecognizable by the end of his life.



Fig. 12

Yet, the final act redeems our hero. In that earlier image, he takes to the sea driven by the intuitive curiosity of his younger ways, [fig.12]. With a strange look of determination, he makes his way to the ship. This short journey heals him from his reciprocating self-imprisonment. His aggrandized anguish is forgotten in the heat of hope. Instead, in the final act, the 'infamous'

captain returns. Terje has the chance for revenge, to repeat an unforgiving cycle, [fig. 11].

Instead, he finds the truth of his person. Alone and settled, he lives on with the certainty of his own way, affirming some sense of ‘coming home.’ Emerson, the great American Transcendentalist wrote the essay *Experience*, late in life in the aftermath of tragedy. In the essay, he moves through a most difficult space of grief, eventually arriving at some other form of promise. In the consummation of the work, the last line tells all, reflecting Terje’s last stand of life.

Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!— it seems to say, — there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.”³⁰³¹

(Emerson)

At the tail-end of his years spent laboring in memory and thought, it is the active pursuit, born of curiosity that moves him. He comes to know that there is no act of vengeance that will appease his suffering. Rather, it is an internal consolation which settles him and he dies in peace. The movement in the film is from his certainty towards the uncertain. In the canted image above, [fig. 12], Terje is surrounded and stands against the chaos of his mind, represented by the ocean. He dies with the strength of his decency, a clarity to see life his own way.



Fig. 13

³⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Steuart Curry. *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Random House, 1944, 268

³¹ Emerson wrote *Experience*, shortly after his son, Waldo died. Prior to this, Emerson was the great affirmer. This was the first essay he began with a question— ‘Where do we find ourselves?’

The final shot holds for twenty-five seconds.

Fade to black.

The Intruder

“The more inaccessible a work is to reason, the greater it is.”

-Goethe

The Intruder (L'Intus) begins with a sound engaging our most subtle inner faculties — a woman peers from the dark space, into the eye of the camera. It is unnerving. She is surrounded by dripping rock walls, accentuated in windows of blue light and raising carved textures like tracks. The rock recedes into pools of darkness; a heavily shaded, mysterious region. She lights a cigarette. A disconnected voice fills the space, “Your worst enemies are hiding inside, in the shadow, in your heart.” These enemies cannot be tracked. A light has been cast on this private place.



Fig. 1: Still from *The Intruder*

The movement of the film challenges traditional storytelling structures. Denis mercilessly entangles the protagonist's present experience with psychological visions, memories, dreams, all

thrust before our eyes in a seemingly unsorted continuum. One never settles while watching *The Intruder*, as it exists in uncertainty: things loosen, unravel, and change. If you track across the image, [fig. 1], there are windows of broken light and darkness. Then, the clarity of an unforgiving gaze strikes³². This is the uncertain space, manifest, exposed before the film's start. *The Intruder* lingers on the *dreadfully particular*, moving from one slow-burning space to another with feverish intensity.

Denis is known to be a great appreciator of American Literature. Having studied in particular the works of Herman Melville, there is an undeniable influence that exists in her approach to film-making, storytelling, and editing. Denis' films are often literary adaptations, carried out in unconventional and exploratory directions. Her most well-known film, *Beau Travail*, is based on *Billy Budd*, Melville's final work. In his time, Melville was a great innovator of form, clarifying his themes with an original and vivid approach.

The Intruder's source material is *L'Intrus*, a non-fiction essay written by Jean Luc Nancy, who is a prominent French philosopher. *L'Intrus* is his conception of self after a heart transplant. Nancy's non-fiction essay is the source material that provides Denis with the passageway into the journey of a man who has been attacked by his heart. Nancy responds to Denis' adaptation. He writes, "The relationship between us is not the relatively 'natural' one presumed of an adaptation, (a simple change of register or instrument) but the kind of extra-natural relationship that, without evidence of kinship, solely on its symbolic elaboration... to engage the complex and delicate system of correspondences, of 'inspirations', or contagions

³² This is a good way to think about this film when watching it; it moves into and out of different sense-making.

between us.”³³ The connection between the source material and the film is arranged internally.³⁴ The two are not linked by the articulation of plot points or images, but rather, by the figure of the heart transplant. The literary work and the film are infected with the same disease. In her re-deliberation of the Nancy text, (the work of Melville as a consistent, secondary source on the backburner), Denis emerges with a sense of the work informed by her own sense of the world.

Denis and Melville conjure a similar, exploratory style. In the Melville quote below, an important idea of land as it relates to the body and mind is explored. The paradox is given a warring life in *The Intruder*.

... consider the subtleness of the sea, how its most dreadful creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying an eternal way since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a stange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!³⁵

(Melville)

In the passage from *Moby-Dick*, Melville compares the surface of the land and water to the ocean’s underworld of horror, and in so doing, finds analogy to an inner world of humanity.

³³Vecchio, Marjorie, and Wim Wenders: *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border*. I.B. Tauris, 2014. *The Intruder According to Claire Denis* by Jean Luc Nancy, translated by Anna Moschovakis

³⁴ As is Denis’ relationship to the literature of Melville. The kinship reflects in her directorial choices.

³⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; Or, The Whale*, (New York: Norton, 1976), 215.

Certain elements of nature (the land, the sea, the embedded ‘dreadful creatures’), manifest our inner working and spiritual truths. Melville illuminates the vicious cruelties that we are capable. He alludes to an embedded ‘cosmic malignity’ in the world which his Captain Ahab believes is calling for him.

There is a tension between what we recognize and what is buried with our darkest urges. Our physiognomy conceals the interior organs, the apparatus of life, (heart, kidney, liver, etc). The soul overflows and arises in the glint of an eye, an uncensored emotion or twitch of the surface. Melville confronts the reader as if to say ‘look again, closer,’ suggesting that the existence of ocean creatures, the cannibalism of the sea eludes human interiority, equally as turbulent.

We are bound to the earth, mulling about on the surface. We see ‘the land,’ a placid, exposed, and docile place. Melville ponders the allure of distant tides which draw humans away from their comfortable certainties on land. The higher realm exists beneath the surface, bubbling up and showing itself in expression(s).³⁶ The ‘placid’ surface presents a harmonious facade. Melville, an inebriated master of form, further explores the gullied geographies which persuade his characters from spiritual peace. The sea draws the sailor from the safety of solid ground to the unknown, where half of life cannot be seen.³⁷ This is the story of those who are pushed from life ‘atop the surface,’ inviting difficult explorations of the deep.

An inevitable discrepancy exists between the world of thought (contemplation) and the experience of life (action), which is a perpetual unfolding in *Moby-Dick* and Denis’ *The Intruder*; visual representations of action allude to an interior world of consciousness. Nancy’s

³⁶ Whether facial, cinematic, natural etc..

³⁷ The murky water covers its contents.

L'intrus is a non-fiction account of this working through this confrontation. There are multiple worlds of meaning in *The Intruder*, as there are in *Moby-Dick*. Melville harnesses a 'charged ambiguity'³⁸, grounding the spiritual landscape in concrete objects which quiver, beholden to ultimate truth, (the masthead, the deck, a rope). Denis' audio and visual cues are orchestrated amongst seemingly unrelated imagery and action (a baby, people running in the forest, unidentified women, city-scapes, a heart in the snow). The images are barren, un-surrounded, and un-supported by context and without an emphasis on one sequence over any other. There is a resistance to total narrative transparency. A fractured 'throughline' complicates the story, but it challenges the viewer to bring their sense of meaning. One must consider what isn't there or what lives in between. As occurs with 'Consider the subtleness of the sea...' (quoted above) we search for buried notes of soul and psychology. I will attempt to describe in detail and draw the essence of Denis' subjective style, which closely resembles Melville's sensibility and form.

A logic underpins the movement of the film, yet, the move cannot be categorized. The initial, 'hardly visible space [figure 1.] is the first in a series of sharply precise visions. We move from darkness towards a revelation. The vision is claustrophobic, as it exposes form, appearance, and action which can trick us. The rhythm of images emerges, consistently. Denis sets up her problems to resolve, her patterns to break. We learn to expect the unexpected.

Nothing remains stable. The images generate a visionary pattern of the film's protagonist, [Trebor's] oblique inner landscape. Every image and image association refers to his temporality, his sense of the world as well as that which haunts him. We question what is real. The only

³⁸ As phrased by Professor Suchenski

certain thing is this present destabilization. Denis intentionally moves through the real and the *questionably real* to energize further possibilities.

[47:24] A gunshot goes off. It scares Trebor's abandoned dogs. Within the cut, we travel from the original place of Trebor's residence, somewhere on the French-Swiss border in the Jura Mountains, to a city, presumably somewhere in Switzerland. The sound of the gunshot links these frames. Trebor is now on a city street and lured into a watch shop. It is this juxtaposition which only Trebor's mind, the internal force of the film, can bridge. The watch-seller wears white gloves as they talk about a watch. The perspective chops about their hands. She puts the watch on him. He likes it. He's bought himself some time.

The next shot is waist-high, and from behind— Trebor walks down the street, self-satisfied, and flings his jacket over his shoulder. A car passes in front of him. He stops at the curb of the street. There is a presumed POV-shot which faces up towards the lighted sign of a casino, then frantically across the space of the city. It is mostly darkness with blurry lights. There is an abrupt cut. Trebor is down on the other side of the street and is walking up steps. He disappears into darkness. The sound of a wailing siren stirs in the city and carries us over into the next image, a snowscape. A shaky camera tracks across the snow; we have yet to find our subject. There are tracks in the snow. Drums and symbols improvise. A cut shows the same shot, traversing the snowscape— the vision is unstable and starts over. Then horses burst into the frame. There is a female rider [fig. 3]. There are several disorienting cuts, repetitions, and the horses burst into the frame again. We see the steps made on the surface of the snow. We see the track and then the making of the track. Things come together, in retrospect. A man is being dragged. It is a faceless, subjectless few minutes until the female rider steps away from her

horse. She is the same woman from the first scene. She removes the rope from the man's feet. He is revealed to be Trebor. She checks his pulse and speaks in Russian.

Following this sequence, Trebor is in two places at once. In one image, he is safe in an urban space. In the next, he is being dragged through the snow, near death. These two images are right next to each other. To make sense of this, to understand the direction one must address the missing space, the interstice, between the two images. There, we may form some method of relativity. The hunter leaves Trebor as he bleeds in the snow. The two unknowns ride off into the overexposed horizon, [fig. 2]. The tracks of the rider mark the snow. This is the last image we see before we are in a hotel room.



Fig. 2

Trebor is in bed and removes his watch. The music echoes as it fades. It is uncertain if this is past, present, future, or premonition. The sound of the watch is sharp as it clinks against his bedside table. Trebor pulls a knife from a drawer, removes it from its encasing and puts it beneath his pillow, then exhales. The mark of the tracks on the snow, [fig.2], like a scar on the land, along with the knife allude some scar of his consciousness. A scar which fades over time.

All is still for a moment. There is a soft unidentifiable sound and he looks up. We are back in the snow-scape. The sound is of sniffing dogs. The dogs find a dead man under the frozen ground. He resembles Trebor. There is a story at work, just below the surface [fig.4].



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

A memory of the words from the first scene, “Your worst enemies are hiding inside, in the shadow, in your heart,” haunts Trebor (fig. 3 shows the unidentified woman from the first scene). One can begin to trace expressions, external measures, signs, indicators as allusions to fragmentation. In the looping, repetitive, soundtrack, there is an indication of Trebor's inability to reach conclusions. Trebor attempts to return to his past, hoping to stay alive. The past, which occurs and disrupts the present, is recalled in the echoing, dream-like nature of the soundtrack. His blocked consciousness— the center from which the story revolves— is inferred in the repetition. We grapple with the range of his experience as Trebor remains driven by a narrow intensity to outlive his design.³⁹ As his journey unfolds, we are overcome with the incongruous ‘him’ and the movements, the misdirections, and unfulfilled gestures which shape his nature.

³⁹ Fate

The present is unstable; it is already a memory. Each frame holds the delicate nature of time passing. Denis seamlessly interlaces distant places and periods into one fluid, inter-working stream of disruption(s). Denis intentions, space between the cut— space, left to be shaped. Despite feverish passages of disorientation, we are oriented around Trebor.

Clutched by an Unseen Ailment

Bobbing in the Water



Fig.5



Fig.6

We first meet Luis Trebor swimming across a lake. His dogs watch as he splashes around apparently in agony. Trebor is floating in the clutches of death. Engulfed in a mass of green water, he grasps at his chest, [fig. 5]. The water buries half his body; his sick heart is buried within him, [fig. 6]. Beneath the veiling surface, “its most dreadful creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden...”⁴⁰ The pain, like many beautiful and terrible things in life, is elusive, fleeting, not to be seen. It rips him from his afternoon in the water and among the trees. In a medium shot, a stranger appears from the crowd of black trees. We see a point-of-view from this stranger— he watches Trebor from a distance as Trebor reaches the bank to lie down next to the dogs. He grips the earth in his continuing affliction and grabs for

⁴⁰Melville, Herman, *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale*, (New York: Norton, 1976), 215.

breath. He clutches the sand and finds the butt of a cigarette like some artifact of his unhealthy heart. Subtle sounds of rolling water blanket the scene.

In this early sequence, there is a strong sense of layering— an onlooker who waits to strike; the dogs watching and Trebor, sputtering in pain. There is a strong impression of the surface of things — the water, the forest, the skin — the things which bind. Stories and characters collide which we do not know.

As stated, Denis' film, *The Intruder* is based on Jean Luc Nancy's non-fiction account of his own heart transplant. In the budding complexity of his new existence, with another man's heart, Nancy questions if the 'strangeness' of his condition shows itself, externally:

Strangeness and strangeness become ordinary, everyday occurrences. This is expressed through a constant self-exteriorization: I must be monitored, tested, measured. We are armed with cautionary recommendations vis-a-vis the outside world (crowds, stores, swimming pools, small children, those who are sick). But the most vigorous enemies are inside: the old viruses that have always been lurking in the shadow of my immune system—life-long intrus, as they have always been there.⁴¹

(Nancy)

What does it mean to have someone else's heart? How does it make itself known? It's *unfamiliar* to him, but a change in the glint of an eye, a distant look, a certain movement surface. 'The strangeness' of the inside disrupts the 'docile' surface in subtle alteration. As Trebor swims, his sick heart makes an evident interjection. Nancy seeks to source the materiality of his unseen inner-functions, his utter helplessness in matters of the heart. It's as if the heart has a will of its own. 'The most vigorous enemies' he writes, 'have always been lurking in the shadow of my

⁴¹ Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Susan Hanson. "L'Intrus." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2, no. 3 (2002): 1–14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949352>.

immune system.’ Nancy becomes aware that someone else’s heart inhabits his body. He sees the strange heart as alien, as it sustains him. The center of his nervous system is branching out, acquainting itself. Has he committed something irreversible to his nature?

Denis’, Trebor, like Nancy, must face the reality of his transient self. Her film is the story of a ghost, shown in phantom meanderings. He grasps at life through his limited access to it, his half-memories, hallucinations, his dreams, and projections.

.. one thing is important: because Michel is the flesh and the heart of the film, we should feel free to break up each scene as if even Michel wasn’t needed in the image, as if every image came out of his mind. Therefore, we decided that he could be in the frame or not in the frame and also that he could be in frame sometimes but not as the main object, not as the centre. I wanted each image to convey a sense that it was generated by his mind. So the sound was not describing the landscape but describing a vision of a place.⁴²

(Denis)

From the start, the sound and image express Michel Subor’s⁴³ [Trebor’s] physical and spiritual rootlessness, deepening a sense of his anguish. Denis delivers sound and image which give clues to the viewer. The camera-view clings to his edges and other parts of him in the off-kilter meaning-formulation. In fragments, we receive his past, his present, and the future he fears. Physically, Trebor may not be in the shot, sometimes missing from the scene completely — we search for an immediate reference within the frame. What we see remains rickety, perplexing, and stops short. Our sense of him remains incomplete.

⁴²*L’Intrus: An Interview with Claire Denis – Senses of Cinema*. 2021.

⁴³ Michel Subor is the actor.



[Fig.7]



[Fig.8]



[Fig.9]



[Fig.10]

The ‘vision of place’ is driven by Trebor’s psyche which is different from a static ‘description of landscape.’ Every image communicates Trebor’s sensory experience: grasping his chest, dragged through the snow, holding the gate or the dog leash. All during, he hears the sounds. The frame is a partial view— a half-conscious perspective. While at the start of the film, we had no bearings or connection to him, it’s not long before everything is referred back to him. We are attached to his experience.

The momentary lapses of Trebor’s non-appreciation resonate with the viewer. Through acute subjectivity, the interaction achieves objectivity because we begin to see how he is stuck in his ways (in direct imagery, [fig.10]). His case is extreme.⁴⁴ It is a fine line that Denis negotiates

⁴⁴ He is like a bad detective from a noir movie.

between the valence of subjective [fig.8] and objective space. She illustrates a private blindness in Trebor that we can understand. He is blind, narrow, and stubborn, unchanged by the things he experiences. We grapple with his short-sightedness.

Driven by Trebor's overtly personal space, the external world is detached from his internal meandering. In the classic quest narrative, the traveler is changed by what they see and experience. The world inhabits the traveler as the traveler takes in the world. There is often an 'internal transformation' which occurs, oriented around the journey.⁴⁵ While the overall structure of *The Intruder* implies the character's desire to return, and an explicit nostalgia for the past, it is formulated selfishly. Trebor does not realize a change in the parameters of *The Intruder*. He continues to search with the dullness of his insight. He does, on the other hand, appear to feel guilt but whether this is true remains ambiguous, surrounded with fog. In many ways, the audience realizes and grapples with his experience more directly than Trebor does.

Brooding Trebor

What is the nature of his brooding?



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

⁴⁵ The quintessential example; *The Odyssey*

There is an abyss that separates Trebor from life around him—all is misguided by his ego. In the image above [fig. 11], Trebor is surrounded by darkness and there is the sense of his back in chiaroscuro. He grips his head and faces into the darkness, away from the light. The image relates to Denis' treatment of visibility and knowledge—how much can we tell about consciousness from the physical evidence of the body? Denis questions the parameters of conscience in a near-heartless man. He is often thinking, but we hear no words with which to conceive of his thoughts. Instead, his crooked shoulders, his weighted head which rests against his hand in this moment of removal, clamor out the otherwise incommunicable. But still, it is not clear or verbal. It is inherent. There is a strong sense of physical presence that is felt in the film. We get the sense of his severance from the world. He is far from the moment, desperate for escape.

In the other image, [fig.12] we see the son who *is* around. Trebor's son, [the father in this case] has overcome Trebor's brutal disregard. He fills the role and is shown performing 'motherly duties,' as he takes care of the baby while the mother works. In the image above, [fig.12] he holds the baby. His look rests gently on his sleeping son. The father watches until his son wakes up. The son finds his father's eyes and smiles. While the baby cannot make sense of this, the interaction is meaningful. Trebor's son [the father], is acting out that which, we can suppose, was never acted out with him. We see the warmth of the look and come to know the difference in their awareness. Trebor looks longingly into the darkness, or out the window, [fig.11]. There is no indication that he has ever graced his son with a total and warming presence.

The Intruder captures the lyrical essence of Trebor's world in his vain and romantic pursuit of an earlier form—his greater, younger, more capable self. He says, "I want a young

heart. Not an old heart or a woman’s heart. I’m a man. I want to keep my character.” He generalizes here as if his character resides in the universal ‘man,’ as if his character were not distinct. Trebor is often dealing in generalizations. He simplifies the world and fuels his desired outcome— in reality, he is floating and barely attempting to know his own nature. In effect, he is suspended in this superficial journey, never piercing into the heart of the matter. He is given a heart, a second chance. Showing no signs of breaking down the patterns of his life, he continues to traverse horizontal landscapes. His is a tragic misunderstanding.

There are people who suffer at the cost of Trebor’s self-indulgence. He journeys across continents to find his other missing, ‘beloved son,’⁴⁶ and disregards the son who is there. He never sees what matters when it is in front of him.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Great darkness in his heart and mind widens with his choices, as does the longing of those around him. Trebor remains psychologically and spiritually static, jailed in his sensuous journeying. Troubled by his incapacity, his utter disconnection commences in his choice to ‘denaturalize.’

⁴⁶ The son in [fig.13] reads a letter Trebor wrote, addressed to his other ‘beloved son.’ Trebor spends the entirety of the film searching for the son who is not there.

We are, along with all my more and more numerous counterparts, the beginnings of a mutation: man recommences going infinitely beyond man (this is what “the death of god,” in all its possible senses, has always meant). Man becomes what he is: the most terrifying and troubling technician, as Sophocles designated him twenty-five centuries ago. He who de-natures and re-fashions nature; he who re-creates creation; he who brings it out of nothing, and, perhaps, returns it to nothing. He who is capable of the origin and the end.⁴⁷

(Nancy)

There is an indisputable tension in the film between this man’s aspiration and his limitations within nature. For Trebor, the outdoors is reserved for rest, sunbathing, and skidding across surfaces (on bikes, boats, swimming). It is a gentle, dimensionless place. He is misaligned with nature’s more malignant routes; its veiled trickeries. Nature displays a menacing, unconquerable system. Our ‘mutation,’ as Nancy puts it, has to do with the extent we tamper with or stray from our original human makeup. We use modern science and technology to delete, insert or rearrange and can proceed beyond the conditions which define us. Trebor redefines his own, internal makeup, to overcome his condition. It is also suggested that he has taken his son’s heart. This is inferred when we see his son in the morgue. The ‘death of God’ is this breakdown of boundaries and ‘natural law,’ as well as the loss of faith in the life process.

Nancy dominates his bodily form, clarified as a ‘de-nature and refashion [of] nature.’ This fractured, inhuman state, conceived with the heart transplant, is an invitation for tainted emptiness to dominate the ‘body-container,’ as the spirit flees. All that remains is a substance-less drive to ‘find,’ to fill and preserve. Trebor is endlessly pursued by a living confrontation with emptiness (embodied by the woman from the beginning who stalks him in

⁴⁷Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Susan Hanson. “L’Intrus.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2, no. 3 (2002): 1–14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949352>.

reality and visions). He is more or less a dead man, surgically revitalized and so cheating death. His domination renders him empty; he remains unwilling to surrender for the sake of it.

In Trebor's striving to re-vitalize, to 'de-nature and refashion nature,' he postpones the inevitable in a superficial extension. Nancy writes, "To defer death is thus also to exhibit and under- score it... Only it must be said that humanity has never been ready for any form of this question, and that humanity's non-preparation for death is but the blow and injustice of death itself." Every preventative measure is taken against death—Trebor invites the foreign tissue to take his body over. It solidifies the reign of the machine, the tail-chasing of his hapless pursuit. Trebor's second life is haunted by death (reminded by the woman who haunts him, reminded by the scar).⁴⁸

At [26:04], we see his lover at work in a pharmacy, in the city. It's easy to recognize her compassion for her customers. She is lovable but is unloved by Trebor. It is a distinct juxtaposition with Trebor, who is at his home in the woods, hiding the remnants of the dead man he had killed the previous night. He walks into the forest beyond the covered remains and towards the overexposed horizon. Then, part of a door in a dark room opens. Trebor leans on a shelf and looks around, [fig.15].



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

⁴⁸ The scar comes to represent all that is lost including the son, the black-market trade, self-estrangement etc..

The remnants of lunch, a radio, pills, an open computer litter the desk, [fig. 16]. The droning music begins, reinforcing a headspace and the atmospheric relationship between the shots. He hears his dog bark, and turns. He touches the keyboard, a stroke of intimacy for the machine. He types, "I opt out for the emergency solution." The vision of place, along with the verbal clue, suggest that Trebor is thinking and is about to act. The camera's movements and cuts repeat, creating the impression of starting over. He's staring off and gives the impression of thought, yet, it seems his mind is in a cyclical rut, in open-eye arrest. The camera is magnetic, attracted to these moments which conceive a troubled 'vision of place.'⁴⁹

Around twenty-seven minutes, Trebor decides to engage in a (presumably) black-market heart exchange, made certain in the quiet of his hideaway in the further woods. His decision marks a shift in how we perceive him. From this point on, he spends time on city streets, in conference rooms, in hospital beds. He is shown at odds with nature itself, where his own solemn and passive watching of the land are signs of his distance from himself. He is no longer a romantic quest hero taking on the world, but a weathered old man clinging to survival and looking from behind the glass. His gaze is fixed, stuck, misled as it spires inwards. When he looks, he does not see. He has decided to step outside from matters of life. Trebor is consumed by his own state of being. A shadow of a man, his brooding has concretized into reality. He is ensnared in the probings of mind.

⁴⁹ Denis' term

Sculpted in Light

Frozen Trebor Thinks, off-center



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

Trebor is a statue, frozen by the light as he invites regret to consume him, [fig. 17]. There is a presence felt as if we are near a confrontation— some mark or indication of his concern. It does not show itself plainly.⁵⁰ He looks out, mired in that which is lost. We see him looking out. What does he see? His suffering becomes the dark sun around which everything else turns. We cannot break from his reference. He does not reckon with his natural state, his life and his decisions— rather, Trebor ruminates in his painful thoughts which only solidifies them into rigid certainties, established by the rigid re-generation of vision and perspective in this sequence. It is as if the camera keeps starting over, trying again. He is trapped. We are trapped in tandem with him. He is a man, unable to detach from the space of his heartache. The vision is unable to detach from him. This is the point where madness takes hold and the world collapses. The outpouring of his trapped consciousness drives him to the furthest reaches of life and memory. Nothing else matters but his maintenance. “The emergency process is underway. The surcharge

⁵⁰ Mirroring his poor, fatherly role. He never looked at his son with any contentment. His son does in filial correction.

is to be paid upon your arrival,” the computer responds. The reverberating soundtrack echoes through the scene, as he hands his life over to dark, abysmal forces, as if his blood is digitizing, his cellular makeup downloading.

Trebor lays back to rest. It is unclear how much time passes in his semi-conscious state. The film remains in this liminal place of the in-between. Trebor raises his head and looks into the light. His movements are solemn, gradual, hesitating. A guitar strums and a window frames the land, the water, and the trees. Trebor is dressed, sitting up and looking. Little has changed but the light, which falls differently. The camera pans down: he is the one strumming the guitar. The dogs are running across the field by the water. It is dawn now. Trebor looks out of a glass window with reflections on it. The strumming stops. The dogs bark. He looks and the music begins again. He holds his hand to his head and looks up another time. The sequence ends. The music strings the series of looking and waiting to the next scene of a death march. Coffin-bearers are carrying a coffin, towards a preacher. Is this the end of Trebor? A new beginning? A nondescript funeral? We are carried off in the tumult of these possibilities. Peering in, we reconstruct, and deal in the active process.

Here, as in most of the film’s sequences, we get a strong sense of the essential movement of the *The Intruder*, established through recurring shot-countershot ambiguity and temporal abstraction, rooted in the particular sounds and images of place and then the ‘extraordinary potential of the disarray.’⁵¹ There is no formal code for what we see. It’s almost like a continual *pan* over grounding [meaning], where poignant artifacts, composition relationships, or the movement itself can suggest further paths. The elusiveness of formative certainty and

⁵¹Vecchio, Marjorie, and Wim Wenders, eds. *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. That Interrupting Feeling: Interstitial Disjunctions in Claire Denis’s *L’Intrus*

explanation in the film has to do with Trebor's fogginess of mind and spirit. Most often, life is experienced without absolute certainty. Our vision is connected to Trebor's lapses of consciousness, in the off-hours, between. With melancholy, he thinks with a heaviness in revolt against his unavoidable, human decay. In this struggle against the world, Trebor remains self-absorbed and hoping for preternatural solutions.

The world presented demonstrates his unfolding interiority, like a torn up scroll in water. The film, in its complexity, attempts to depict the grounded experience of one's chaotic and modern mind as it flits about in untethered flapping. When asked to describe the subject of her film, Denis replies "...*L'Intrus* is like a boat lost in the ocean drifting."⁵² The idea of 'drift' is prevalent in the film and feeds into our experience on multiple levels. Trebor is a man adrift, physically, from the eastern hemisphere to the south; spiritually, he drifts in a gray zone between life and death, sanity and isolation, self and other, sense and non-sense. The subject reels for surfaces, solid ground, and peace of mind. Instead, we follow his informal listlessness. As in *Moby-Dick*, the film is neither stuck nor contained by any demand for proper story-telling. Melville and Denis share a desire to reimagine time. Wherever the plot goes, it forges a new, ungoverned path.

For Denis, like a handful of other directors (Bela Tarr, Charles Burnett, Tarkovsky, Ackerman, Fellini) it is in her makeup to re-negotiate our relationship to time, until, eventually, our sense is overrun. The indefinite, 'drifting' feel of the film becomes another mode for sense-making with grounded sounds and images — as if making sense is unnatural. And isn't this the case?

⁵²*L'Intrus: An Interview with Claire Denis – Senses of Cinema*. 2021.

If one were to attempt to track the film's geography, one would classify the movement as a branching evasiveness, defined by its *unpredictable nature*. The work is partitioned by landmarks of travel and attempted return. The lucid, travelling lens spans realities, colonized land and imagined space. This kind of traveling breaks down the ability to objectively 'map out,' the film. Specifically, Trebor travels from the Jura Mountains in France, to Switzerland, Seoul, Korea, and then Tahiti (the place of his youth and his missing, '*beloved son*'). The majority of the film takes place in darkness. Denis heightens the sense of the damaged and weathered body, breached and marred, like the partitioned land, with her treatment of land and Trebor's inescapable loneliness. In the second half of the film, the cities and the land communicate an opening up. Trebor does not belong in these places. This is where the tragedy exists, as there is a sense of surgical-temporal transplantation where the narrative continuum is spliced, re-arranged and, at points, altogether omitted. What does this mean in the context of the human? How do we reconcile with what is lost?

There is an image from my childhood. I am on a ship, I am arriving in Africa with my mother... There was the sea, the sky, that little line which made up the coast, we were going towards something, and what was just a little line would come closer and closer and become solid land.⁵³

(Denis)

Denis retained this sense from her early life; there is no view of the landscape which is locked. She approaches the 'little line' which makes up the coast; it expands in horizontal plentitude. In drastic oscillation, the form, the size, and the initial sense of the place are wiped clear out. It's as if 'vision,' itself, were defined by its indeterminacy. In the film, images of the

⁵³ *L'Intrus: An Interview with Claire Denis – Senses of Cinema*. 2021.

landscape arise and often suggest Trebor’s marginal aura. The landscape is hypnotic and convincing as it seduces individuals to lay claims to the space. It draws one in and captivates as we starve with illusions of ‘capture.’ The land is ungraspable, unclaimable, unsubscribe to any encompassing form— a constant opening and begetting of further orderlessness. There is no central history, myth, or partitioning of place— these are ideas overlaid or drawn over the land, like scars or marks of existence. “The division itself is nothing: it is the separation, the interval, the insubstantial line of the horizon that joins and disjoins earth and sky’. It is ‘at once a closure of space,’ the outer limit of earth, depth and presence and a flight into infinity... which never stops drawing back.”⁵⁴ There is the ‘separation, the interval, the insubstantial line,’ and then there is its opening up. There is always a limit to what we see, ending with the horizon. The horizon line balances us. There are endless horizons. A new frame begins beyond the edge of the existing one. A different perspective awaits. The vision of the land leads to a temporary certainty, only to open up again. In this case, our knowledge permits that things will always unravel and shift with a new perspective. Nothing is stable.

Forest of Fog

What is the relationship between the sound of the razor and the image of the forest?



Fig. 19

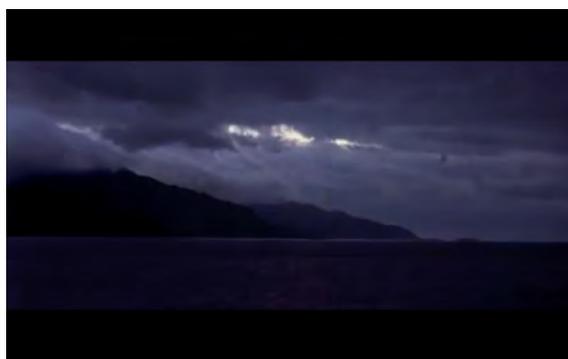


Fig. 20

⁵⁴Vecchio, Marjorie, and Wim Wenders, editors. *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border*. I.B. Tauris, 2014. Jean Luc Nancy, ‘The Uncanny Landscape’

The natural world— pensive, threatening, lurking, is charged with a withheld essence, [fig 19, 20], contrary to Trebor's stoic, impassive sense. The landscapes are boundless and unlinked to any preconception— the wide-open space undermines ideas of borders and patrolled space that exists in the film. There is no way to capture the totality of the film, as a hunter would stalk a deer. Nature withholds an incongruous and indefinite essence at its core. It takes on a contradictory role between the known and the seen. The treatment of exterior landscape, bodies of water, sublime abysses, the ocean, forests, dense with fog, are a living reminder for Trebor of his fragility and impermanence. It is the world that enunciates his dislocation. At the moment of his departure, from home [41:36], there is a sense that he is escaping 'nature' with a razor in his hand.

Trebor is shaving with an electric razor which continues to buzz over the camera's slow pan of the woods. He prepares for a drawn-out journey, away leaving his dogs, deepening his insufficient *fatherliness*. The pairing of the razor's mechanical drone with foggy treetops creates an unsettling dichotomy. This marks his irreversible phase of later life— Trebor smiles and bids goodbye to his organs, his dogs, his son, his home in the woods. Trebor is hiding somewhere under the canopy of fog and trees, [fig. 19]. He hides from his death. We watch as he looks, then sees the tops of trees in fog. The camera is in motion, traversing a moody landscape. An intended relational interaction becomes apparent through shot- countershot. It places the subject and the environment in direct dialogue. The buzzing sound drones over both images; the contrast of sound and image is striking. The sound glazes over the seam— the impression of a natural transition. The sequence- relationship foreshadows his heart surgery. The pan is spatially unchained, in a mental pan inwards. It only grazes over the thing, leaving the feel of hidden

tracks. To pan through space is to resist definitive focus. The shot traces Trebor's feeble pursuit within the dark throngs of his future. He readies himself but loses something essential.

A further investigation of the subject is handled through the continual incorporation of non-human presences— landscape, dogs, and, more generally, instinct. Domineered by an instinct, absent of reason, the dog moves by non-human codes, a reaction which marks a difference in fear and understanding. The dog is well-attuned to the lurking danger, that doesn't show itself so plainly. The natural world makes incongruity, indefiniteness, manifest; dogs carry an intuitive sense. Nature takes on a role in contrast to and in conjunction with what is seen and what is known.

While women with belts, guns, and jobs obtain a deep sense of things, Trebor sunbathes.⁵⁵ The dogs, whose latent, frameless perspectives suggest boundlessness, human awareness is cut-off, limited, self-involved. An individual's span of vision does not exceed his desiring self. Trebor is unconcerned with spiritual absence; he cares only for physical resolve— he wants to keep his 'person' intact at all costs. He has a way of writing off the 'spirit' by following symbolic indicators— the lost son, the heart, his youth— but makes no distinctions between them. The penultimate example of this is when his son, holding his own child, fulfills the role of the father. The dog has nothing but reigning spirit. Nature embodies Trebor's missing spirits. The role of dogs is the conduit link for these ideas.

⁵⁵ There is a strengthening partnership between women and their dogs which is reinforced numerous times in the film.

The Mark of the Scar

A dividing line



Fig. 21

Denis', *The Intruder*, is a film made up of shadow crossings, porous boundaries, and internal threats. Her denouncement of linear narrativity keeps most of the film 'in-between' the action. Like Melville, she gives space for a meditative concentration that deepens textural reverberations and avoids 'the transactional.' In Denis' vision, the tangent is rendered to matter; this is her method of storytelling. That is not to say that her methods are not formally strict and supported by a hidden logic. There is great attention to structure in her work but it must be unearthed consisting of layered concentration of cadence and rhythm, that exchanges total clarity for an original style, a freedom to diverge. Her work offers an honest circumambulation in the murkiness of our interior realm.

Halfway through the film, the scar on Trebor's chest reorients all that we have seen and all that we will see. It changes our relationship to what is happening— we never see the operation. His scar functions as a placeholder for the entirety of the film's movement. The scar holds within it the presence of two states: the memory of life before the operation and the time spent healing, post-operation. In the remainder of the film, when he grabs at his chest he reinvigorates the past of things we did and did not see. It is a further way to activate the

condition of memory. The operation becomes an invisible dividing line, which breaks up the film. As nature peels from his body, Trebor becomes a walking corpse, forging forward. This is not to condemn the capacity of modern science and technology. Rather, it is to question our extreme and developing place as we grow further apart from the natural rule and our own nature. Trebor so badly wants to re-inhabit a 'self' that no longer exists. It is this perpetual shifting, creeping towards death, which the film highlights.

It is a film of *kinaesthesia*, horizontal movements. After the heart transplant (going in) Trebor continues on this surface itinerant. He is missing this piercing, insightful vision. He does not use his human ability to see oneself from the outside and reflect. He is atomized, insular, inflexible, short-sighted, and keeps trying to fill these holes (heart transplant, replacement son, sense of home, listlessness) but still, the invisible groundwork of his devastating decisions, remain. He only patches them up, for the time being, while the true hole, the enemy within, cannot be addressed. He will live embattled and twisted in this confrontation for the narrowing remainder of his days. He has been dead for a long time as he never faces himself, or those around him. He does not know-how.

Scars, partitions, borders, aches— often, we do not see the thing happen. There is the anticipation of the thing, and then the consequence of it (the scar is one example). One gets the sense that the very 'distraction' may be at the heart of the matter. That somehow, the plunging and directionless movement of the film is charged with intention. The route taken is in the inter-stitching(s), the present interventions, the space between reality and imagined space, which always points to that which isn't there. They insinuate 'virtual' or implicit routes, outward from the formulated space of the narrative. Denis' vision is derailed from action-affection-reaction;

her resistance speaks boldly. Somehow, these movements away lead to a greater conception of the interior— movements outward that leads inward. The world of the film encompasses multiple realities. Between what is ‘implied’, from the film’s formulations, and what arises in the mind of the viewer, we must convert what is seen into some kind of knowledge. Every mode of vision must be considered in order to create an impression of ‘wholeness’ from the film. Our assessments loosen and unravel without the certainty of continuity and resolution. These are haunted, peripheral visions.

Faint and Hardly Recognizable

Trebor rests under the ghostly cloth



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

In both stills, [fig. 22, 23], there is a certain play of luminescence. Light and shadow touch in stark gradation, implying two contradictory states at war. In the waning moments of the film, Trebor is half-dead, half-creation; an empty container. Inhabited by the unknown other, he remains in limbo. What does it mean to have an alien heart? He becomes a stranger to himself as an old friend sneaks around him. He looks faint behind a flowing veil. He always lies there, like

a weathered whale. Trebor attempts to re-fill, re-color, re-vitalize his memories in his struggle to be human.

For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies an insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!⁵⁶

(Melville)

Trebor returns ‘home’ to look for his son. He ends up laying around and talking to some old friends. The Melville quote poses a perfect analogy in terms of entering into the space of the film. Melville writes, “full of peace and joy, but encompassed by the horrors of the half known life,” when describing the ‘insular Tahiti.’ *The Intruder* begins in the idyllic countryside and uses associated tropes of peaceful living to heighten our sense of dark and violent affairs going on underneath, at night, and in the thick, surrounding forest. Most of the film takes place, soaking in the “horrors of the half known.’ A poetically injected mirage of shadowy border crossings, illegal transactions, faceless intruders, and circulate the unknown nature of disturbed relationships — the danger of dealing with what’s beneath the picturesque, (often with sound), is a consistent point of tension.

When Trebor arrives in Tahiti, he is far from himself. His friend sees something lost in him. He looks Trebor over as if he’s a stranger. Trebor is too faint to notice. Only his heart is new but his friend recognizes a difference.

One emerges from this adventure lost. One no longer knows or recognizes oneself: but here these words no longer have meaning. Very quickly, one is no more than a

⁵⁶ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale*, (New York: Norton, 1976), 215.

slackening, floating strangeness, suspended between poorly identified states, between sufferings, incapacities, lapses.⁵⁷

(Nancy)

While Tahiti is where Trebor decides to fill his empty heart, it is also a destination from his youth. He is slowing down, his movements are simplifying. He is taking in what he sees with passive desperation, a guilt-full gaze like no other. While there is no true solution, he does find some mode of strange peace-making. He has filled each role, temporarily.

The film further asks how far one can travel from one's self. The widening distance we forge in gradients of fear and protective intent. How far can one go before losing oneself, entirely to despair and illusion, to the daunting world of unnatural science and progress? Where does one 'belong' in a life full of shifting, (transience and movement, identity and form)? There is a sense of bodily plasticity; the inability to escape the body, paired with the constant suggestion of violence. Trebor is always being followed and watched —the body becomes an inescapable container. There is a perpetual mystery of the body and a mystery of the human person, which cannot be resolved. He revolts against the entire operation. In his rebellion, he strives for a life extension, he wants to tie up loose ends. The story's unravelling is synonymous with Trebor's falling apart and eventual peace-finding with a stranger, performing the role of his son. He invites the intruder, (the fraudulent son), to intrude, to trick him, to allow him to find peace as if to say, 'this will suffice! This will take the place of my old memories,' in some desperate, last stand. Trebor and the replacement son ride away together, skidding across the surface, [fig.24]. The last scene shows the dog trainer woman, who Trebor flirts with, joyous and uninhibited in

⁵⁷ Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Susan Hanson. "L'Intrus." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2, no. 3 (2002): 1–14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949352>.

the barren snow-scape, [fig. 25]. Amid his passive re-integration, she is active in revelry, elsewhere in a bold portrayal of self-assertion.



Fig.24



Fig.25

In the film, when Trebor's body fails him, he is shocked into an awareness of his human condition and attempts to mediate some healing approach. In reality, the body is a delicate realm. As he attempts to mediate an untenable nature, he communicates his discontent. Trebor remains blocked. He rides the conviction that he is an autonomous subject, independently affected, ignorant to the effect of his decisions on others. He cannot escape the space of his self-absorbed, revolving desire. He is self-conscious and stitched together as a romantic figure- a walking disruption of the harmony around him. At the point of his transplant, he isn't seen in the environment anymore. He is an outgrowth of his form and nature teases his diminishing self. He reckons with his decisions in the last image of him, drifting at sea, sprawled out on a boat. His replacement son walks over to amuse him.

Luis Trebor overcomes his human form; the film adopts Trebor and every noise, movement, vision, action belongs to him. Trebor has allowed foreign tissue to invade his body (the heart) and his consciousness, (a man plays the role of his son), altering him so that he

doesn't belong. The trace of intrusion (the scar) operates on the level of the film sequence, where Denis follows a logic of 'the scar' — she enunciates the disconnect between shots; exposes the seam in the edit. The film delivers an unending sidestep. Trebor looks out at the land, or the sea and is shown, contemplating. The moments depict his struggle to piece this fractured portrayal (this world) back together. In the end, he appears drained from his physical and mental toil, and instead, drinks tea while he still can. The last shot shows the grinning woman who is pulled by her dogs that run mindlessly in the snow.

Leviathan

New Bedford, Massachusetts was the center of the modern-day fishing industry. It was immortalized by Herman Melville when he used the town as his inspiration for the setting of *Moby-Dick*. The directors Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel return to this scene, full throttle, to capture the modern-day fishing industry, trusting that the reason they're there will emerge. Taylor explains, "We didn't know what movie we were going to make. We never do... We have a lot of ideas, but the ones that pan out will be born out of our experience with the world, through ourselves and through our cameras." Much like Ishmael's subservience to Ahab, tremendous darkness engulfs the blind and passive followers. There is a danger in this passivity, in *giving in*.⁵⁸ Paravel and Taylor began working with the locals to find the heart of their film. It wasn't long before they were on a vessel, surrounded by all the danger of their sea-bound conditions.

The documentary *Leviathan* (2012), distinguished as 'Sensory Ethnography' by the filmmakers, seeks to capture the direct experience of working on a fishing vessel. The director's employ a raw, underworked style. The cameras were mounted to bodies, to the chests of the fisherman, and even, at points, to the ship itself. There is a range of perspectives, best distinguished as alien. The film hypnotizes us as we engage in a meditation of what it might mean to live, on this ship, for even the smallest amount of time, on this sea and ship that seems to have a life of its own. The great vessel plows the wet world. Frames, devoid of humanity, invite gradual contemplation. The active vision embraces lasting portraits of grotesque and rare

⁵⁸ As is explored in the crew, in *Moby Dick* as they give in to Ahab. They lack the strength to oppose his strong, personal desires

performance: a tangible presence of death, the senselessness of the sea, the human condition. The hauntingly vivid experience is underscored by the rhythmic drum of the wave as it strikes the ship. The curtain is pulled back revealing a world that is impossible to comprehend. The challenge of surviving is profound. It is hard to look away.

Everything about the enterprise of this film calls into question what it takes to survive the force and will of the ocean. The construct of the ship displays a human attempt to match the intensity of the sea and the danger that may arise. The machine formalizes a fear for the unknown. There is visceral beauty about the vessel— the ship is a force in nature. A washed-up, dying creature rolls helplessly across the deck, bumping into its half-mutilated neighbors. Fish slap in desperation. The drone of the iron cranes, the cough, and the clank billow. The waves are endless and at times, drown the camera beneath the turmoil. The camera continues to record the madness. These are the components of dislocation. We desire to be washed away; to be anywhere other than here. Yet, this unfiltered world lures us into the frame where the sounds and images are searing with hard truth.



Fig. 1: Still from Leviathan

There is no perspective which can capture the entirety of the ship, [fig. 1]. How can one frame the totality of this experience? The film-makers search for balance between the weariness of waiting and living aboard, and the looming form of the ship against the darkening sky. In the corners of the ship we view a small pageantry of limping birds, [fig. 2]. It becomes “difficult to decipher big from small, natural from mechanical.”⁵⁹ The physicality of the machinery, the city’s worth of sound combines with oceanic cacophony to arise some demented duet; a moan like the beast itself. There is a sense that there is no escape from the overpowering emotional nightmare; it lingers and dominates every crag of the vessel. The only moments to breathe are underwater, away from deafening sound. Even then, we choke from the overload, [fig. 4,5].



Fig 2.



Fig 3



Fig 4.



Fig 5.

⁵⁹ *Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor by Anya Jaremko-Greenwold - BOMB Magazine.*
<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/verena-paravel-and-lucien-castaing-taylor/>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2021.

The hugeness of the experience in all of its disorientation finds context in the Biblical Leviathan. The *Leviathan* is a Biblical creature mentioned in Job by God. The creature's existence is an ultimate expression of the Lord's freedom to create (and to destroy). In Job, the creature cools the egoisms of men— Leviathan “looks down on all that are haughty; he is king over all that are proud.” (Job 41:34). As testament to the limitless will of God, humans face their own, crude, incapability by encountering some realm (or experience) which implies God,⁶⁰ or the beast. Ultimately, Job learns that ultimate knowledge (of the cosmos, of the divine, of chaos) is beyond human pursuit. The beast epitomizes Nature and grounds us in our dainty place and men are overcome with fear. From the perspective of man, Leviathan takes on the mythic dimension of chaos, but the creature makes no difference to God. The divine perspective undercuts the myth and puts man in direct confrontation with nature.⁶¹ In some readings, the Leviathan is interchangeable with the whale, the Ocean itself or something that's non communicable, large and unrestrained. Ultimately, the story narrates a series of challenges, cast unto Job, exercising him in a relentless obstacle of human suffrage, challenging him towards new gratitude for life. The story of Job is communicative about the film experience as *Leviathan* tests our very grounds for making sense of things moving the viewer towards a new perspective.

In Thomas Hobbes' philosophical treatise, *Leviathan*, he refers to the state of society that holds individuals as cogs in a larger machine. The people are insignificant as individuals and serve the greater society of surrender and compliance. The health of the society is dependent on the compliance of the laborers. The masses are swallowed by the state and must *give in*. The men in the film operate under the shadow of an overpowering industry. Like some invisible threat,⁶²

⁶⁰ Ie. vast landscapes, Nature, the ocean

⁶¹ Drawn from Leviathan in the Book of Job and “Moby Dick.” William A. Young

⁶² The indication of the authority is nonexistent in the scope of the film.

the industry commands them in the hellish conditions of their night-ward travel. The true authority, in the film, is the ocean.

The film doesn't offer information to ground us. There is an explosion of graphic scenery and sound. We fend for ourselves in the nightmare of not knowing where we are or what is to happen. We see men fixed in the danger of their work, focused to the pin-drop through their exhaustion. We can almost smell the sweat, blood, exhaustion, dead fish. Then we realize some twelve- minutes into the film that everything we've watched has fulfilled the duty of an establishing shot— it all could've been determined in a single image. Is the extra time spent merely excess? Why this degree of uninterrupted immersion?

This is the experience of the ship itself and of being on the vessel, trapped and subject to disaster all around. It is a complete, intellectually unimposing experience, free from scheme or pedagogy. The visionary exploration is objective, as there is no dominating voice or positionality to filter what we see. We must think for ourselves and draw our conclusions.

So to me this film could be read as a completely impersonal, cold film but at the same time one might see it as an utterly unmediated representation of the horror and the beauty of a very private, very personal experience that we had with those fishermen, on that boat, with those fish, in the sea, and the entanglements between these things. The way in which it is personal is not always transparent to others. It's not diaristic, or confessional—(you don't feel like you're inside the brain of Werner Herzog, for example.)⁶³

(Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor)

The film has a claustrophobic framework. We are nauseous prisoners of the ship. Then, there is the crew; tired and worn eyes, [fig. 6], their incredible effort in unbelievable

⁶³ "Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor by Anya Jaremko-Greenwold - BOMB Magazine." Accessed December 6, 2021.

circumstances. They are irrelevant to these monsters. The film may be criticized for being impersonal, but it remains faithful to the difficulties of this labor and world. The viewer maneuvers many horrific aspects. The film displays an intimacy for the men on the ship as a record of their work. There's a profound respect for the labor. The men on board were hesitant for the film to be shown in public. It is a difficult reality to bear.

... to have a film that shows their experience of the world in some authentic way is something they're really interested in, but at the same time like many marginalized communities there is that sense of inferiority—it's of interest to us, but is it of interest to anybody else? It's the kind of film that might appear to be faithful to their experience of the world, but they don't know whether it will be of interest to outsiders, especially if their only form of reference is Hollywood, or documentaries.⁶⁴

(Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor)

The almost ritualistic happenings on the ship are so personal that there is a resistance about letting the outside world in. There are stakes for the men, not only in matters of work, but in their portrayal. They wonder if their lives interest others. They wonder, do we matter?

The film is a profound portrait of the soul, [fig.5] and muscle of men at work, at sea. The ship's brutal atmosphere has dug its way into the consciousness of the men. The men's muscles and hands are working against the drone of industrial music. The camera stays with them and imposes, even in their off-hours. The maddening and grotesque realities on deck are the noises of their rest. His worn and tired eyes are sunken like cavernous valleys. The exhaustion is absolute and sleep takes him away. It is a drastically different view than shown in the prior chaos—personal. The men know they are a dying breed. The end is coming.

⁶⁴ “Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor by Anya Jaremko-Greenwold - BOMB Magazine.” Accessed December 6, 2021.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

The men have left their families and homes and the comfort of land under foot. Many have this line of work and life in their bloodline. They've sacrificed being a part of the 'traditional' social fabric for a life of what can only be termed as a brutal and savage madness. The industry has suffered the highest fatality rate in the US. A similar inhuman brutality is detailed in *Moby Dick*, concerned with the industrial reality of life at sea. The madness takes hold as they reach the terrain, out of sight from land, a marginal and questionable place. The experience of watching *Leviathan*, is unlike other films in its unearthing of the vivid and destructive nature of the ocean. It calls to mind, more than anything else the apocryphal story of Turner tying himself the mast in a storm⁶⁵ to immerse himself in an ultimate experience of nature. In a sense, it is this ultimate subjectivity, beyond human control which guides the

⁶⁵ Referenced in the Introduction

cinematic vision, shoulder to shoulder with immeasurable happenings.⁶⁶ Turner's subjective vision, embodied in his painted work, epitomizes an attempt to pictorialize chaos. He translates his direct experience onto canvas—we still cannot conceive of nature.⁶⁷

Upon peeling back the romance which colors idealisms about maritime adventure, a darker, industrial heavy vision is revealed in *Leviathan*; a nightmare of grizzled beauty. Apocalyptic and industrial realities consume the men; they are overworked and underpaid in devastating disclosure. The conditions of life on board continue to astound for the duration of *Leviathan*. The danger is all around and it heightens life. It's a life lived close to death. Despite the ethical and environmental aspects which may condemn this work, despite the learned violence of the men, there is still great sympathy for the men and their draw to the sea. As they communicate to each other in subtle gestures we catch their real, life-affirming dance for survival.

Time at sea operates on its own terms. This is as far from a 9-5 work-a-day as one could have. They carry the weight of this experience; it comes down heavily on their backs. Their bones withstand it all, their minds subject to the clamorous circuitry of their voyage. It feels like months after the restless ninety minutes spent on board. The men are trapped on this vessel with no escape.

Leviathan, the title, carries appropriate weight for the subject, evoking otherworldly associations with the dark and incomprehensible. If the film wasn't called *Leviathan*, we would have a much harder time grappling with the experience of the film. This is a film that brings one

⁶⁶ The film-makers are also in danger. They are exposed to the same extremities.

⁶⁷ Melville is known to have encountered the paintings of J.M.W Turner on multiple occasions as well as seeking out his work at the *Vernon and Turner* gallery (1857) as he was beginning to write *Moby Dick*. Melville was interested in a similar terrain as Turner. In their independent mediums, they harnessed the severity of experience as it relates to nature as well as the enacted cruelty, the remorseless violations.

close to the absolute savagery and brutality of an industry that the modern world has massacred. The images and sounds are unrestrained as they envelop the audience in experiences of the unknown. None could imagine the stories of immeasurable and haunting sublimity, behind the fish on the plate or in the market. The images we see, their relentless presentation shocks us from taking this work for granted— and it exceeds beyond the fishing industry; so much of the seen world is supported by incredible efforts and labor of unimaginable exertion. Altogether, it is awe-inspiring and destabilizes our placid impressions demonstrating the possibility for film to inhabit and expose, otherwise inhabitable modes of vision.

In the act of seeing something differently, our ‘developed principles’ are challenged. Our perspective is permanently shifted and we cannot ‘unsee.’ This film does not reveal the commercial fishing world without absolute intention. It does not allow you to move quickly past. The film halts the audience in their tracks. *Leviathan*, in bewildering chaos, is the kind of audio/visual sense experience that forever changes the way we take in the world. Visions, sounds, and experiences disturb the preciousness of our private ideas and our formations are dismantled. In contrast to the ways of our land-dwelling, the ocean itself is an ever-shifting landscape of fathomless detail that flows around any solid rock and fills any natural depression. The water is unbroken in its fluid way. Our hardened perception must burst— an astonishing obstruction (an image, the interaction of images, a perspective) may occur where fresh planes of perception arise to heal our broken truth(s). *Leviathan*, in bewildering chaos, is the kind of audio/visual sense experience that changes the way we take in the world. Visions, sounds, and experiences disturb the preciousness of our private ideas and our formations are dismantled.

It was Emerson in the mid-1800s America who first found a spiritual essence in the life of nature. As a precursor to Melville, Emerson wrote of the unbounded potential of men to overcome social conformities and see the world again. In *Circles*, he challenges humanity to resist any stability in matters of their beliefs. In his mind, there is a pursuit of knowledge, like a field of shifts and re-emergences that never settle. There is no constraint to the truth.

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens... (There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us.)⁶⁸

(Emerson)

Leviathan does not lead the viewer through some graphic arrangement of gradual understanding— each image is an encounter that deepens the sense of place with endless, unformatted penetration. The viewer may not arrive at conclusions. Instead, the work and style open up possibilities. Rhythmic sequences draw us in, and leave us in awe, (washed-up fish in a bucket, stingrays being sliced, roaming from in and out of the water, etc....). The mind travels and otherwise buried ideas arise in the use of the long take. These temporal patterns push that which is uncomfortable. It is a work that forgets the self. Emerson's 'circles' refer to the fleeting sense of stability in matters of nature. There is an endlessness of recreation and re-assessment which is attainable by the mind. Taylor, one of the director's writes, "We're interested in those harder to pose questions, problems which don't have an easy resolution—or the resolutions are not easily reducible or transformed into public policy." The film suggests the complicated realities which lurk, marginally, out of view. Humans formulate solutions and the impression of

⁶⁸Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton, 2001, 174-5.

containment by attributing a frame to the thing. There is always further contemplation to be done, beyond the appearance of ‘solid ground,’ beyond answers. Time suggests contemplation, imbuing the object with ‘deeper regions’ of meaning and of mind. This film pushes a personal experience of realization from the viewer, engaging the further questioning mind.

In many ways, it is like a silent film. The only sounds are that which deliver a further ‘sense of place.’ There is an absence of discernible dialogue — nothing new is discovered through the patterns of speech or meaning. Instead, the film mimics the way of the ocean. It shamelessly thrusts itself upon the observer in its fullness. It’s purely what it is, irrespective of our judgments or our sensitivities. This essence is also similar to how the machines work and impose on the worker. It is a showcase of persistent causation— a factory-line of defeat— a shameless plunge of slathering, perennially doused by the heaving Atlantic.

The film begins in darkness. Waves echo against tin. We are within some container, simmering with anticipation. There’s some further clanking and a red light hovers into view. The camera is hand-held. Is it the jacket of a man we see? A squid of some kind? Are we in the belly of the ship? Is it the eye of the great beast itself? We begin in darkness with only the sounds to shape the space. The mind begins to reel attempting to place these daunting first noises with the (lack of) image. Nothing is conceived and nothing settles. Gears begin to turn. Ropes run and tighten overhead. The camera continues to follow the barrage with quick, reactive jolts. A machine begins to reel. Light spits on the deck and across the water. Little information is provided as we are incrementally informed. A gloved hand reaches to take hold of a chain spitting from a larger machine like some unrestrained horror movie, [fig.10].



Fig. 10

There are other people around the camera. None are speaking. This must be ordinary, somehow. Water rains down from massive, industrial carabiners. A man's hands reach for another chain from directly behind the camera as it becomes apparent that we are attached to the chest of one of the fishermen in the midst of a haul, then, grabbing hold, he looks overboard when a huge claw emerges from the dark water and crashes with all its heaviness against the ship. The men seize ropes and attempt to control the thing. A moment of waiting ensues. The men are looking overboard. The sun is rising or setting. We're sure of one thing— they are not admiring the view.

The fishermen are anticipating something. It isn't long before the chains begin reeling again, lifting some heavy machinery out of the water. The men work quickly, tying, wrapping, and securing. They work with well-oiled efficiency looking over at each other here or there, exchanging a knowing glance. From afar, his friend looks like a little creature against the rusted wall. The subject's (the cameraman's) shadow falls across the ship. *Leviathan* expresses an extreme, human desire to survive in the terrain of chaos. The visions allow us to see ourselves, from the outside as intruders in the ocean world, willing to wreak havoc upon the place. We understand that humanity does not belong there.

The man turns away from the water and we see some variation of an establishing shot, crammed in the midst of this long POV. There are orange jackets everywhere to direct the oncoming haul. They begin exchanging inaudible words. The mouth of some monstrous, wet, and grinding machine begins spitting out creatures of the deep, then a net. Is this what we have been waiting for? The man yells “watch out!.” But then, things settle down. The action comes to a momentary halt. Then, the cameraman turns to the sea again. This film does not operate according to a formula where tension builds to resolution. There is an extreme tension, throughout, slowly reformulated into meditation. White seagulls like phantoms, like dread, [fig. 11] like omens afloat across the night sky. A thick netting begins to reel. There are colored tassels, ropes, and chains dangling in some mess of incomprehension. What the hell is going on?



Fig. 11

At this point, ten minutes and eight seconds into the film, we are mesmerized and have no choice but to give in. We are literally placed, unworriedly between the men and the action (mounted on chests). The cranes begin to screech and burn, the camera is wet; it seems that the

bag of fish has arrived. Hands chop about as hooded figures grab and prod at the mess of slippery catfish-looking creatures. Everyone and everything is drenched in an onslaught of saltwater. Some men stand knee-deep in fish. The pale of his face glows over the dark surround. The fish hop. It's a litany of unsuspected chaos which introduces us to this world. It looks terrifying to us and must look scarrier to the fish. Men are shaking the bag out. There's some ambiguous hand-rummaging through piles of frayed, colored twine to prepare for another machine deposit. Now, huge vine-like ropes that look like pliable tree branches are being fed back into a revolving gear. Is this choreographed? Is this all chance and reality? The film-style escapes 'directorial intentionality.' The vines, [fig.12] look like hoses or giant, segmented worms which contribute to the horror.

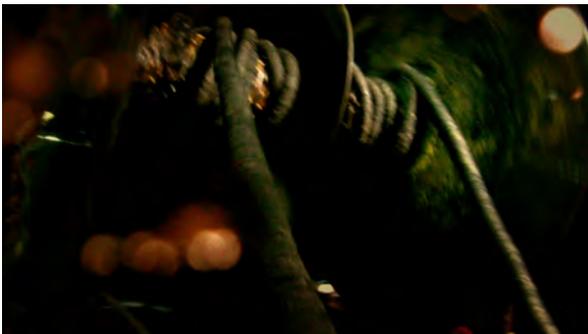


Fig 12



Fig 13

Water courses through the net. It seems to be lowering in on us. The camera lingers on enchanted moments. Is this the net being lowered into the water? The gears begin to crank again and water floods the openings. It is uncertain this unruly pace will ever stop. There is hardly time to ask questions. We are alarmed as things appear out of nowhere, unstable. The deck is flooded and everything looks slippery. There are huge claws and danger is all around. The spectrum of

our senses is activated without any time to adjust. We are brought directly to the heart of the film. Without knowing where we are or what these machines can do, or not knowing much of anything at all, we can only give in. Everything appears to be going wrong, yet none are panicking. There is no intention of softening the information. The result is an unmediated relationship to a marginal world.

At around eighteen minutes, the first sequence ends. We are watching the dreadful seagulls, stark white and aglow against the depth of the sky. For the following four minutes, a shot from the stern of the ship, pointing out on the vessel's wake in the sea shows another ship waning in and out of view. The ship appears as a grouping of lights drowning in the darkness. The dark embattled sea and sky blend in the absence of a horizon. The first lengthy sequence is followed by another, watching the distant lights of a ship gaining, only to fall further behind again. We keep losing track. The sequence ends with a light in the distance, the same kind of blurred light as in the first shot. A circle has been made, structurally. The pace of the film is set.

The perspective is visceral as it is attached to the action. It moves beyond any human vision of consciousness, even animals. It is a unique account of great range which envisions something like the perspective of the great ship itself, or even it is close to a natural vision from the world which comes into fruition with the lack of control, camera control, orchestration, and compositional tampering. In this way, the concentration of beings, whether the machine or the life affected by it, is bound by the vision as it threads an impression of the fabric of the world. Everything is feeding into each other. The footage attains a current of enchantment, of surreal beauty. It is shocking; omniscience we desperately need more of; the shots hold for minutes at a time, and while never still, time is swallowed by the hypnotic rhythm. A universalizing force, the

film brings us close to that which we never imagined seeing— this sometimes ugly, grotesque, and somehow mythic world of vision is carried out.

Unlike the other works discussed, the sea in *Leviathan* is the main character and dominates every moment of the film, without hiatus. Opposed to the staging quality with characters, narrative structures, and other features which build an impression of the ocean, *Leviathan's* meditative and lingering quality of each shot — the camera mounted, the havoc, the chance encounter amidst the chaos— is created by the wave itself. There is never a still or balanced moment— the persistent rocking casts a lull over the viewer as one falls into a kind of focused absorption. The Ocean, the great belly of the earth, swallows all that is forgotten and the artifacts of experience. *Leviathan* seeks a greater sense of our humanity, from ourselves, as the vision better realizes our ancient relationship to the ocean. It is a hypnotic and rhythmic penetration as this new, flourishing world of the sensory envelops the psyche.

The time spent at sea presents some horrific realities. The vessel cruises horizontally atop the surface of the water; the vision does not move beyond the experience of the ship, remaining grounded, *aboard* the vessel. There is no penetration of what occurs in the lower depths below the surface of the water. We only see the ship, the men, and their immediate action. In the emptiness of the ocean world, features of the depths make themselves known in curious ways. The self sharpens— you can see yourself anew. A penetrating vision into one's nature is possible with distance and alienation from the usual way of things. We see the self from the outside as we are detained from usual life on land, where things can be controlled. These uncovered truths about our humanity become apparent, from the outside in chaos and other moments of self-forgetfulness. The documentary experience alleviates one from one's own

self-consciousness. The film frames an encounter with the endlessness of the ocean, remaining atop the mild surface gripping the wicked fish and squid from lower depths, and performing mindless, murderous acts upon them. It feels as though we have left our world completely.

The movement of the film promotes an extreme, perspectival shift as we gaze upon the onboard operations. The fishermen slice creatures in, efficient and bloody mindlessness. In metaphor, we are faced with the discoveries of our bottom-dwelling creatures, showing uncovered and gloomy features of our own depths — the ocean presents dreadful manifestations. Contact with these features aspires to dread, for we spend all of life evading the cruel realities which reside somewhere beyond, below, within, etc. The fishermen net and drag the unseen from great depths, clutching the slippery creatures. The film expands on the topic of perception and subjectivity as the vision entwines incomprehensible aspects of naturalness. Furthermore, the film creates a vision of internal chaos, as it captures the natural chaos of the world.

One cannot prepare for this kind of challenging experience. We cling to our contrived worldview(s). Our entire life is a sketch crowded with the revelation(s) of perspective and vision. Our ‘perspective’ is tirelessly reworked and challenged while we do what we can to keep our sense intact. *Leviathan* exposes itself beyond our possible comprehension. It moves past a subjectivity and jumps overboard. In this way, we are overcome with the action before we can begin to interpret. It is held together by this connection with language (the title). One reads the inscrutability of these images and sounds to the effect that it works into a framework related to the title. There is the desire to label these features as malevolent or benign. Beyond the simple dichotomy, there is the persistence of ambiguity (and chaos) which is the essence of the natural world. The film presents peaceful reckoning with certain, grounded aspects within chaos,

remaining connected to the ship at all times. We survive and are left to work through this experience without really understanding what happened. The self seems helpless and small in matters of nature. The medium of film frames the incomprehensible, engrossing us in the unfathomable experience. This kind of experience is implicitly inseparable from Job and from Ishmael's experience at the end of *Moby Dick*. They cannot make sense of their confrontations with ultimate realities, but they live to grapple with and pass on the story.

Conclusion

Far from the constant demand of society, the cinematic mood is one of focus and repose. We retreat to the movies and give in to romantic embellishments, dramas, comedies, films, which, for the most part, are expected to conclude in meaning. Our world is disserved as it is sorted and recorded on the basis of conclusive endings. Cinema shakes from time's desperate, ticking omniscience and has its way of running the incidental, the uncelebrated, the unanswerable through the space of the frame, so that it may linger. In the trio of films I explored, *A Man There Was*, *The Intruder*, and *Leviathan*, the plot is alight in possibility and the narrative is regenerative, energized to expand beyond the confines of the theatre. It lives on in the troubled minds of the audience. These films harness the power to change someone's course, to turn a mind, to enhance awareness.

Imagine you want to get away from people. Set on busying yourself, you turn from your self-discoveries and sign yourself to an unfit and murderous Captain, leading you out to sea. Ishmael is a young man of malleable vocation. The charisma and certainty of others shields him from his own, unworked, and formless nature. He is drunk with idolatry. In contrast, Captain Ahab follows the direction of his soul, leading his men into the 'Godless' trickery of the ocean terrain. For Ahab, an ocean is a Godless place. The whale and the spotted squid are proof of the masterlessness of the terrain leaving to Ahab an ultimate position of power. Our navigation, our destiny is up to him.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ I'm thinking of the force of Ahab as an equivalent to the force of film, Ishmael as a reflection of the theatre goer.

In this postmodern era, it feels that all avenues have been exhausted. The world closes in on us—we find paths in the shadow of example. I find great resonance between Ishmael and the moviegoer, the captive glare of the audience set on the rays and beams, before them. Ishmael observes Ahab; we watch the film; Ahab watches the sea, all searching. We depend on the cinema to show us ourselves, our flaws, our direction.

This trio of films challenge how we experience reality. They are films that draw us from our pre-detained peace and send us reeling for solid ground. They push our perspective from a stable, architectural place towards destabilization. All the world is unhinged from conceptual markers, freeing us to create, to find, to empathize, to inhabit. We find agency in the illusion of the film, reflect, and at best, carry this freedom of interpretation back into our lives. Something shifts and the invisible is rendered mysteriously possible.

When grappling with these films, we engage in a discussion of “energized visions.” *A Man There Was* possesses a framework for looking back. The subject experiences his ruminating mind, made physical in film images; we experience a visual expression of memory, made possible by the medium. *The Intruder* blurs lines and traces of structure; of known—unknown, seen, and unseen. Our humanity is made porous. Memory and the imaginary weave into the same fabric as ‘reality.’ The subject physically travels, parallel to the travel of his mind—the visions of his traveling mind intrude into the film sequence, complicating vision. It is up to the energized viewer to bridge the contending states of vision. *Leviathan* exists in the physicality of travel; the particularity of chaos. The memory of ocean traditions is inherent in the work, yet, history nor context is offered to frame the experience. The chaos of sound and image envelopes us, anchoring us in rhythm. The film implants a memory of its experience into the mind of the

spectator (with the vivid conditions of the travel). The form resonates; the individual finds oneself amidst the creation of form.

Something must liberate us from our crutches in matters of life. In the breakdown of convention and tradition, yet maintaining some respect for it, we find ways of reinvigorating thought, action, and individuality. We must not yield to the current conditions— to any condition. *A Man There Was*, *The Intruder* and *Leviathan* encourage a rigorous engagement with non-conforming modes of vision, structure, and movement. They present a fearless tenacity to frame the world in its unsettling incoherence— they generate power to imply otherwise. It is exhilarating, not to know.

The self is a terrain of ungraspable depth. As water can take the impact of any weight and maneuver around it, we must allow our minds to function in the same way.

I claim to be unoccupied with finding answers, nonetheless, direction is what concerns me. I feel powerless. I'd like to believe in something. Where do we find ourselves? Where do we go from here?

Where we go depends on how we deal with self and other; inside and outside. The direction of our global identity depends on how we treat and interpret 'the other'.⁷⁰ In a further breakdown, it seems to rely on this complex of lightness and heaviness, (stern contemplation or to move without worry). The dilemma of these countering approaches, (between lightness or

⁷⁰ Entailing anything and anyone outside of the self.

heaviness), are both present in *A Man There Was*. He moves from non thought, in his young life, towards a paralyzing mind, and then to peace.

The Intruder, a film of porous boundaries, brings complexity to the issue. Luis Trebor can't seem to do the right thing. There is a tension between lightness and the heavy responsibility of looking back. His memories haunt. I do find compassion for the man who yearns. *Leviathan* creates the impression of travel, but there is no hope for an arrival. Without a destination, the vessel is a prison of aimlessness, surrounded by chaos.

I find sadness that takes root in the trio of stories. There is a struggle against the way things are. Each film captures a ceaseless journey. A vision of hope, of how things should be is absent. I question, does the mind ever settle in harmony with the world? Do we ever find lasting ease? As humans, are we defined by our restlessness and incessant travel? Does the ephemeral last? I find a stranger hope in the experience of these films— in the artist, who masters form; in the person who self-designates, bearing the weight of the past, there is hope.

We make our own decisions. While they are not necessarily for the good of others, our actions communicate incommunicable personhood. The viewer sees oneself in the artist who conquers form, who replaces life structure, who willfully stumbles.

Hatred and ruin are self-expressions. Underlying the act is hopelessness— a lack of faith in the quiet. The end of time has to do with our growing ignorance towards it. We look, but hardly see and we run from the quiet. Our contemplation is dying.

Seated in a dark theatre, we give ourselves over in an unavoidable confrontation with other skin. At least, it makes it harder to justify hatred and hopelessness, for film captures hope which lives in bleak places.

Whatever it is we look for, let us care for the other, alongside us, who take their own searching steps. If we all acknowledge the position of the person in the next seat over, we may be alright. We can only hope that we rediscover the world we see every day.

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