



Introduction: Art and the Real in Film

For the moment, let's put to one side the idea of the real as that which is inherently unrepresentable to explore the ways in which it is gestured toward in art, particularly in film art. What is meant by figuring the real or gesturing toward it? Here are some of the questions raised by the chapters that follow: How is the "real" suggested by visual metaphors? What is its relation to illusion? How does it manifest itself in the literalist gesture? Is the boundary between art and the real permeable, and what is the "reality bleed"? How is the spectator figured as entering the text, and how does the image enter our world? In cinematic experience, what promotes the impression of reality, and when does medium awareness come into play? Another—integrally related and complementary—aspect of our concern is anchored in the (real) body of the spectator. Cognitive and phenomenological approaches to perception alike tell us that spectatorial affect is "real" even when it is film and not reality that produces it. Thus, the emotional and bodily response of the spectator can be said to extend textuality into the real world. As will already be clear, it is not the spectrum of historically and culturally shaped "realisms" that is the focus of this study,¹ and only on occasion will we take up the documentary image, with its unique claim to the representation of reality. André Bazin's and Siegfried Kracauer's beliefs in film's mission to show the real, in film's ontological connection to reality, are central to the larger issue of realism, of course. But here it is primarily the assertion of film's indexicality that enters the discussion. Insofar as photographic registration is seen as natural, the film image itself is both material and referential, a fusion of art and the real. Further, the imprint of the real in the photograph intersects with moments that play on filmic illusion or in other ways concern the interface of the image with the material world. It is only seemingly a paradox that the real and its relation to

representation are centrally at issue in the *trompe l'oeil* and *tableau vivant* moments that occur in film—in the visual games, that is, that film plays with reality. Aesthetic practices such as these serve as occasions for staging the real in its relation to representation. The means by which the real is suggested range from the metaphorical to attempts to represent more literally.

This introduction serves, then, to contextualize the issues addressed more specifically in the chapters that follow by locating them among related problems of visual and literary representation. In this it resembles the introduction to the final chapter, which also takes up questions of visibility and spectatorship. We will begin by sketching out a few of Kracauer's views on the material aspects of film and film experience, views that intersect with several central ideas concerning the real in relation to images. Kracauer's realism will be approached first with respect to the materiality of the medium itself—including indexicality—and second, with regard to the embodied spectator and his (*sic*) relation to the "things of the world" as they appear in the images of film. Finally, a parable of realism alluded to by Kracauer will serve as a transition to other kinds of permeability between images and the real that will concern us in subsequent sections.

Material Effects

As is well known, Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) asserts film's unique capacity to "picture transient material life," claiming that its task is to preserve the existence of things.² Kracauer's film theory is a realist—and, as he points out—a *materialist* project: in *Theory of Film*, the relation of the photographic image to its referent is repeatedly expressed in the metaphor of the umbilical cord. Although the affinities in their thinking have not been emphasized, there is much to connect Bazin's ideas of realism with Kracauer's.³ Bazin's almost mystical devotion to realism is also a "heightened search for the eclectic materiality of film . . . for visceral signifiers of the real."⁴ But it is the shared belief in the indexicality of the photographic image that comes as something of a surprise. Like Bazin, Kracauer suggests that the images of film are indexical, as the anecdote in which Kracauer identifies his interest in film makes clear. Here Kracauer recounts his first experience as a spectator, of a film entitled—rather prophetically for his work—"Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life": "What thrilled me so deeply," writes Kracauer, "was an ordinary suburban street,

filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house facades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the facades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me.”⁵ From this poignant description of a childhood experience, tinged with melancholy, we can derive a number of the salient features that for the Kracauer of *Theory of Film*, at least, make the filmic medium significant. In the sequence described by Kracauer, the film camera has recorded a moment of everyday life, its location a street. The experience is ephemeral, spanning the brief moments in which a breeze passes over a puddle. Along with the sky, the facades of houses are mimetically reflected in the mirror of the puddle. From the point of view of their spectator, they are upside down. A breeze then sets the reflected scene in motion. Until the moment when the breeze begins to blow, the image conjured up by Kracauer’s description is purely photographic. But with the introduction of movement the images become filmic: nature and culture—the sky, the houses—begin to move and “take on life,” they “waver” and “tremble.” Both are reflected together on the muddy surface of the puddle; both are aspects of the physical reality that film is capable of “redeeming.” Insofar as ideology enters this image, it is invested in the animism—the movement—that makes things take on life. It resides as well in the act of desublimation involved in the reflection of the heavens—the “upper world”—in the dirty puddle below.

Echoing the work of Bazin as well as his own earlier writings, Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* claims that films are proportionately more cinematic the more they cling to the surface of things, their relation to reality seeming mystically to extend beyond the merely mimetic.⁶ The relation of art to nature here described contains the residue of romantic theories of art: the dirty puddle with its “wavering” and “trembling” motion provoked by a breeze resembles nothing so much as an aeolian harp—a stringed instrument played, as it were, by the wind. It is an instrument in which sensory and aesthetic effects are produced by the natural world itself, an instrument that serves as a model for the romantic imagination. In Kracauer’s revision, however, this model is given a new valuation. Here, Kracauer would have us realize, images of physical reality produce the visual effects, the moving images, that constitute film. The puddle assumes the role of film stock, of celluloid whose surface receives the image of the real. The “pattern of light and shadows” is produced by the referent itself. Not only does this surface function as a mirror that reflects the image but, more importantly, it acts as a surface that receives

the physical impression of the wind. On the one hand, the focus of interest here is the material support of film, its optical and photochemical processes.⁷ But there is also something more, for Kracauer's description points in the direction of the idea Bazin had already developed into a doctrine of realism: that the unique value of the photographic image—the film image—resides in its indexicality. Like the veil of Veronica mentioned by Bazin—the *vera icon*, the true image⁸—film receives the imprint of the real. The photographic image, like the image of Christ on the veil of Veronica, is an image “not made by human hands,” and it is similarly invested with an iconic (and quasi-religious) significance. As Joseph Koerner writes by way of the topic of portraiture, the veil of Veronica “brings forth a theology of the sign . . . as a perfect match between image and model, *signum* and *res*.”⁹

Kracauer's anecdote of the reflecting puddle recounts a filmic memory formative for his theoretical work in a number of ways. Kracauer describes a similar scene later on in *Theory of Film*, where it occurs in his discussion of the “found story,” the story discoverable in “the material of actual physical reality.” In this passage, too, the impression on the surface of the water is pivotal: “After you have watched long enough the surface of a river or lake,” he writes, “you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns. Being discovered rather than contrived, they are inseparable from films animated by documentary intentions.”¹⁰ Movement and narrative are launched together: essential to Kracauer's metaphor for the found story is a spectator who perceives the movement that introduces temporality, hence discovers the narrative embedded in the material of the scene. But, as we shall see later, movement also has another significance for him.

It is Adorno who refers to his teacher Kracauer admiringly as a tourist, as a spectator whose mode of seeing is like that of a man on a journey, transforming the everyday into an object of wonder.¹¹ Kracauer himself elevates this attitude into a principle of cinematic representation: “Film ought to proceed like a tourist who, in strolling through the landscape, lets his eyes wander about.”¹² It is not that the camera must shun the formative impulse altogether. For Kracauer, the photographer resembles the spectator—and hence interpreter—of the text of physical reality itself. He is “most of all the imaginative reader intent on studying and deciphering an elusive text.”¹³ His role as reader and spectator does not, however, necessarily imply a distance. Like the spectator of the film, “the photographer summons up his being . . . to dissolve it into the substances of the objects that close in on him.”¹⁴ In *Theory*

of *Film*, the filmic medium is not the place for discursive reasoning; dialectical materialism and its expression through montage are rejected in favor of a phenomenological interest in the material world. Kracauer's approach to cinema is grounded in the material body, both in the sensory perceptions of the photographer/cinematographer and in those of the film's spectator.

Repeatedly, Kracauer privileges what he calls the "psychophysical" response of the spectator, the affective response to sensory stimuli, in other words,¹⁵ and the movement of film's images has a major role to play here. Movement evokes the "flow of life," setting up a "resonance effect" between spectator and image: moving images provoke visceral responses in the "deep bodily layers" of the sense organs, producing "organic tensions, nameless excitements."¹⁶ Thus film experience has the immediacy of lived experience; it produces somatic responses in its spectator, responses that promote continuity between the moving image and the embodied observer. Yet there is also a metaphysical strain in Kracauer's relation to the things of the world. The spectator who contemplates the things of the world in the images of film perceives that "he [*sic*] is listening, with all his senses strained, to a confused murmur." Images begin to sound and sounds are again images. "When this indeterminate murmur—the murmur of existence—reaches him," Kracauer continues, "he may be nearest to the unattainable goal."¹⁷ This synesthetic experience—seeing becomes listening, listening becomes seeing—is a sensory experience: "[objects] must be experienced sensually," writes Kracauer to Panofsky.¹⁸ Does the synesthesia described here—seeing becomes listening, listening becomes seeing—take spectatorial experience beyond the world of the senses, into the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl or Maurice Merleau-Ponty?¹⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, as Vivian Sobchack puts it, signification is born concretely, "from the surface contact, the fleshly dialogue, of human beings and the world together, making sense sensible."²⁰

For Kracauer, too, objects resonate, and the spectator dissolves into the substance of the objects. The things of the world that appear in film resonate "multiple meanings and psychological correspondences," creating a "maze" through which the spectator wanders towards the thing as if in a dream.²¹ Interestingly, in what constitutes a parable concerning a certain kind of realism, Kracauer suggests that the spectator drifts into the things recorded by filmic images "much like the Chinese painter who, longing for the peace of a landscape he had created, moved into it, walked toward the far-away mountains suggested by his brushstrokes and disappeared in them never to be seen again."²² Alluding to but not citing Walter Benjamin's

“Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” by way of the Chinese legend, Kracauer redirects the force of Benjamin’s reference to it. For Benjamin, the legend illustrates the concentrated attention elicited by painting, an attention that results in its spectator’s metaphorical absorption by the work—while in Benjamin’s account the spectators of the mass medium of film, conversely, absorb its tactile images materially.²³ For Kracauer, in contradistinction to Benjamin, the relation between the “things of the world” in the images of film and their spectator is one of *mutual* permeability, a “dialogue” of the senses—and absorption is a response to the images of film. If the Chinese painter’s entry into the painting functions as a parable of realism here, what kind of realism is it? It is certainly not descriptive of the range of Kracauer’s aims as realist: the Chinese painter’s realist drive is for fusion with the images of his painting, which—no matter how abstract they may be—are nevertheless represented as “real” enough to enter.²⁴ Much in the same way, Michael Fried will read the central expression of Courbet’s realist drive in the spectator/painter’s figured corporeal entry into his own paintings.²⁵ Fried’s interest in corporeality—may we not call it materiality?—extends, like Kracauer’s, to the materiality of his medium. Further, Fried acknowledges his debt to Merleau-Ponty in several ways: in (1) his focus on Courbet’s embodiedness, (2) in his interest in the corporeality of painting, and finally, (3) in his emphasis on the relation of painting and beholder.²⁶ It is the latter concern—expanded to include a spectrum of relations between images and the real—that will be developed here.

Reality Effects/Games with Illusion

The spectators in Plato’s cave are fettered, able to see only the movement of shadows on the wall before them. Because they have been in this condition from childhood, this is all that they know. And yet, were they to be freed, they would still remain in the cave; such is the power of the images to enchain them. The moving shadows on the wall that pass before the prisoners, Plato would have us know, are at several removes from truth; they are illusions; they are copies of the copy. It is Jean-Louis Baudry who famously elaborated the analogy between the fettered spectators in Plato’s cave and the spectators entranced by the moving images of cinema. For Baudry, cinema, too, is an apparatus that promotes simulation. In both of these scenes of looking, Baudry suggests, the spectators are victims of an illusion of real-

ity, they are the “prey of an impression, of *an impression of reality*.”²⁷ What promotes this bondage to the image? What is the nature of the images that spectators see? Projected on the wall of the cave, the images are flat, two-dimensional, although Baudry speculates that a sense of depth is suggested by the movement of the images on the wall, by “their crossings-over, superimpositions, and displacements.”²⁸ Sound exists in Plato’s cave, but like the images, it is secondary, because it occurs as an echo of voices, reverberating from the walls of the cave. It is self-evident that Plato’s description of a situation—or, as Baudry puts it, apparatus—that demonstrates the illusoriness of reality is an idealist project. For Plato, what is known through the senses—here the eyes and ears—rather than understood by the mind, must always be insufficient, secondary, and illusory. Truth resides in the idea.

In cinema, Baudry suggests, the impression of reality is a subject effect, one that allows the perception of the image to pass for the perception of reality. Yet even for Baudry cinema, although conducive to the suspension of the reality principle, does not suspend it completely. Whereas Baudry anchors the confusion between representation and perception in Freud’s concept of primary process—“the basic condition for the satisfaction produced by hallucination”²⁹—and in the relation of film experience both to dream and to the oral phase in infant development, this is not our focus here. Indirectly, however—by way of examples—we will take up a question entertained by Baudry in passing: “what desire was aroused . . . what urge in need of fulfillment would be satisfied” by a montage whose goal is to create the impression of reality?³⁰ The desire for cinema, of course, is what Baudry has in mind. No doubt Bazin’s canonical essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” prompted this question, with its insistence that the history of the plastic arts is primarily a matter of psychology. Bazin understands “the story of resemblance, or, if you will, realism” as a “mental” need, not an aesthetic one.³¹ For Bazin, at the center of the controversy over realism in the arts—beyond the struggle for resemblance in mimesis—there is confusion between the aesthetic and the psychological aims of mimesis. Perhaps he had been reading—and disagreeing with—the early work of Rudolf Arnheim and E. H. Gombrich.

We can no doubt agree that the reading of illusion, anchored in the spectator, has both a perceptual and a psychological component. To what extent is the spectator complicit with the illusions contained in so many kinds of visual experience? Cinema is only one of many representational practices that promote illusionistic effects. As Richard Allen points out, illusion is “central to our experience of diverse forms of cultural practice.”³² Illusion

may be sensory without being epistemic—we need not be deceived into taking what we see for reality. The spectator of a film is aware that what she is viewing is not real but, in Allen's convincing reading, she voluntarily participates in the experience of illusion. We should keep in mind that there is, after all, aesthetic pleasure to be derived from illusion. Attempts to categorize the varieties and degrees of illusion—both from an aesthetic point of view and from the perspective of cognitive science—sometimes overlook the pleasure lurking in the both/and of ambiguity.

Like cinema, *trompe l'oeil* painting involves the suspension of medium awareness. Or at least this is the effect it seeks to promote in its spectator, who derives satisfaction both when medium awareness is relinquished and again when illusion reveals itself as such. In visual as well as literary practices, there is often a deliberate blurring between the—*aesthetic?* *psychological?*—goals of figuring the real and a satisfaction in the awareness of illusion's role in its figuration. As spectators, we are placed alternately in the position of belief and disbelief. Our pleasure in these effects derives from their oscillation, much as we experience in the famous *figure/ground* effect, in which one perception recedes as the other comes to the fore. Our pleasure in such effects is the pleasure we take in aesthetic play, but it is also something more. Groping for terms with which to address the incursion on the real by illusion and vice versa, we resort to formulations such as “the invasion of semiotic systems by the real,” “the illusion of the natural sign,” and “visceral signifiers for the real.”³³ With respect to *trompe l'oeil* painting, yet also more generally concerning the visual arts, Jacques Aumont among others has noted that it is the goal of certain representations to be confused with what they represent.³⁴ It is in this sense that the metaphor of the “material image” is a suggestive one for the present study, pointing beyond the indexicality of film's photographic images to the games with illusion and the pursuit of the real that I have been describing.

Illusion and Mimetic Drive

Aesthetic practices that rely on the oscillation between illusion and reality have a history, of course, and flourish especially in certain periods of cultural history. One of these practices is *trompe l'oeil*: Pliny's foundational tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasios has been cited through the ages, its theoretical interest recently revived for art historians, theoreticians of the gaze, and cultural

historians alike by Lacan and Baudrillard.³⁵ In particular, the Baroque period is noted for its interest in illusion, known for the *trompe l'oeils* in which the images of painting are extended into and concretized by sculptural effects. And the art of the Dutch seventeenth century especially thrives on the intertwining of realism with illusionism, its obsession with representation approached from multiple points of view, including the economic.³⁶ Can we speculate about “the mysteries of temperament” that lead to such interests in painting? asks Simon Schama, only to conclude that images we make of a culture are of necessity “fugitive and ghostly.”³⁷ In point of fact, the ambiguities surrounding Dutch Realism are pursued as well in the eighteenth century, another era fascinated with the borderland between reality and illusion. In England, France, and Germany, aesthetic practices that embrace these ambiguities seem to have generated a particular *frisson* in their spectator, whether they involve the transformation of the real landscape into a painting by way of a traveler’s Claude glass, or a walk through a candlelit sculpture gallery, its flickering light animating the statues on display.

Indeed, the concept of the movement between representation and the real that interests me here owes a great deal to Fried’s work on French eighteenth-century painting, with its various forms of figured permeability between the place of the (real) spectator and the painted image, a line of thinking that Fried pursues as well in his later work on Courbet.³⁸ Games with representation and the real were much the vogue in the eighteenth century, as Diderot’s *Salons* make especially clear—as when, for instance, Diderot as spectator describes a walk through the countryside he is taking with his friend the Abbé, only to reveal at the end of his lengthy description that it has not been a natural scene, after all, but rather a landscape painting he has been describing. It is the realism of the depicted scene that promotes Diderot’s figurative entry into the painting, of course, and he uses his description to make that point. But Diderot’s conceit also implies more than that. In Diderot’s *Salons* the figured movement into the image world is often accompanied by a countermovement: the (figured) movement out of painted surface into the world of the spectator, a movement such as we see in *trompe l’oeil* painting.

Preoccupations such as these are not peculiar to Diderot. They abound in the eighteenth century. The examples that follow are taken from Germany, the United States, and England, and they are not isolated examples. (In mentioning Diderot, we have, of course, barely touched the surface of this interest in France.)³⁹ A key text in this discussion is Goethe’s epistolary novellette, “The Collector and His Circle” (1798), in which Goethe—a staunch

opponent of strict mimesis for whom it is nevertheless a source of fascination—elaborates on the aesthetic proclivities of a collector whom he refers to as an “imitator.”⁴⁰ The imitator’s collection of paintings begins with still-lives of objects from nature, is expanded to include realistic portraits of family members, moves to full-body paintings of family members, then embraces paintings of human subjects surrounded by their favorite objects. Next, the collector’s obsession with illusion leads to the commission of *trompe l’oeil* portraits of himself and his wife, located behind a false door (the architectural form of *trompe l’oeil* is a false door or window). Finally, his “blind drive” leads to the commission of a life-size wax figure whose head is based on a plaster cast of his own face. It is not known whether Goethe modeled his imitator on an historical person, but the American painter Charles Willson Peale would certainly have served him well.

Peale was an “imitator” in the sense that Goethe means it, as well as a collector and the owner of a museum. His life-size portrait of his two sons (“Staircase Group: Raphadle and Titian Ramsay Peale,” 1795) was hung in a doorway, drawing on architecture to extend its illusion in the manner of the *trompe l’oeil* commissioned by Goethe’s collector. From Peale’s painting an actual step protruded—Baroque fashion—extending in three dimensions the painted image of the stairway on which the figures were positioned. A sculptural piece by Peale recalls the final stage of the imitator’s drive: a life-size wax figure of Peale presided over his museum. Further, in a perfect amalgam of illusion and reality that typifies eighteenth-century predilections, Peale was said to have ridden in a carriage harnessed to both living and *stuffed* animals.⁴¹ Susan Stewart reads Peale’s aesthetic obsessions as derealizations, as defenses against death—thus suggesting another point of connection with Goethe’s imitator/collector, whose efforts likewise seem aimed at arresting time.

It was Goethe’s novel concerning the representational practices of the eighteenth century (*Elective Affinities*, 1808) that established the fashion for *tableaux vivants* as the embodiment of painting by human actors. But this novel catalogues a number of other eighteenth-century representational obsessions as well, including a death mask, which, as a contact icon, shares its indexical status with the photograph.⁴² Similarly, Charles Willson Peale’s interest in taxidermy supplemented his collector’s drive: both taxidermy and collecting have been read in connection with the desire for preservation that also finds expression in photography. Interestingly, Peale’s museum also featured a physiognotrace (1802), an apparatus that created images—silhouettes—through direct bodily contact.⁴³ No doubt the various practices conflating representation with the real in which Peale indulged and which fascinated Goethe did

have a psychological significance beyond the mere indulgence in aesthetic play. Does the highly developed “attachment to representation, the taste for simulacra” such as we find in Peale take his aesthetic practices in the direction of obsessional neurosis? Perhaps, suggests Serge Daney. For Daney, tastes such as these point to “a certain love for the cinema.”⁴⁴

Pleasure in the movement between the image and the real is not an amusement specific to the 18th century. Does not the mimetic drive—in both its aesthetic and psychological manifestations—simply take on different guises and degrees of importance, mushrooming in one era, and receding from view in another? There is no doubt, however, that the eighteenth century was a focal point for such interests, whether or not we can account for them historically. It is perhaps no accident that it was in 1750 that Alexander Baumgarten took a term that had always been applied to sensory experience—*aesthetica*—and gave it an intellectual dimension. This blurring parallels the deliberate blurring between art and the real or art and nature in so many of the aesthetic practices of the period. If the senses, as in Plato, can only produce illusions, why not then affirm illusion by way of the aesthetic games played with reality? Or perhaps the increased stress on the objectivity of science—of seeing at a distance—during this period resulted in an offsetting need for immediacy, for the dissolution of objectivity involved in the practices that featured the interpenetration of art and reality. But one thing that *is* clear is that similar tastes are taken up again with gusto in postmodernism, which has many affinities with the non-Kantian eighteenth century. In the postmodern cultural moment, in which the experience of reality is said to be undermined already by the emptied-out, commercialized images that surround us, the indulgence in aesthetic play has been famously read as a symptom of the loss of reality, of inauthenticity, and of the waning of affect.⁴⁵ Already clichéd in our twenty-first century, Fred Jameson’s descriptions of the postmodern subject refer more to what he calls a “new type of emotional groundtone” than to the salient characteristics of images and art objects themselves, characteristics he acknowledges as having already been visible “in this or that” modernism.⁴⁶ Simulacra have a negative implication for Plato’s idealist project, it is true, and for Jameson and Baudrillard they are further tarred with the brush of late capitalism, a materialism of yet another kind.

This book does not address the postmodern loss of connection with the real as such. Where the postmodern has a role to play, it is concerned instead with the ways in which the real is illusion’s necessary complement. In order, perhaps, to demonstrate postmodernism’s connection to eighteenth-century games with illusion, Wim Wenders’s film *Until the End of the World*

(1991) may very well have taken its title from a German eighteenth-century garden of that name, a garden that notably contained a landscape painting at the center of its natural clearing.⁴⁷ Compelling examples abound in Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover* (1992), a novel about yet another eighteenth-century collector. Postmodern in its relentless intertextuality, heavily indebted to Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Sontag's novel offers its reader a full array of eighteenth-century practices that conjoin the real with representation and adds some new ones of its own. Here Goethe as picturesque tourist appears as a refuser of festivities in the midst of pleasure seekers who include Lord Hamilton, the collector. Sontag's account of Goethe's visit to Lord Hamilton in Naples is followed by a party in the here and now that is similarly interrupted. Sontag's novel takes on the features of a parable as none other than the "stony guest," a statue come to life in the eighteenth-century mode, appears on the scene: "In comes this guest, this alien presence, who is not here to have fun at all. He comes to break up the party and haul the chief reveler down to hell. You saw him at the graveyard, atop a marble mausoleum."⁴⁸ Mediated by Aristotle, Molière, and Mozart, intertextual to the bitter end, the poet as statue come to life turns out to be none other than a "huge, granite, forbidding father." Goethe is featured as literary precursor. This father as cultural monument—the formulation is Sontag's—brings the modern-day revelers up short: "he's pretentious, overbearing, humorless, aggressive, condescending. A monster of egotism," writes Sontag, "Alas: he's also the real thing."⁴⁹

Sontag's "stony guest" is not just a monument, he's also a "work of art collected by his admirers," she adds, in all probability alluding to Tischbein's famous portrait of Goethe, a cultural icon appropriated by Andy Warhol for his silkscreen prints in the manner of a Duchampian ready-made (1982). Like Warhol's, Sontag's images are multiple and play on the relation of the original to the copy. Perhaps in imitation of Warhol, too, whose images manage to be at once simulacral and referential, Sontag creates a portrait of Goethe that is the sum of various textualities, and yet lays claim to something more. Like Warhol's "Coca Cola Bottles"—the commodity turned icon—for Sontag Goethe—the icon turned commodity—nevertheless remains, as she puts it, "the real thing." What does she mean? There is yet another allusion embedded here, and it is to Slavoj Žižek's "answer of the real." In response to the question of why the symbolic has to be hooked into a "thing," into some "piece of the real," as he puts it, Žižek responds that the function of the "piece of the real" is to fill the void that gapes in the very heart of the symbolic.⁵⁰ As his example, Žižek refers to the coincidence that takes us by surprise and produces a vertiginous shock, such as in the case of the politician whose plat-

form collapses after he proclaims: “may God strike me down if I have spoken a single lie!” Behind such situations, Žižek suggests, “the fear *persists* that if we lie and deceive too much, the real itself will intervene to stop us—like the statue of the Commandatore, who responds to the insolent dinner invitation from Don Giovanni by nodding its assent.”⁵¹ At the heart of our fictions, Žižek implies, it is the threat of the real that produces the uncanny effect. This statue come to life is not the fulfillment of Pygmalion’s erotic dreams: when the stony guest arrives, it is our death that is signalled. Sontag’s stony guest wields a scythe.

A congenial model for thinking about the relation of images to the real and its attendant issues can be found in Hal Foster’s “Return of the Real,” a seminal essay that takes on the critical models that govern the visual arts and art theory from the 1960s to the 1990s. Foster suggests that readings of art based on either one of the two basic models of representation alone—the “simulacral” and the “referential”—necessarily result in a “reductive either/or.”⁵² Instead, Foster would stress the interdependence of these attitudes in the art under discussion, as when, for instance, he reads Warhol’s pop images as both *screening* the real (simulacral) and letting the real “poke through” (referential), so that the spectator seems nearly to be able to touch it.⁵³ The spectrum of possible relations among simulation, illusionism, and realism that Foster applies to the visual arts of this period maps out a series of interconnections that are operative in film, as well. A central concern is a shift from the idea of reality as an effect of representation to the real experienced as shock or trauma—from an emphasis on representation, that is, to the body. Here the work of Cindy Sherman is Foster’s example. When Foster writes about artists who use illusionism not to hide or cover over with representation, but to “push illusionism to the point of the real,” he has the work of Duane Hanson in mind.⁵⁴ In an opposite but related gesture, yet another group of artists rejects illusionism in order to lay bare the abject body. Foster suggests a new term to define the art that is made by rejecting the symbolic order, by rendering the body abject: the “mimesis of regression.” But how far removed is this from the literalism that makes the corpse itself a sculpture from Jeremy Bentham’s wish that his embalmed corpse be exhibited as a statue in the University of London, dressed and seated on a chair as an “auto-icon”?⁵⁵ When Adorno wrote that one model for art would be the corpse in its arrested, undecaying (embalmed) form, did he have Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* in mind?⁵⁶ For Goethe himself, the corpse featured in his novel as work of art was precisely that—he called it a symptom of “mimetic regression.” Work of the imitative imagination at its most relentlessly literal, this form of sculpture resembles the “art” of the cannibal horror film. Striving