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The Embodied Spectator and the Uncomfortable Experience of Watching Breillat's *Romance* and Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*

This article is born out of the intensely uncomfortable film viewing experience that I had the first time I saw Michael Haneke's film *The Piano Teacher*, an experience that was dominated by a powerful unease whose source and delimitation I could not entirely pinpoint.¹ The cringing, the sweating, the knots in my stomach and the urge to avert my eyes even if nothing particularly violent or visually unpleasant was going on onscreen made me wonder about the relationship between bodies on the screen and the body in the seat when watching a film that had no immediately obvious sources of discomfort.

After having similar sensations while watching Catherine Breillat's film *Romance*, I was lead to wonder about the embodiment of the spectator – in this case, first and foremost my very own embodiment as a spectator – and what *Romance* and *The Piano Teacher* did to the reassuring distance usually in place between spectator and screen.² This distance habitually situates me, the spectator, as a fly-on-the-wall during most mainstream Hollywood movies, privy to the best angles on the action in the film, always in an invisible – but powerful – position of *looking in* on the cinematic bodies from my safe seat down in the audience. How did Breillat and Haneke's films manage to get under my skin, so to speak, and challenge my voyeuristic privileges? What was it about the bodies of the characters in the films that made me so uncomfortable? In this article, I will work towards some possible answers to these questions by drawing on theories of affect, the experiences of the embodied spectator, and an emerging reconceptualisation of cinematic voyeurism.

¹ *La Pianiste*. Dir. Michael Haneke. Kino International. 2001

² *Romance*. Dir. Catherine Breillat. Lions Gate. 1999

I am using my own embodied responses as a methodology to begin articulating a new approach to film theory that takes into account the embodied nature of the spectator.³ The larger question coming out of my encounter with these films thus concerns how we conceive the *bodily experience* of the film, and how considering an embodied, affected, affective spectator poses a challenge to a branch of film theory built on ideas of visual mastery, which contain the notion of a spectator divided into mind and body. My own cinematic experience caused me to question whether such a divide could exist at all, and made me ask: what is at stake in upholding such a divide, both between mind and body in the spectator, and between the spectator and the film? What can be gained by operating outside of this divide? And what do we need to think about in order to theorise the collapse of this divide in the context of film spectatorship?

Both *The Piano Teacher* and *Romance* problematise issues of power, gender, and sexuality in relation to corporeal, lived bodies. Both of them have also been characterised as somehow difficult, uncomfortable, provocative, or downright disgusting to watch by audiences and the press, and their directors have been labelled as provocateurs.⁴ Haneke works with a carefully crafted cinematography where much of the violence is not shown explicitly, but his films nevertheless draw some very strong, and often un-nameable reactions from the audience.⁵ Breillat deliberately invokes a pornographic aesthetic in her films, using known porn actors and adopting cinematographic conventions from the porn industry,

³ Earlier efforts in this direction, which underpin and inform my own attempt, include Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye. Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁴ Monisha Rajesh, 'Michael Haneke's Film Noir', *Time Online* (30 November 2009). <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1940236,00.html>> [accessed 1 June 2010]; Stephanie Zacharek, 'Agent Provocateur', *Salon.com* (15 October 2004). <<http://dir.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2004/10/15/breillat/>> [accessed 1 June 2010]

⁵ Stephen Holden. 'The Piano Teacher (2001) Film Review; Kinky and Cruel Goings-On in the Conservatory', *The New York Times* (29 March 2002). <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C02E5D81E3BF93AA15750C0A9649C8B63>> [accessed 1 June 2010].

including acts of unsimulated sex. She also pays particular attention to stylistic devices such as sets and colours.

Both directors can arguably be said to be part of what James Quandt has called the ‘New French Extremity’, a predominantly French cinematic direction that has unfolded during the 1990s and 2000s, a direction that Quandt describes as ‘a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement’.⁶

We do not find images like the nine-minute single-take rape scene in *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) or the multiple, consecutive killings and copulations in *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) in *The Piano Teacher* and *Romance*, but I am sure it is already apparent from my confessions of discomfort that they were still hard films to watch. I want to give short narrative thrusts of both films even though my analysis rests less on narrative details than on affective properties in cinematography, costuming, sets, and how bodies move within them. The narratives of the films may be described as disturbing in their own right, but the cinematography works within them in generating this disturbance.

In *The Piano Teacher* we encounter the respected, bourgeois piano professor – and, it is implied, failed concert pianist – Erika Kohut. She exercises her sadistic impulses on her pupils at the music conservatory in Vienna (including at one point maiming the right hand of one of her students by putting crushed glass in her coat pocket at a rehearsal for an important concert), and represses and/or expresses her masochistic desires through voyeurism and self-mutilation. She lives in an oppressive and sexually charged relationship with her over-controlling mother until the attractive, outgoing, and confident piano student Walter Klemmer enters her life. Walter takes a sexual interest in Erika, but responds to her

⁶James Quandt. ‘Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema’, *ArtForum* (February, 2004) <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_6_42/ai_113389507> [accessed 10 August 2008].

painstakingly articulated masochistic desires with disgust. After repeatedly having been denied his way with Erika, because she only wants to engage in sexual activities on her own sadomasochistic terms, a sexual encounter between Walter and Erika takes place on the floor of the hallway of the flat she shares with her mother. I interpret this incident as rape, but one might conceivably see it as a fulfilment of Erika's fantasies too. The film ends shortly afterwards with a long, lingering shot of the exterior of the Vienna Music Conservatory, after we have witnessed Erika stabbing herself, albeit shallowly, in the chest with a knife, and then walking out of and away from the Conservatory building, and hence out of the shot.

When Paul, the boyfriend of the protagonist Marie in *Romance*, declares that he does not want to have sex with her anymore, she seeks out sexual encounters with other men, the first of which is played by the internationally famous porn star Rocco Siffredi. But it isn't until her colleague Robert introduces her to bondage that we sense that Marie's desires are being met. Between her affairs and her waiting for Paul to take an interest in her, a random meeting with an anonymous man in Paul's hallway leads to something that might or might not be rape: our understanding is made ambivalent by Marie's admission of rape fantasies earlier in the film. After the man leaves, she shouts that she refuses to feel ashamed, while still crying. Through all of this, Paul remains Marie's ultimate 'object of desire', and when she returns one night to Paul's apartment from Robert's house, they have extremely brief sexual intercourse that leaves her pregnant. The film ends by showing a highly pregnant Marie turning on the gas in Paul's apartment while Paul is asleep, then leaving us to see the explosion while she gives birth at the hospital with Robert by her side.

After reading these descriptions, we might attribute at least some of the audience discomfort to the presence of explicit material and subject matter in the two films. But much mainstream film, produced in Hollywood or not, also probes such boundaries, without eliciting the same kind of reactions from the viewers that we see with 'New French

Extremity' films. Consequently, it becomes important to delineate the *kind* of discomfort that different films elicit. One could undoubtedly argue that there are many films that make me uncomfortable, most obviously in the genres of horror and thrillers, but the discomfort I experienced watching *Romance* and *The Piano Teacher* was of a different kind. It was not the visceral shock I feel when the murderer jumps on the victim from behind with an axe/knife/chainsaw. It was not the pure, nauseating disgust at exploding brains, open wounds, or entrails being pulled from bodies, nor was it the creeping, goose-bump-inducing fear of supernatural phenomena. It was a less locatable, less definable discomfort, one that quietly took hold of my entire body, making me cringe, causing a vague aching in my stomach, and producing an ambiguous feeling of indistinct unease that pervaded my body. Compared to the specific shock-horror-thrilling genres mentioned above, the degree and frequency of explicitly shown sexual behaviour, killings, or mutilations in Haneke and Breillat's films were on a much lower level. Yet I was deeply conflicted about having to occupy the position of the spectator and witness what these films had to show me. And yet again, I could not stop watching.

When I started analyzing this discomfort, I found it contained traces of other identifiable emotions; pleasure, repulsion, fear, and more. But precisely because these were only *traces* – and often confused ones at that – rather than what we may think of as 'fully formed' emotions, I find 'affect' a more productive term to work with than 'emotion' in my analysis. While I associate my more readily identifiable reactions to, for example, axe-wielding murderers or alien attackers, with what the cognitive film theorist Noël Carroll calls our 'garden-variety emotion', the term affect denotes a less clear-cut, object-driven state.⁷ For the purposes of this analysis, I borrow from the language of psychoanalysis and take affect to

⁷ Noël Carroll, 'Film, Emotion, and Genre', in *Passionate Views. Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 21-47.

mean energy that has no particular object, and thus no clear cathexis. An affect isn't *going anywhere particular* in a straight line, but is rather free to move within, between, around us, in circles or in tension with other affects, mixing it up so that we might find ourselves in a state that Sianne Ngai calls 'affective disorientation'.⁸

Coming from a politico-cultural theory angle, Ngai sees our contemporary moment as one where 'a new set of feelings – ones less powerful than the classical political passions' is needed.⁹ She challenges the subordinate place of what she calls 'ugly feelings' in writings on political passions and writes that if her book is 'a bestiary of affects...it is one filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally being, well, weaker and nastier'.¹⁰ Yet even if these feelings might be characterised as small and icky, she sees them as having endured longer than grander ones, such as anger or fear, producing their own politics of suspended, noncathartic, thwarted 'action'. Inactivity, confusion, and other 'boundary feelings' are thus affective states in their own right, but states which work less to incite forceful action than to diagnose situations, 'and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular'.¹¹

'Affective disorientation' produces ambiguous affects, namely [W]hat we might think of as a state of feeling vaguely 'unsettled' or 'confused,' or, more precisely, a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling. This is 'confusion' in the affective sense of bewilderment rather than the epistemological sense of indeterminacy. Despite its marginality to the philosophical canon of emotions, isn't this feeling of confusion *about* what one is feeling an affective state in its own right?¹²

⁸ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.14.

This is certainly the case in *The Piano Teacher*. The film offers many instances of ‘thwarted action’ and encounters between characters that are marked by tension, confused feelings, and a lack of release. The narrative presents us with encounters that are hard to interpret and refuses to provide the spectator with clear-cut directions on how to understand either itself or the characters within it, leaving the spectator as confused as those within the narrative.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that ‘affective disorientation’ is the closest I can get to a description of my spectatorial state while watching the following scene from the film. In this scene, Walter confronts Erika in the music conservatory bathroom after her pupil Anna has cut her hand horribly on the glass Erika put in her coat pocket. As the scene unfolds, there are multiple sensations running through me, on different levels of my body: my skin tingles while my insides squirm and my legs are tense; my repulsion at Erika’s action of violence is mixed with desire, longing, and many other *almost-articulated* affects. As Erika walks out of the stall, I see her body by itself for only a moment before Walter takes one long stride and throws his arms around her while kissing her fiercely. Yet in this moment before the embrace, Erika looks almost like a sleepwalker, or like a ‘dead man walking’: her body completely rigid, her arms by her side, her gaze staring blankly ahead. Walter’s embrace *looks* like violence, it *feels* like violence on *my own body* in the seat. His embrace is convulsive in nature, nearly enveloping her thin frame entirely, his body devouring hers. A part of me wants Erika to just give in, while another part of me is not at all comfortable with what is happening.

As I began analyzing the cinematography of *The Piano Teacher*, and this scene in particular, I realised that some of my discomfort stemmed from how the film was set, shot, and edited. Here we touch on the role of cinematography in contributing to this unease. A significant portion of the pleasure of spectatorship when ‘watching movies’ arguably lies in identifying with one or more characters in the film, letting them temporarily stand in for

aspects of ourselves.¹³ This identification is facilitated by certain cinematic conventions – especially the shot-reverse shot pattern – that different forms of cinema follow to different degrees.¹⁴ Since identification thus provides the audience with such a large part of the spectator's pleasure, obstructing it may cause our experience of the film to change radically.

Throughout the first part of the bathroom scene described above, the camera stays in a medium shot with Walter's back turned to us. This prohibits us as spectators from 'taking part' in the action in the bathroom and the scene as a whole, as we neither *see* Erika and her reactions, nor Walter and his (re-)actions properly for the majority of the scene. Techniques like this are used at other times in the film; in one instance, an entire scene consists of Erika standing fairly far away from the camera, her back to us, eating something in front of an open window while we hear the traffic going by outside. She does not turn around, and the scene cuts to the next.

This deliberate thwarting of camera's access to the characters means that the spectator gets only limited contact with their faces, body language, and other physical markers that conventionally provide us with clues about them and the motives for their actions. The characters in *The Piano Teacher* are thus not particularly many-faceted or well explicated, and the combination of little or no access to what they are thinking, and the scarcity of explanation at the level of diegetic action leaves us guessing. Instead of giving us characters whose lives and pre-histories we may imagine and lay as foundation to our interpretation of their actions in the narrative, we are given what approximates to 'laundry lists of symptoms'.

The shallow personalities of the characters are thus in part created by the way they are shot. In the case of Erika, she makes identification difficult by not accommodating our look, by not displaying a traditional feminine niceness, neither smiling nor posing. Added to that,

¹³ See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier. Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 57.

¹⁴ See Kaja Silverman, 'Suture [Excerpts]', in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. by Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 219- 235 [p. 220].

throughout the first half of the film, she dresses in shapeless, matronly blouses, buttoned all the way up to her chin and over her wrists, coupled with long skirts that obscure all signs of legs or feet. In short, she is not available to us as an ‘easy’ object for our viewing pleasure. The filming of Erika often lacks shots from her point of view, and we are frequently confronted with head-on shots of her face and upper body while she looks straight into or slightly to the side of the camera. This, in addition to the lack of development of the characters’ motives, stands in stark contrast to the seamless texture of mainstream cinematography, where our identification is clearly directed through the shot-reverse shot structure and close-ups in key emotional moments, as well as the use of music to bring forth particular emotions in particular scenes. Conversely, the filmic language in *The Piano Teacher* rarely ‘tells’ us what to think or feel about Erika’s actions or reactions. Her foreclosed desire is almost mirrored in our foreclosed identification with her.

However, even if my identification with Erika is obstructed by the way she is filmed, it does not mean that I *do not identify* with the character of the piano teacher. Erika’s body, as it is presented to us on the screen, is one source of the unpleasure I feel while watching the film, but it cannot disrupt my attempt at identification completely. I feel her body’s closedness, its numbness, her stiff jaws, and her repressed and rigid body language *in my own body*. My body in the seat is tense and goes numb at the same time as it wants to break out of these bonds, wants *Erika’s* body to break out of these bonds, wants her to respond to Walter’s kisses instead of holding her stiff and unresponsive body clumsily in his embrace, her mouth hard and straight. In this way, identification becomes complex as my embodied responses are telling me several things at once: to abhor Erika’s actions, to embrace the possibility of releasing her desire, and to feel disgust and agreement with (and consent to?) Walter’s advances. But above and beyond all formulated points of identification, a very strong sense

of unease, an unresolved and undirected affect fills my body during and after I see the film. Erika's body on the screen resonates in my body in the seat.

Another form of 'affective disorientation' is produced by Breillat's use of colour in *Romance*. Breillat's choice of colour scheme permeates throughout entire outdoor and indoor sets, clothes, and props, influencing what kind of spectators we become. White (and light pastels), red, and black are used consciously, overwhelmingly, and almost act as archetypical signifiers of content, mood, and story developments. The world of Marie and Paul is entirely made up of a limited palette of pastels: white, light blue, beige. Paul's apartment is completely white and every single piece of furniture is white. He dresses in white or beige (apart from when he models as a bullfighter for a fashion shoot in the opening sequence), and Marie wears white, beige, and light blue in the first two thirds of the film. Even Paul's car is white, and he goes to bed dressed in a white t-shirt and white shorts.

Conversely, red and black are the dominant colours in Robert's house, with shades of brown and grey mediating between them. Robert is wearing a red shirt and black trousers when he takes Marie to a Russian restaurant, which is itself decked with heavy, crimson velvet curtains and carpets; meanwhile Paul dines in a Japanese restaurant with a beige and white interior. While Paul's second-floor apartment is airy and light, its spaciousness excluding any hint of clutter, Robert's house is densely coloured with carpets, walls lined with brimming bookshelves, sculptures, artefacts, and antique furniture. The narrative brings out certain properties in these colours, at the same time as the colours bring with them certain associations that the director consciously utilises. For example, white in conjunction with Paul connotes an absence of visible skin and body fluids, an almost clinical 'purity', and emotional detachment. For me, all the white in Paul's life inevitably conjures up associations with hospitals, death, and nothingness. Red and black in conjunction with Robert, however,

connote passion, transgression, sex, and perceptible flesh, but also a certain stuffiness, lack of air, making his house a warm, intimate dungeon of desires acted out.

This brings us to the affective properties of colour. As Patti Bellantoni argues, we never just *see* colours on film; we *feel* them.¹⁵ Colours determine how we read a narrative, they can foreshadow events, they build characters, and they cannot be said to address an isolated visual sense, but rather the spectator's larger, embodied sensorium. Bellantoni found that different colours inspired different behaviour in her students through experiments by arranging monochromatic, associative 'colour days' in her film class. On the 'red day' she 'became aware that there was a 'Red' behaviour happening. The students compulsively gulped down salsa, talked louder, and turned the volume up on the rock music. The males in particular became sweaty and agitated'. On the 'blue day', 'those loud, boisterous students from the week before stopped talking, laid back and became almost listless'.¹⁶ Following her analysis of close to a hundred films, she concludes that each colour operates with certain properties that translate into cinematic connotations. She attributes characteristics to colours, but emphasises that 'this does not mean the colour itself has that inherent emotional property. It means that it can elicit that physical and emotional response from the audience'.¹⁷

As referred to above, the immediate connection I make as a spectator between Paul's white interiors and the lack of sex and passion in his and Marie's relationship is thus linked to associations I have (and which I would argue I share with director Breillat) with 'white', but does not reflect any *inherent* properties of 'white'. White here becomes the sign not so much of virginal purity¹⁸ as with a certain sense of the clinical in how Marie and Paul physically relate to each other. Bodies are not allowed to be bodies in Paul's apartment: naked skin is

¹⁵ Patti Bellantoni, "If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die." *The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2005).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxi-xxii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p xxv.

¹⁸ Although the pairing with Marie's red dress in the second part of the film, after she has initiated a sadomasochistic relationship with Robert, may suggest such a reading too.

something he explicitly wants to neither see nor feel, and the living, corporeal entities in his apartment become aligned with the other objects in it – lamp, bed, chair, body, table, towel. In this space, bodies are negated and wrapped up, meant to be transcended in order to perform whatever disembodied activity Paul considers more important than sex.

The ‘affective baggage’ of the colours utilised in *Romance* contributes to my uncomfortable viewing experience of the film, by providing an overwhelmingly sensual response to the strongly coloured visual image, a response akin to what Bellantoni reported in her ‘colour days’ with her students. There is one scene in particular that affected me in a way comparable to Bellantoni’s descriptions, but somewhat surprisingly so since the scene in question is not based on a colour that I would expect to hold particularly strong general connotative properties. The scene, which occurs very early in the film, begins with Marie and Paul sitting in a café. They are shot in medium close-up and the scene is organised by shot and reverse shot. We see a few slow tears run down Marie’s otherwise inexpressive face, and after a moment of listening to their conversation, we realise that they are talking about his decision to stop having sex with her. They get up to leave the café and the scene cuts to a medium long shot of them from the side, walking between sand dunes and on to a beach. Their conversation is superimposed on the film during the cut between locations and so we assume continuity even though we have no visual way of knowing how the café and the beach lie in relation to each other. Over the next thirty seconds or so, the stationary camera films them from behind, walking away from us along the beach, their voices disappearing with them.

The most striking thing about the beach section of this scene¹⁹ is that absolutely everything in it is *beige*: the dunes, the sand, the broken fence they step over to get to the beach, their clothes, the air, the sky, the few tufts of straw. Visually, beige looks and reads as

¹⁹ I read it all as one scene as their conversation remains uncut between the café and the beach.

non-descript. I doubt I am alone in reading ‘beige’ as carrying with it connotations of what is ‘boring’. Not ‘boredom’, but ‘boring’, as in neutral, diffuse, and without character. It feels like there is absolutely nothing for the spectator to latch onto in this scene, a scene that begins by containing dialogue that is central to setting up the narrative of Marie’s sexual frustration. All expectation and interest built up in the café section of the scene slips away like the beige sand I am watching, trailing off just like the tones of their conversation as I hear them recede into the distance, until the scene is completely quiet. I am left alone with the beige, soundless landscape.

No matter how boring I claim to find beige, it is clear that this scene is not leaving me unaffected. On the contrary, I feel quite beleaguered by all the beige, *frustrated* by it. It is as if the sheer quantity of beige is closing down my senses: I cannot see any more since there is nothing to distinguish, I cannot hear since Marie and Paul are being swallowed up by the beige image, moving further and further away. The colour beige, which usually denotes neutrality, nothingness, banality, is here excessive, intrusive, and obstructive. *I am overwhelmed by beige*. The sexual frustration played out in the narrative through the conversation between Marie and Paul (a conversation that takes place and fades out on the beige beach) denotes and awakens desire, but it is a knotty desire, both for Marie and for me as a spectator, one that takes circuitous paths and leaves me confused and unsettled. The fact that these particular affects are triggered by a colour as non-descript as beige subverts any assumption we may have that only visually and traditionally considered ‘strong’ colours are able to elicit a strong affective response.

These visually and auditory ambivalent moments of tense yet apathetic, frustrated, disaffected, yet desirous bodies reverberate into my body as a viewer, and again I find myself in a position of *sensing* Marie’s body in my own. It is a sensing that is suffused through the layers of my body, sometimes coming through stronger in my skin, sometimes in my

stomach. Here the description of affect as *intensity*, as both Ngai and Brian Massumi call it, is apt. Massumi in particular draws out a characteristic of affect highly appropriate to this analysis, describing as he does ‘a nonconscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder... It is *narratively delocalised*, spreading of the generalised body surface like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops that travel the vertical path between head and heart’.²⁰ In other words, affect cannot be pinned down to one particular part of the body.²¹ Similarly, affect does not carry with it a clear narrative of what it is or why it is there. Its language is expressed through intensity in the different layers of my body, rather than through constructed sentences. Affects are hard to put into words, a problem I repeatedly ran into when trying to articulate my discomfort by finding out what it was, what caused it, and why I was feeling it.

What I find in my responses to Haneke and Breillat’s work is not only signs of affective disorientation, but also a call to revise our idea of the voyeuristic spectator. If there is anything I do *not* feel that I have in my encounter with Erika Kohut and Marie, it is distance, and distance is what voyeurism is predicated upon. According to Christian Metz, whose psychoanalytic film theory has heavily influenced the field since the 1970s, voyeurism is the perceptual passion particularly privileged in the cinema.²² This is a type of looking that fits well with the ‘removed objects’ on film, since it derives pleasure from looking at something from a distance, something that does not know it is being looked at. Moreover, the pleasure is reliant upon the distance being kept up at all times. Metz writes, ‘[T]he voyeur is very careful to maintain a gulf, an empty space, between the object and the eye, the object and his own body: his look fastens the object at the right distance’, and continues, ‘[T]o fill in this distance would threaten to overwhelm the subject, to lead him to consume the object (the

²⁰ Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 25.

²¹ Although Massumi writes about different kinds of sensibilities pertaining to the different layers of the body: skin, organs, and muscles and ligaments.

²² Metz, p. 58.

object which is now too close so that he cannot see it any more), to bring him to orgasm and the pleasure of his own body, hence to the exercise of other drives, mobilizing the senses of contact and putting an end to the scopic arrangement'.²³

This threat of lack of distance calls to mind what Steven Shaviro has called 'the barely contained panic at the prospect (or is it the memory?) of being affected and moved by visual forms', a panic that we may translate into the fear of the collapse of the distance between spectator and screen.²⁴ As Metz's quote demonstrates, filling or collapsing the gap between voyeur and the object will result in, firstly, the voyeur being *overwhelmed* by her or his own body, and secondly, the consummation of the object, which will lead to orgasm and bodily pleasure. However, voyeuristic pleasure is expressed through retention rather than orgasm, and thus being overwhelmed by one's body (in orgasm) signifies *displeasure* for the voyeur in this particular economy of desire.

How, then, does the particular *unpleasure* that Metz alludes to, the orgasmic, bodily (un-)pleasure, fit with the bodily, affective, unclear *discomfort* that I felt while watching *Romance* and *The Piano Teacher*? The two words – unpleasure and discomfort – are synonyms, but in this context, they signify different experiences. Discomfort cannot be said to be equivalent to the overwhelming, bodily, orgasmic pleasure that seems to result from the collapsing of the boundary between subject and object in Metz's account. If so, that means that the collapsing of the subject-object boundary in the case of my chosen films must be conceptualised in different terms to the one Metz applies. If we want to keep the idea of a collapse, then, it must result from a different kind of space, distance, and relationship between subject and object, between spectator and film. It cannot be based on the same preconditions as the psychoanalytic relationship between voyeur and cinematic bodies. Following Metz, it is then pertinent to ask if these particular films, and others like them, do

²³ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁴ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 14-15.

something to this voyeuristic space ‘between the object and the eye’, the safe distance that we are accustomed to be granted by the cinematic medium?

When I *sense* Erika’s body in Walter’s crushing embrace *in my own body*, or when the lack of visual and emotional access to the characters in the film make me construct uneasy identifications marked by a confusingly wide and at times internally contradictory menagerie of affects, I interpret it as a sign that the space between the bodies on the screen and my body in the seat has to be rethought. In Metz’s theory, space is always conceptualised as *distance*, as distance between one thing and another (spectator and screen, for example), distance that separates, breaks, individualises. But could we re-think distance not as expressing two different positions divorced by space, but as two things inhabiting the same space? Can the spectator and the screen be thought of as being in the same space instead of being thought of as separated by a distancing gaze?

I would argue that Breillat’s *Romance* and Haneke’s *The Piano Teacher* demonstrate a need to ask such questions, indeed force us to formulate these questions. Thus I believe the key to answering these demands lies in investigating our own affective responses, as well as exploring the challenges arising from reconsidering and rethinking the space between the embodied spectator and the film. We need to reconceptualise this ‘distance’ as a space in which our senses bleed into each other and refuse to stay separate. This will necessarily carry us into unknown territory when it comes to vocabulary, since affect inevitably resists the precise descriptions that our ‘garden-variety emotions’ seem to lend themselves to. All we can do is to try and be as clear as we can about our confusion, and keep in mind, as Massumi writes, that ‘the skin is faster than the word’.²⁵

²⁵ Massumi, p. 25.

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