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**LIMINAL SUBJECTIVITIES  
IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND LITERATURE**

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Submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Sussex  
September 2010

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been  
and will not be, submitted in whole or in part  
to another University for the award of any other degree.

**Signature:**

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

D.PHIL

LIMINAL SUBJECTIVITIES IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND LITERATURE

*Summary*

This thesis discusses the intersection of subjectivity and the liminal in contemporary literary and filmic texts.

In discussion of eight texts, the thesis weighs the dual meaning of “liminal subjectivities” – the liminal space between subjectivities, and the condition of subjectivity as it negotiates the liminal. It aims to explore how liminality manifests in manners both universal and specific to the literary or filmic form, in the embodiments of characters, and the rhythms and poetics of the text. It considers the liminal a privileged trope of destabilised subjectivity, a space of suspension and potentiality, and explores how the liminal functions as an interface between haecceity and otherness; whether it binds together or holds apart; if it is a space between oppositional states or a continuum of specific sites of intensity.

The eight texts discussed are *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* (W. G. Sebald), *Sputnik Sweetheart*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and *After Dark* (Haruki Murakami), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *The Science of Sleep* (Michel Gondry), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant). The work of Sebald and Gondry is considered in translation from the original German and Japanese. The thesis considers both literary and filmic texts to contrast the salient modalities of subjectivity that each form constructs.

Each chapter considers how liminality manifests at the surface of the text, how a liminal agency operates to interrupt, destabilise, and displace subjectivity in the spaces between languages, genre, form, voice, states of consciousness, word and image, facticity and fictionality, and cinematic and literary tropes and modes. The discussion explores how this is reflected and expanded upon within the text, in liminal embodiments, intensities, and motifs, such as the hypnagogic, rites of passage, the uncanny, home, the vespertine, night, metamorphosis, carnival, as well as issues of space – the non-place, the extraterritorial, and nomadic space.

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## **Introduction**

My interest in liminal subjectivities emerges from a collision of pre-existing critical interests and an observation of particular characteristics in recent narrative film and literature. As I began this project I had come to see an aggregation of preoccupations, themes, and motifs in certain texts, presenting a kind of lacuna or open question – a question of the subject’s negotiation with otherness, and of the space that lies between here and there. In the representation of the subject and its navigation of liminal space, I became aware of paradoxes, of particular vulnerabilities or instabilities of subjectivity. This seemed to be an emergent characteristic in both literature and film, occurring at the fringes of each field yet also exerting an influence upon the mainstream. I began to see in these texts new modes of articulating the liminal subject. These modes are diverse, some universal and some salient to the literary or filmic form; the common feature is the manner in which vulnerabilities and instabilities are elevated to the surface of the text in the construction of narrators and protagonists, as well as embedded in the text in interdependent motifs of liminal instability.

In the early stages of my research I was predominantly concerned with issues which coincided with my critical interests in postmodernism, in particular with deconstruction and Deleuze and Guattari. As I will come to discuss, the project began to reorient itself as I integrated these issues and saw patterns across very diverse sets of texts. My mode of questioning “tipped over,” as Brian McHale might put it<sup>1</sup>, from ontological to epistemological, and then negotiated an uncertain path between the two. This path has been instinctive and tremulous, and has come, inadvertently yet very aptly, to reflect the paradoxes of liminality that I sought to unpick. At times I have wished (for my own sake) that my approach had a more consistent grounding, though I do not believe a more formulaic approach would have led to such a generative discussion, nor would have prised open the critical concerns which hold these texts together and present a clear picture of the phenomenon of liminal subjectivities manifest in texts of the contemporary moment.

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<sup>1</sup> McHale argues that modernist and postmodernist modes of questioning have an interdependent dynamic: “Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bi-directional and reversible.” McHale 1987: 11.



## The texts

Each chapter takes as its focus a writer or filmmaker within whose work I have identified a play of liminal subjectivities; these are W. G. Sebald, Haruki Murakami, Michel Gondry, and Gus Van Sant. The texts I have selected span not only a division of literature and film but also of genre and tone, and of high and low art. Each was chosen for the particular ways it intersects with my questions of liminal subjectivities, with my interest in the contemporary moment, and in particular for a reciprocity with my critical orientation. Indeed, the development of my approach has narrowed a wider field of texts as I began to note certain links and patterns between these texts, a process precipitated by my reading of Sebald.

The texts which I eventually came to are W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*<sup>2</sup> and *Vertigo*<sup>3</sup>, Haruki Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*<sup>4</sup>, *Kafka on the Shore*<sup>5</sup> and *After Dark*<sup>6</sup>, Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*<sup>7</sup> and *The Science of Sleep*<sup>8</sup>, and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*<sup>9</sup>. The Sebald and Murakami novels are considered in translation (the Sebald by Michael Hulse, and the Murakami by Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin). All eight novels and films are from the last twenty years. Of the earliest texts, Sebald's *Vertigo* was first published as *Schwindel. Gefühle*, in 1990, its translated counterpart following in 1999, and Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* was released in late 1991. Of the later texts, Rubin's translation of Murakami's *After Dark* was published in 2007 (its Japanese publication being in 2004), and Gondry's *The Science of Sleep* was released in 2006.

I have chosen to discuss both literary and filmic texts to explore the contrasting and interlinking ways in which subjectivity is constructed across these forms. In Sebald and Murakami subjectivity is constructed through linguistic signifiers, through literary and narrative modes, and across pages and chapters, whereas in Gondry and Van Sant, subjectivity is constructed at an intersection of the audio, visual and temporal, through the composition and editing of shots, and through the performance of actors. In this sense, the filmic text is already a more polyphonic means of production, with a greater breadth of creative input, albeit one in which these many voices are attempting to create a centred

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<sup>2</sup> Sebald 1998 [1995], trans. Hulse, M.; hereafter cited as TROS.

<sup>3</sup> Sebald 1999 [1990], trans. Hulse, M.; hereafter cited as V.

<sup>4</sup> Murakami 2001 [1999], trans. Gabriel, P.; hereafter cited as SS.

<sup>5</sup> Murakami 2005 [2002], trans. Gabriel, P.; hereafter cited as KOTS.

<sup>6</sup> Murakami 2007 [2004], trans. Rubin, J.; hereafter cited as AD.

<sup>7</sup> Gondry 2004; hereafter cited as ESOTSM.

<sup>8</sup> Gondry 2006; hereafter cited as TSOS.

<sup>9</sup> Van Sant 1991; hereafter cited as MOPI.

textual subjectivity. Taking this distinction as a given, I have also selected these texts to consider the different ways in which subjectivity is constructed within a single form, and how parallels emerge across the divide of form, something also apparent in liminal motifs within the texts. For example, I note particular similarities in the construction of subjectivities between Sebald and Van Sant, which do not exist between Sebald and Murakami, nor Van Sant and Gondry. Correspondingly, the motifs I identify in Murakami ramify with those of Van Sant, while those of Gondry refer back to Sebald. It is also notable that these particular texts are rich with intertextualities which transcend form. The narrative voice of Sebald's novels, in conjunction with the images present in the text, may be "heard" as a kind of voiceover. Similarly, the first person plural narrator of Murakami's *After Dark* reflexively constructs a "visual" gaze with which to "observe" the characters. *My Own Private Idaho* not only references Shakespeare; its narrative structure relies heavily on *Henry IV* (though, strictly speaking, a dramatic rather than purely literary text). It also draws, less overtly, from Dostoevsky, from both *Crime and Punishment*<sup>10</sup> and *The Idiot*<sup>11</sup>, as well as from Eliot's *Silas Marner*<sup>12</sup>.

I discuss Sebald, Murakami, Gondry, and Van Sant in turn across four chapters, and I delineate the discussion into sections entitled *Textual subjectivities* and *Liminal motifs*<sup>13</sup>. Each chapter approaches the discussion of *textual subjectivities* in differing and interconnecting ways, according to the modalities of subjectivity presented in the work of that writer or filmmaker. All of the texts discussed engage in complex negotiations with the liminal, instituting dynamics of haecceity and otherness, exploring the fissures of truth and fiction, and deploying character dynamics which seek to challenge notions of stable, whole, or discrete subjectivity. Crucially, I aim to explore the construction of narrators and protagonists and the production of textual subjectivity, and as such these sections focus on the surface of the text and how the liminal manifests in the spaces between the constituent voices of polyphonies, between cinematic and literary tropes and modes, between word and image, between languages, genres, and states of consciousness.

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<sup>10</sup> Dostoevsky 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Dostoevsky 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Eliot 1996.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the delineation of *textual subjectivities* and *liminal motifs*, the chapters on Murakami and Van Sant open with particular discussions of themes which come to condition the texts discussed. Murakami's novels are notable for the author's construction of the "other side", a particular plane of space or consciousness which institutes a clear dynamic of haecceity and otherness, and postulates a liminal space in between. The protagonist of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* suffers from narcolepsy, a condition which causes the sufferer to fall asleep without warning and which causes hallucinations in wakefulness. Thus the confusion of hallucination and reality comes to dominate the text, and, like Murakami's other side, to construct a particular liminal space between consciousnesses.

The discussion of *liminal motifs* aims to consider how the liminality present at the surface of the text is reflected within it. I identify intensities, embodiments, and aggregations of liminality within the narrative, and search out reverberations of these motifs across otherwise highly contrasting texts. These motifs include the hypnagogic, the vespertine, the carnivalesque, the uncanny, metamorphosis, notions of adolescent liminality, of languages, of nomadism, and of extraterritorial space. Here I draw special attention to the hypnagogic, a key trope of the texts discussed; the theme of sleep is prevalent across all four chapters, and the dynamic of sleep and wakefulness is central to my question of liminal subjectivities.

### **The liminal subject**

The notion of the supposedly stable subject in peril is vital to these texts; indeed, the instability of subjectivity is what first draws my attention. My understanding of the subject sees an inherent tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces – the struggle to achieve and maintain a centred if illusory wholeness set against agencies which expose this illusion and destabilise wholeness – and I perceive the liminal to be a key trope of destabilised subjectivity. The liminal occurs at the interface of systems of meaning – temporal, spatial, or theoretical. As the subject enters the threshold space, it is placed in a crosswind of tensions, frictions, and collisions. Centrifugal forces are exacerbated as a liminal agency brings about interruptions, destabilisations, and displacements of subjectivity.

I employ the term “liminal subjectivities” for its dual meaning, of the condition of subjectivity as it negotiates the liminal and becomes other, and of the liminal space between distinct subjectivities and the liminality inherent in the ambiguities of subject and object. The texts here employ a narrator or protagonist to approximate an apparently singular voice<sup>14</sup>, and through a succession of liminal engagements this singularity is encroached upon by otherness – it is never permitted stasis, nor is it ever stable or whole. In this sense, the construct of a literary or filmic voice simulates subjectivity. The theoretical ideal of the subject is the absolute embodiment of haecceity – a discrete entity, stable and whole; such a subject is not only unaffected by otherness, it is oblivious to otherness. Similarly, an ideal of textual subjectivity would be a discrete and singular narrative voice or filmic protagonist

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<sup>14</sup> The Murakami novels provide an exception to this rule, though each engages with the construction of voice in reflexive and idiosyncratic ways which complements the discussion in other chapters.

which presents an illusion of wholeness<sup>15</sup>. As with the construct of individual, the illusion of a stable textual subjectivity is undermined by an imbalance in the tension of centrifugal and centripetal forces which maintain the subject's apparently stable position. Such an imbalance in these texts may be accorded to an engagement with otherness, an engagement which necessitates entry into the liminal.

The space between subjectivities may become destabilised through the institution of a polyphony, as the subjectivity of a haecceitic narrative voice is destabilised through a negotiation with the otherness of a polyphony of voices. In the literary texts, this may be through a multiplicity of voices that the narrator engages with, or an array of interrelating storytelling modes. In the filmic texts, this may be through the use of multiple filmic modes to construct a diegesis. In each instance, the originating narrative voice either strives to maintain its haecceity through a mastery of these other voices, a process of assimilation and subjugation, or opens itself up to deconstruction and enters into an open dialogue with these other voices, allowing or even welcoming the threat to its haecceitic authority. In some cases this occurs to such a degree that the notion of any such "originating" voice is undermined and replaced by the suggestion of a continuum of ever-shifting haecceity – a perpetual becoming.

The other notion of liminal subjectivities, that is, of subjectivity entering into or engaging with a liminal site, sees a recurrent insistence upon deconstructions, destabilisations, deterritorialisations, which may or may not resolve with subsequent reconstruction, restabilisation, reterritorialisation. This poses the question: what becomes of the deterritorialised subject? What happens when the subject abandons or is abandoned by stability, when it does not pass through and exit the liminal phase but remains in a state of instability, uninscribed by a new discourse or system of meaning? How may we theorise the perpetual chrysalis, perpetual adolescence, or the never-ending bridge? Such notions would appear to present a contradiction in terms – a bridge is not a bridge unless it links two locations; yet these images posit the idea of leaving behind a certain state of stability with no definite other state as goal. Equally, even when the equation contains two contrasting states between which we would expect straightforward transitions – sleep and wakefulness for instance – the possibility for uncertainty exists. The perpetually

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<sup>15</sup> It may also be said that the apparent haecceity of textual subjectivity is disrupted by the role of voice in the interface of reader and text. In this engagement the voice is a kind of liminal space in itself – it is the threshold of the text and the reader, being both of the text when the reader comes to it, and of the reading experience. From the reading perspective, the dynamic of haecceity/otherness here is self-evident; the reader represents a haecceity and the text an otherness, with voice the mediating liminal factor.

hypnagogic, as manifest in the condition of narcolepsy, resists the definitive and resonates with the nomadic. This posits a further question: without the cloak of stability and wholeness, can the subject still be considered “the subject”? If meaning may not exist beyond the articulation of language, how may the individual exist beyond the articulation of subjectivity?

This paradox is at the core of the lacuna or open question which I observe in these texts. With “lacuna” I mean to suggest not merely an absence, but a perpetual space of undecidability, a space of suspension rich with potentiality, which cannot be “known” in the way that the states it bridges can be known; it is an impossible space – it is the cannot-be-known, the anti-definitive. This refusal of the definitive is a distinctive characteristic of the texts discussed and has clear ramifications with Eco’s theory of the “open text”<sup>16</sup> and Barthes’ *Death of the Author*<sup>17</sup>. However, these texts are distinctive in that, rather than allowing for the myriad interpretations of the reader, there is a tendency to actively direct the reader toward a particular reading of openness, of no resolution<sup>18</sup>. This is true to varying degrees of the texts discussed here; some direct the reader very precisely, and flirt with tropes of narrative obfuscation, while some are intent on radically disorientating the reader or viewer.

Correspondingly, I employ the term “open question” to imply an absence of definitive answers, and to again invoke the notion of undecidability. The open question may be in the context of the narrative, for example, in an open narrative which resists resolution; it may be in the context of a playful ambivalence of facticity and fictionality; it may be in the enigma of the uncanny, the telepathic, or the intersubjective; it may be in the wide open postulation of an unknowable otherness. This theme of otherness predominates; it is a bright thread running through all of these texts, negotiated in different and often highly contrasting ways, and it remains elusive and ever-shifting. In each instance, otherness presents a supplement which destabilises haecceitic primacy. The texts acknowledge this problematic; each text asserts and insists upon an otherness, which seems to imply a provocative gesture towards its potentiality – the acknowledgement that what lies beyond, and in between, never fails to destabilise that which is present.

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<sup>16</sup> Eco 1979.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes 1977: 142-48.

<sup>18</sup> In this sense, we may in fact be dealing with closed texts, or perhaps a third category of text which resists designation as either closed or open – inside out texts, perhaps?

The particular way in which these texts present their “open question” is why I have chosen each for discussion. As I have suggested, my field of chosen texts has narrowed, corresponding to a reciprocity with my critical approach. I have come to view these texts as being at a vanguard in the representation of subjectivities, and I hope to go some way to explaining why this is so. It is of note that although each of these writers and filmmakers has an international reputation, perhaps only Murakami has wholly penetrated the mainstream (and only very gradually), yet each has long been a leader in his chosen form, and exerted a notable influence upon the mainstream<sup>19</sup>.

The mainstream flirts with this particular facet of these texts – the open question, the lacuna – yet resists assimilating it wholesale. It would seem that something of these texts “sticks in the throat”, precluding straightforward consumption or digestion. These texts react against a readership or spectatorship which demands certainty and resolution and instead present the reader or viewer with something uncertain, something unknown, a liminal space that the text is unable or unwilling to define, be it in the relationship between sleep and wakefulness, facticity and fictionality, or reality and hallucination. The form – narrative film and literature – for the most part remains familiar and accessible, yet it holds something partially inaccessible, something irrevocably other. This suggests the *unheimliche*<sup>20</sup>, and resonates clearly with Nicholas Royle’s account of Freud’s concept as, “a feeling of something not simply weird or mysterious but, more specifically, as something strangely familiar.”<sup>21</sup> This uncanniness disconcerts; the instability at the threshold of home and not-home (haecceity and otherness) threatens the stability and safety of home itself. The persistent refusal of the definitive disallows the dispersal of this uncanniness; it remains uncanny and cannot be assimilated. It is always partially other. This paradox is a key facet of the treatment of otherness in these texts. Though it is impossible for haecceity and otherness to coincide, the boundary between appears to be ever-shifting and porous – it would seem that otherness is not always discrete.

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<sup>19</sup> I would argue that this is so, but my argument may be disputed. Sebald’s critical reputation is certainly superlative, and as the project of this thesis draws to a close, Gondry has moved towards Hollywood action hero films with *The Green Hornet* (Gondry 2011), and Van Sant’s reputation continues to grow following the success of *Milk* (Van Sant 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Freud 2003: 121-162.

<sup>21</sup> Royle 2003: vii

## Critical orientation

As I have suggested, my critical approach to these texts and to my questions of liminal subjectivity has been serendipitously uncertain. Early in my research I identified my approach as poststructuralist. This emerged from prior deconstructive work on other liminalities, in particular liminal sexual identities, a subject area well-suited to deconstructive readings led by Derrida, Judith Butler, and queer theory. As I began my research here I was confident in my critical allies of Deleuze and Guattari<sup>22</sup>, and Bakhtin<sup>23</sup>, and sought also to draw on theories of translation, the hypnagogic, and on the anthropological models of Victor Turner<sup>24</sup> and Marc Augé<sup>25</sup>. As my research progressed, some of these models became less applicable than others; in particular Deleuze and Guattari, and Bakhtin, played less of a role than I first imagined. Moreover, the introduction of Sebald to my selection of texts cast a new light on my critical approach and, as I have suggested, in shifting my focus toward an examination of textual subjectivity, I found new tensions in my approach, between the epistemological and the ontological – modernist and postmodernist modes of questioning<sup>26</sup>. Translation and hypnagogia remain strong and consistent model throughout, and I will seek to summarise each here, before discussing the influence of Sebald, and hopefully offering some further insight into how my uncertain critical orientation developed, and to the questions posed by this approach.

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<sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's theories of deterritorialisation, becoming-other, and the nomad, offer an accommodating model of liminality (Deleuze and Guattari 1983; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Deleuze and Guattari 1986); while other models present as a singular site which is passed through, theirs offers a perpetual continuum of intensities. Deterritorialisation emancipates the subject from a particular discourse through an engagement with an other discourse; relative deterritorialisations resolve in reterritorialisation, while absolute deterritorialisations construct a plane of "consistency" or "immanence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 41), a nomadic subjectivity. Such subjectivity can be theorised as either immobility or as absolute fluidity.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin's theories of polyphony and carnival (Bakhtin 1984a; Bakhtin 1984b) offer a model to articulate the liminality inherent between the voices that constitute a textual subjectivity, literary or cinematic. Such a model suggests that a range of modes may be deployed to construct a polyphony of contrasting and democratic voices, or may be deployed to speak as one. The polyphonic might be said to be a liminal space in itself; it insists upon otherness, upon creating a channel between haecceity and the other. The carnivalesque proposes that polyphony may engender a democratic space, and asks what the boundaries and conditions of this space may be.

<sup>24</sup> Turner develops Arnold van Gennep's research on the liminal phase of rites of passage (van Gennep [1909] 1960; Turner 1969), referring to the liminal subject, "being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew," and to being, "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (Turner 1969: 95).

<sup>25</sup> With his theory of the non-place Augé proposes non-anthropological space (Augé 1995: 78), a space not inscribed by history or identity, passed through rather than inhabited. It carries the implicit suggestion of "non-people" and may be reclaimed as an ulterior anthropological space – a space of movement which is not necessarily passed through, but which becomes an ongoing plane. The paradox inherent here would seem to restate the question of how the individual may exist when subjectivity is perpetually dispersed.

<sup>26</sup> In *Postmodernist Fiction* (McHale 1987), McHale charts the emergence of postmodernism, delineating modernist and postmodernist poetics as, respectively, epistemological and ontological.

It is appropriate to address the issue of translation in its own right, given that the first two chapters focus on English language texts translated from, respectively, German and Japanese. The transition of meaning and voice from one language to another creates a problematic liminal space; Susan Bassnett describes translation as “a process of decoding and recoding,”<sup>27</sup> which would seem to suggest the existence of a mid-point at which meaning has been decoded but is yet to be recoded. This idea opens up a seemingly paradoxical liminal space, a site at which meaning has not ceased to exist but lies beyond the matter of language. The translation model differs from other models of liminality in that poststructuralist theories suggest that meaning cannot exist beyond language, hence a space which is both post-decodification and pre-recodification may never truly exist. Meaning which cannot be articulated by language becomes hermitic and ceases to be meaning, which resonates with the problematic of how the perpetually destabilised subject exists beyond the articulation of subjectivity.

There exists a notion of “adequate” translation<sup>28</sup>, that is, a translation which conveys meaning from one language to another with a minimal loss of meaning and minimal interference by external factors. Such factors are omnipresent; languages are never truly parallel and the liminal space of translation necessitates loss and reinvention; meaning emerges from translation reconfigured, both linguistically and culturally. Bassnett distinguishes between these two factors of untranslatability – the linguistic, when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute, and the cultural<sup>29</sup>.

In his essay on translation<sup>30</sup>, Walter Benjamin suggests that “the notion that a translation does not exist to give readers an understanding of the ‘meaning’ or information content of the original.”<sup>31</sup> He continues:

translation exists separately but in conjunction with the original, coming after it, emerging from its ‘afterlife’ but also giving the original continued life.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bassnett 1991: 16.

<sup>28</sup> Munday 2008: 114.

<sup>29</sup> Bassnett 1991: 32. Linguistic untranslatability is addressed by imposing (in this instance) an English sentence structure onto a foreign language – simply restructuring the word order of the sentence as appropriate to the syntax of the given language. Cultural untranslatability has more far-reaching ramifications. Bassnett cites the untranslatability of personal experience as one such problematic and attributes its untranslatability to its “uniqueness,” (Bassnett 1991: 36).

<sup>30</sup> Initially published as an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* (1923).

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin 1968: 77; Munday 2008: 169.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin 1968: 77; Munday 2008: 169.



This idea gives credence to the notion that the subjectivity manifest in the English translations of Sebald and Murakami is other to that in the original German and Japanese. The translated text is a polyphonic text; it is a reconstruction of the original text's voice and meaning, and contains the original author's intent, though it is the construction of an interloper, an agency rebuilding voice and meaning in an absolutely other system of meaning. It could be argued that the translator has a very central stake in the subjectivity of the translated text.

Benjamin's idea that translation "exists separately" from the original would seem to suggest that the translated text is fundamentally other to the source, in that there is a rupture in the continuity of meaning between the source and the translation. In this sense, we might consider the text of German and Japanese originals, and of the English translations as distinct entities; the former is unequivocally the "original" though the existence of the supplementary translation unsettles the notion that it is stable and whole. Both Sebald and Murakami have been translated into many languages; it follows that there are manifold supplementary texts, all bearing a meaning which corresponds to the singular original, all having passed through a process of decoding and recoding. This co-existence of original and translated texts is a key condition to the translation model of liminality.

This presents a hybridity, a notion which is pursued in systems theories of translation such as those developed by Itamar Even-Zohar, which see, "translated literature as a system operating in the larger, social and historical systems"<sup>33</sup>. Even-Zohar's theory places less emphasis on the text in its original language – in the author's intent in that language – and instead considers the metamorphosis of the text and its subsequent hybrid status<sup>34</sup>. Gideon Toury develops these theories to consider the stability of the source of meaning, suggesting that the process of translation destabilises the notion of an original message with a fixed identity<sup>35</sup>. This would seem to in turn suggest that any text which has been translated or is even yet to be translated lacks a singular identity; the process of reconstructing a text in another language multiplies the potentiality of its meaning. The existence of other versions of a text renders impossible the notion of a singular meaning or identity. As such, translation becomes a deconstructive process; although the "original" text retains a temporal primacy, there is no primacy beyond this. Every translation becomes

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<sup>33</sup> Munday 2008: 107-8. Munday comments that, "translated literature had up to that point [the 1970s] been mostly dismissed as a derivative, second-rate form," (Munday 2008: 108), and polysystem theory was instrumental in positing translated literature as a valid literary genre

<sup>34</sup> Even-Zohar 1979: 237-310.

<sup>35</sup> Toury 1980; cited in Gentzler 2001: 133; Munday 2008: 115.

equal and no singular identity remains, and while the “original” text and the translated text exist separately, they can also be seen as a single entity, a meta-text, which becomes “the integration of both the original text and the translated text in the semiotic web of intersecting cultural systems.”<sup>36</sup>

With regard to the thesis, such theories have ramifications beyond the translation of Sebald and Murakami’s novels into English, and towards other modes of language present in these texts, such as moments in which characters negotiate with foreign languages, and also the collision of other systems of meaning which might be considered language – filmic language for example, or other complex systems of language, such as those which consist of both word and image, as exemplified by the Sebald texts.

Hypnagogia, the site between sleep and wakefulness, provides a model of liminality which has wide-ranging applications across all of the texts discussed. The term was coined in 1848 by Alfred Maury<sup>37</sup>, and Andreas Mavromatis’ *Hypnagogia*<sup>38</sup> is regarded as the definitive text on the matter, simply because it is the only book-length text. Very little research has been dedicated to hypnagogia, and what has is often regarded circumspectly<sup>39</sup>. Mavromatis describes hypnagogia as:

hallucinatory or quasi-hallucinatory events taking place at the intermediate state between wakefulness and sleep... Similar phenomena occurring at the other end of sleep are called ‘hypnopompic’, that is, coming or leading out of sleep.<sup>40</sup>

However, he does not make a strong distinction between the phenomena, citing Havelock Ellis, who protested that such a differentiation is “pedantic” and “unnecessary”<sup>41</sup>. Mavromatis himself sees no “strong phenomenological [or] physiological criteria for their distinction,”<sup>42</sup> and uses the term “hypnagogia” to refer to both states.

Mavromatis’ (and other practitioners’) study of hypnagogia focuses largely on the hallucinatory content of these stages of consciousness, whereas the thesis is more concerned with the liminal dynamic of the shift in consciousness. The existence of these states suggests an intermediary vantage point from which a deconstruction of the

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<sup>36</sup> Gentzler 2001: 133; Munday 2008: 115.

<sup>37</sup> Maury 1848: 26-40.

<sup>38</sup> Mavromatis 1987.

<sup>39</sup> Jeff Warren describes Mavromatis’ text as, “a frothy combination of rigorous scientific research, trippy illustrations, and high-end speculation.” (Warren 2008: 28-9).

<sup>40</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 3.

<sup>41</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 3; Ellis 1897: 283-7.

<sup>42</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 3.

“absolute” states of wakefulness and sleep may begin. In this binary, wakefulness is ascribed a primacy and the deconstructive approach of the thesis seeks to unsettle this.

The process of hypnagogia ramifies with the process of translation. With reference to Bassnett, hypnagogia may be considered a site of untranslatability. At the threshold of consciousness subjectivity enters a process of translation, from a system of wakefulness regulated by the ego, to a system of sleep and dream. As with the linguistic model, these states are not truly parallel and corruptions occur, manifesting in the hypnagogic phenomena of hallucination.

I am particularly interested in Mavromatis’ suggestion that ego boundaries become loosened in these transitions of consciousness<sup>43</sup>. Laplanche and Pontalis describe the ego as “the defensive pole of the personality [which] brings a set of defensive mechanisms into play,” and “the ‘binding’ factor in the psychical processes.”<sup>44</sup> In wakefulness the ego defends the subject from external factors of otherness which might unsettle the illusion of unity it seeks to uphold. These factors might include the alternative systems of meaning which operate within sleep, or the unconscious, or fantasy. If the ego embraces these factors, as happens at the threshold of consciousness, their influence might effect a dissolution of this unity, leading to a radically mutable subjectivity, which allows access to more than one system of meaning and places the subject in the liminal space – the interface of these systems.

While such a relinquishing implies an emancipation of a kind, being within this state of liminality would not be the equivalent of being able to speak two languages (we are all bilingual in this sense – we are “fluent” in the states of both sleep and wakefulness, though separately) but rather of being in the predicament of attempting to speak, or listen to, two languages concurrently. Such liminal states can become prolonged in conditions such as narcolepsy and sleep paralysis. Sufferers of narcolepsy, as I will discuss in relation to *My Own Private Idaho*, negotiate with this otherness almost perpetually, being at the threshold of sleep and wakefulness much more often than non-sufferers.

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<sup>43</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 12.

<sup>44</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis 1988: 130.

## The influence of Sebald

I applied my initial critical approach – Deleuze and Guattari, Bakhtin, Turner, Augé, translation theory, and hypnagogia – to the Murakami, Gondry, and Van Sant texts, as well as novels and films by Ali Smith<sup>45</sup>, Richard Linklater<sup>46</sup>, Douglas Coupland<sup>47</sup>, Jonathan Coe<sup>48</sup>, Banana Yoshimoto<sup>49</sup>, Richard Kelly<sup>50</sup>, and a play by Kevin Elyot<sup>51</sup>. The result was not without merit but seemed, to my mind, insubstantial – neither cohesive nor compellingly scattershot – and while the conclusions I draw from the research presented here are certainly open-ended, I found in my first approach of these texts very little that satisfied my initial research questions. Firstly, these texts were too numerous and perhaps disparate in way that could not be reconciled. More pertinently, I had not found a way of interrogating these texts which yielded a discussion that I found substantial or worthwhile, or which opened up the texts in a new critical light. My decision to tackle Sebald was one of instinct. I did not believe it would necessarily bear fruit, and I did not, at first, expect to include a reading of his work as a chapter of the thesis. Initially I expected to use him as a “pointer”, as it were, a kind of lens to bring the debate into focus, perhaps giving over a section of my introduction to show how he draws texts together to create something of substance – how he finds the connections and patterns that I thought my own work was missing.

In re-reading *The Rings of Saturn* I found many of my preoccupations reflected back at me. I recognised liminal motifs in the narrator’s accounts of the Suffolk shoreline, tidal surges, and hypnagogic reveries. Moreover, I discovered a new appreciation of his narrative technique. I read on, into *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*<sup>52</sup>, and *Austerlitz*<sup>53</sup>, and I began to consider the texts I had already covered in light of (as I identified it) a form of liminality I had not yet addressed – a production of textual subjectivity through the particular construction of the narrative voice. In *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* the narrator is embedded in the identity of the author, somewhat questionably, and also, as the text progresses, becomes a conduit of multifarious *other* voices. This creates a play of oscillating haecceity and

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<sup>45</sup> *The Accidental* (Smith 2005).

<sup>46</sup> *Waking Life* (Linklater 2001).

<sup>47</sup> *Girlfriend in a Coma* (Coupland 1998).

<sup>48</sup> *The House of Sleep* (Coe 1997).

<sup>49</sup> *Asleep* (Yoshimoto 2000 [1989]).

<sup>50</sup> *Donnie Darko* (Kelly 2001).

<sup>51</sup> *Forty Winks* (Elyot 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Sebald 1996 [1992].

<sup>53</sup> Sebald 2001 [2001].

otherness, which produces a thoroughly unstable subjectivity, both of the narrator as character, and of the text itself.

I was also struck by the tone of both *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* (and for that matter *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*). The narrators of each text are never content or happy, their expeditions never satiated. Inherent to each is a particular anxiety, a seeking to make sense, to find order amidst chaos, alongside the tacit acknowledgement that such a task is impossible. This frustrated desire resonates strongly with liminality; it suggests a being bound within the liminal, never able to complete the task, trapped in perpetual motion on the never-ending bridge. There is also light in this approach in the form of hope, of a kind, in recognising the patterns that emerge from this chaos; that is, that amidst the chaos there is at least the possibility of connection, perhaps with people, and very certainly with literature and history. These novels carry the suggestion that if we cannot have faith in humanity (I believe Sebald would argue that sometimes we can, often we cannot), we can at least have faith in literature.

This observation ramified with certain aspects of the texts, especially *My Own Private Idaho* with its protagonist's fruitless search for his origins, but moreover it struck a chord with my approach to the texts. Thus far my findings, if I could call them that, were chaotic. Latterly I realised that perhaps, to use McHale's economy of poetics, my mode of questioning had been too ontological in its reliance on postmodernist critical strategies. Sebald's approach appeared to offer a return to modernism. This is not to say that his novels are purely modernist but there is a sense that he is wary of postmodernist surfaces, that his mode of questioning is epistemological above ontological. His work is claimed by both modernists and postmodernists alike, and there is an undeniably postmodernist influence to his style. His intertextuality is almost always unreferenced and eludes certain epistemological aspects; as I have stated, his narrator is a conduit of other voices and does not draw the boundaries that formal citation would incur. There is an argument to be made that these voices thus lose an element of original authorial meaning, becoming more a glancing surface, or one of a fast-moving series of surfaces.

In his account of the emergence of postmodernist literature, McHale cites Roman Jakobson's account of the dominant<sup>54</sup>:

within the set of poetic norms valid for a given poetic genre, elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements which were originally the dominant ones become subsidiary and optional.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jakobson 1971: 105-110; cited in McHale 1987: 6-8.

McHale applies Jakobson's thesis to the shift from, as he sees it, an epistemological poetics in modernist texts to an ontological poetics in postmodernist texts, and suggests interrogating texts "with a view to eliciting the shifts in the hierarchy of devices."<sup>56</sup> Therefore we may see a co-existing epistemological poetics and ontological poetics within a single text, but there will be a hierarchy to these, and a greater urgency to the dominant poetics. There is of course the possibility of no dominant, of an irresolvable tension between the epistemological and ontological, recalling McHale's suggestion of each set of poetics "tipping over" into the other<sup>57</sup>, perhaps even a series of such tumbles, or a perpetual to and fro. Ultimately there is such an irresolvable tension in Sebald, and similarly, my uncertain critical orientation owes much to this notion – a never-ending series of tumbles back and forth. I am concerned with the ontological issues addressed in these texts, and I do wish to ask those questions, to engage with those aspects of these texts that bear a postmodernist poetics. But, like the Sebaldian narrator, I wish to find order amidst the chaos. I concede the impossibility of this, but the desire remains nonetheless.

My reading of Sebald became the first chapter of the thesis, and subsequently I began to discard texts from the project. I came to settle on Murakami, Gondry and Van Sant not merely for the ways in which each mirrored Sebald, but for the multifarious ways each engaged with his concept of narrative. In particular I began to question the production of textual subjectivity across the other texts, considering how narrators and protagonists were positioned at the surface of the text as an interface with the reader or viewer, yet were also radically destabilised. The resulting textual subjectivities are diverse, presenting a range of modalities, both universal and particular to each form, though from each I was able to trace a link back to Sebald. Patterns emerged across all four sets of texts, both synergistic and antagonistic, and astoundingly vivid. Often these patterns were, as occurs in Sebald's texts, frighteningly synonymous.

To foreshadow a striking example, I saw the Sebaldian narrator reflected in the protagonist of *My Own Private Idaho*, a character far from the narrator of *Vertigo*, yet nomadic and anxious in much the same way, his narrative a picaresque fever dream, a quest for the unfindable. These quests coincide as each finds himself in Italy, Milan Cathedral and Rome's Piazza del Popolo respectively, waking into a reality and attempting to navigate through a new alien language. Although one character is a middle-aged and (though he

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<sup>55</sup> Jakobson 1971: 108; McHale 1987: 7-8.

<sup>56</sup> McHale 1987: 8.

<sup>57</sup> McHale 1987: 11.

might suggest otherwise) respectable European, and the other a homeless, American youth, the similarity of these scenes, one literary, one filmic, is uncanny.

In closing, I state that these texts are rich with connections and patterns and I am to exploit this in the hope of drawing meaning and substance to my discussion. I emphasise again that my approach is not so much a fair and even balance of contrasting poetics, more an uneasy co-habitation, oscillating and vacillating, sometimes an alliance, sometimes antagonistic. The presence of a dominant poetics varies across the texts, though it is perhaps the uncertainty of such a presence which makes these texts so responsive to such an approach, and which makes such an approach not only necessary but, I hope, invigorating.

## One

**W. G. Sebald**

### *The Rings of Saturn and Vertigo*

*The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* are, ostensibly, novels. Each draws together threads of fiction, memoir and travelogue, and takes a very playful and reflexive approach to the tropes of each genre, resulting in a kind of hybrid – a text which is simultaneously an assemblage of pre-existing genres, and an entirely new genre in itself. These novels employ images as part of the text which, with reference to Barthes’ “reality effect”<sup>58</sup>, present what is at once a definitive record, and something that can be misappropriated or misconstrued. If there is a central idea to be drawn from the Sebaldian project, it is how the attributes at play in the space between truth and fiction conditions this notion of believability. These novels negotiate this space through the construction of a narrative voice which pertains, implicitly, to be the voice of the author. Furthermore, this voice posits an embodiment of itself as a character within the text, a kind of avatar, alienated twofold by the construct of the narrator, and narrator’s use of the past tense to differentiate the narrative voice and that which it recalls. This ambiguous distance between author and narrator is teased via a series of collisions, notably the inclusion in *Vertigo* of facsimiles of Sebald’s identification papers, and biographical detail which in turn confirms and disputes such speculation.

These novels are also of note in that each is a travelogue, and depicts the narrator in configuration with particular landscapes – the Suffolk coast in *The Rings of Saturn*, and Austria, northern Italy, and southern Germany in *Vertigo*. The narrator’s account of the landscape triggers recollections and reveries, of events and figures connected to that landscape (a sea battle off the coast of Suffolk; Casanova in Venice), and sometimes completely unconnected to the landscape, and sometimes partly or perhaps entirely fictional, such as, in *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator’s account of staying with a family in Ireland<sup>59</sup>. Through these recollections and reveries, the narrator encounters an otherness,

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<sup>58</sup> See “The Reality Effect” in *The Rustle of Language*, (Barthes 1989: 141-148).

<sup>59</sup> TROS: 209-222.



exemplified in the voices with which he interacts, the historical detail he presents, and the images placed alongside the narrative account. All of these things lie outside of and beyond the subjectivity of the narrator as we, the reader, come to understand it, yet each lies within the text, and the liminal space between the narrator and otherness comes to unsettle the textual subjectivity. Noam Elcott comments that, “Sebald does not tell stories so much as retell, augment, comment, and, most of all, collect them,”<sup>60</sup> and this notion of collection is key. The narrator insinuates himself into these stories, collapsing the space between himself and the other to draw stories (and images, and objects) toward him.

Alongside these destabilisations, each novel presents an aggregated theme of liminal images and motifs. In *The Rings of Saturn* the image of the shoreline is almost always present; the narrator’s journey takes him along the coast, and only occasionally does he stray inland. The image of metamorphosis is key also, with repeated references to Kafka and Gregor Samsa, and an extended meditation on the cultivation of silk worms and their chrysalis state. The title of *Vertigo* reflects its narrator’s recurrent condition – a fear of falling, of tipping into something unknown, a dizziness and disorientation which emerges from encounters with or fear of the other. These themes, in conjunction with the radically unstable condition of the text, present rich ground for discussion of liminal subjectivities.

### **The texts**

Both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* are travelogues, fictional or otherwise. Each narrative gives an account of the narrator, his interactions with the environment he passes through, his thoughts, and his state of mind. Alongside this, the text offers a document of the journey or journeys in the form of images – photographs, facsimiles, newspaper clippings, and so on.

*The Rings of Saturn* documents the narrator’s walking tour of the Suffolk coast in August 1992, beginning with an account of his immobility and hospitalisation a year later, which he believes was brought on by the journey and, “the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place.”<sup>61</sup> Over the course of the narrative the narrator recounts his journey, and diverts into subject matter, historical and

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<sup>60</sup> Elcott 2004: 203.

<sup>61</sup> TROS: 3.

personal, as he sees fit, often precipitated by the landscape or by a specific event. Most of this subject matter refers to death, destruction, and the decline of civilisation. The narrator holds much of humanity in contempt, including often himself, and at times his despair becomes palpable and overwhelms both him and the narrative.

Recalling a sandstorm, the narrator notes how the wind blows “dust across the arid land in sinister spirals,” bestowing a malign agency upon the elements, and describes the storm’s encroaching darkness as “like a noose being tightened.”<sup>62</sup> “Even in my immediate vicinity,” he writes, “I could soon not distinguish any line or shape at all.” This episode is one of only a few which see the narrator engaging with his present moment and nothing else and, as with other such moments, it gives form to a sense of despair and disorientation. It offers an acute metaphor for the textual affect – of being overwhelmed, choked even. “I walked the rest of the way in a daze,” the narrator says<sup>63</sup> and the reader too is left with a sense of being dazed, and a fear of other sudden imminent destructions.

*Vertigo* consists of four stories or chapters, two of which offer accounts of episodes in the lives of, respectively, Stendhal and Kafka, and two of which feature a typically Sebaldian narrator, who may or may not represent a consistent narrative subjectivity across all four stories. The first and third stories (*Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet*; *Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva*) feature no narrating “I” (the former features a “we”) but the poetics of the text are interchangeable with the second and fourth stories (the effect of Michael Hulse’s translation should be noted here<sup>64</sup>). There is a definite correlation between the narrator of the second story (*All’estero*) and fourth story (*Il ritorno in patria*); the second concludes with the narrator in Verona in the summer of 1987; the fourth begins, “In November 1987, after spending the last weeks of the summer in Verona.”<sup>65</sup> *All’estero* gives an account of the narrator’s 1980 trip to Vienna, Venice, and Verona, and a 1987 repeat trip which also takes in Milan and Riva, while *Il ritorno in patria* is an account of the narrator’s visit to his home town, referred to as “W.”

There is not so much an accumulation of horror in *Vertigo* as in *The Rings of Saturn*, rather a recurrence of anxiety and paranoia – the vertigo of the English title. In *All’estero* the narrator often becomes confused and disorientated, paranoid that he is to be the victim of serial killers, or thought a paedophile, and more than once believes he sees historical

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<sup>62</sup> TROS: 229.

<sup>63</sup> TROS: 229.

<sup>64</sup> I will discuss further the ramifications of Hulse’s translation process below.

<sup>65</sup> V: 171.

figures in the present day (in Vienna he gives chase to Dante; Elizabeth of Bohemia joins his train at Heidelberg<sup>66</sup>). In Venice, considering the imprisonment of Casanova, he feels as trapped as his subject; in Milan he suffers a panic attack while visiting the cathedral which leaves him bewildered and unable to remember where he is, or even if he is still alive. He struggles with bouts of insomnia, and in one instance in Verona, suffers an experience akin to narcoleptic hallucination. In addition to this, issues of identity are further teased and confused; he checks into hotels under assumed names, and at one point he loses his identity as a hotel clerk mistakenly gives his passport to another departing guest.

Both novels are journeys, continuous or fragmented, and the journey-as-narrative form presents a familiar literary trope. The cinematic equivalent, the road movie, is well defined, but the literary travelogue lacks such distinct generic boundaries, despite such founding texts as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. It might be considered related to the bildungsroman in that the narrative usually affects a shift in the protagonist leading to a development of sense of self; the journey sees an ongoing engagement with otherness which necessitates change. The Sebaldian narrator exceeds this notion of change and counters any kind of development; travel becomes trauma, as over the course of the journey the narrator experiences what is perceived as a violent threat to the self, in the form of the former novel's despair and the latter's disorientation. However, there is never a sense that he would feel safer, or more himself, were he at home. In *The Rings of Saturn* home is a site under threat and damaged by a great storm<sup>67</sup>. In *Vertigo*, the narrator's current home is not referred to; his visit to his hometown offers no sense of home but instead provides an uncanny sense of separation, and a wish to be beyond the notion of territory.

### **Textual subjectivities and liminal motifs**

As specified in the Introduction, each chapter is delineated into sections headed *Textual subjectivities* and *Liminal motifs*. The former section is approached in differing and interconnecting ways according to each set of texts, so as to consider how modalities of subjectivity manifest in particular filmic and literary devices, while the latter discusses how the inherent liminality in these devices finds form in particular intensities, embodiments and aggregations within the narrative.

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<sup>66</sup> V: 254.

<sup>67</sup> TROS: 265-268.

In Sebald, the discussion of textual subjectivities begins with the fact of translation; the texts I discuss are Hulse's English translations of Sebald's German "originals". I discuss how the process of translation installs a new or additional textual subjectivity; the narrative content may be that of the author but the syntax and diction of the English text are constructed by Hulse. I discuss how the use of images within the text also impacts upon textual subjectivity, primarily in its deployment of a reality effect which collapses and problematises the distance between memoir and fiction. The most prominent example of the collapsed space is that between the author and narrator, though a comparative secondary space also exists between the narrating voice and the character of the narrator. Further narrative space is opened up (and collapsed) as other voices enter text; here, no clear differentiation is made between the voice of the narrator and the new voice; the narrative "I" remains present and the reader infers from context alone that the speaker has changed. This seems to imply that the narrative voice is, to a degree, permeable and able to negotiate and assimilate other voices. It also presents an illusion of polyphony, though ultimately, it would seem, a tonal homogeneity takes hold as the narrator (or author? or translator?) asserts a mastery over the text.

The liminal motifs presented in Sebald are delineated here into categories of the hypnagogic/vertiginous, and the nomad/extraterritorial. The former is represented by certain engagements with the liminal which manifest in the narrator either physically or in terms of consciousness. These include straightforward evocations of hypnagogia, the intersection of hypnagogia and language perception, and the notion of a continuum of sleep and wakefulness upon which the hypnagogic is merely one position. Vertigo manifests through both physical and existential sensations; in each case the sensation posits an imaginary threshold, a tipping point, perhaps between balancing and falling, waking and sleeping, or life and death. The negotiation of this threshold also ramifies with a sense of the subject being able to position itself (or not) in relation to the threshold at a given moment; that is, if the narrator is able to perceive and convey where or who he is, or if he is not.

The Deleuzoguattarian concepts of the nomad and the extraterritorial are embodied in very literal and physical terms in the Sebald texts. The narrator is a nomadic presence, always in motion, though often fails to categorise himself as such, preferring to denote those he encounters as nomadic, thus attempting to other the concept (this is ironic given that these nomads are most often encountered in stasis by a narrator in motion). As

prefaced, the extraterritorial is embodied in the image of the shoreline, omnipresent in *The Rings of Saturn*, and alluded to in discussion of Venice in *Vertigo*. This image may be viewed as an archetype of liminality; it is perpetually shifting, always indefinable – the epitome (if such a thing is possible) of liminal space.

### Critical work on Sebald

In the few years since his death in 2001, Sebald's work has become the focus of much critical discussion. Given the narrative content of his other novels, *The Emigrants*<sup>68</sup> and *Austerlitz*<sup>69</sup>, it is unsurprising that this discussion is often within a discourse around what is reductively termed "Holocaust literature". However, discussion of his work is diverse and invigorating. It is often considered within the framework of history and in particular the Second World War, including but not limited to the Holocaust. For instance, the final section of *Vertigo* recalls the post-war years in Germany, and this is reflected in critical work on the novel.

In English language criticism, Mark McCulloh's rich and comprehensive monograph *Understanding Sebald*<sup>70</sup> remains the only book-length critical work on Sebald by a single author. Alongside this, there are several volumes of essays on Sebald, notably J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead's *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*<sup>71</sup>, Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh's *W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*<sup>72</sup>, and Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long's *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*<sup>73</sup>. In addition, Sebald's work is widely discussed in periodicals spanning discourses of literature, critical theory, history, psychoanalysis, and German Studies (the Summer 2004 issue of *The Germanic Review* is given over entirely to discussion of Sebald's work<sup>74</sup>). The critical work I draw on here is from a cross-section of these texts; in particular, I owe a debt to the critical work of John Beck, John Domini, Noam Elcott, Anne Fuchs, Richard Gray, Christopher Gregory-Guider, Russell Kilbourn, Massimo Leone, Mark McCulloh, Ann Pearson, Todd Samuel Presner, Bianca Theisen, and John Zilcosky.

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<sup>68</sup> Sebald 1996 [1992].

<sup>69</sup> Sebald 2001 [2001].

<sup>70</sup> McCulloh 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Long and Whitehead 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Denham and McCulloh 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Fuchs and Long 2007.

<sup>74</sup> *The Germanic Review*, Summer 2004; 79.3.

### **Textual subjectivities**

This section focuses on the surface of the text to consider a succession of divisions between haecceity and otherness, and the liminal space between each – between the German and English languages, between word and image, the author and the narrator, and in the management of other subjectivities within the text.

### **Translation**

The first factor to consider is that of translation. *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* are translated texts. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn* and *Schwindel. Gefühle* become *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* through the intervention of Hulse's translation. A very definite space exists between the German and English texts. The former texts may lay claim to being the "original" and the translation presents a supplement which unsettles the primacy of the source. The aesthetics of the original are of Sebald's construction, whereas the aesthetics of the translation are of Hulse; whether or not he approximates the style of Sebald's German prose, the style manifest in the English translation is Hulse's own.

As I will come to discuss, Sebald has installed in these texts a polyphonic narrative subjectivity (or an approximation of) with a collection of voices from history, literature, and characters of the author's invention, albeit a collection rendered with a certain homogeneity of register. These voices become one and equal with that of the narrator; however, it may be argued that the voice of the translator takes precedence. This voice may be seen as a kind of moderating presence, a central stake in this group subjectivity. Hulse is an interloper, yet he becomes the nominal centre of this subjectivity. It may be that the homogeneity is a construct of Hulse, or it may be that Hulse has purposefully constructed a homogeneity he identifies in Sebald's German text.

Ultimately, the subjectivity manifest in *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* is other to that in *Die Ringe des Saturn* and *Schwindel. Gefühle*. Susan Bassnett's argument that personal experience is unique and so, in essence, untranslatable<sup>75</sup>, lends weight to the argument that it is Hulse we hear, through the sheer fact that it is impossible to hear Sebald. Hulse's translation imposes a radical dislocation from the narrator's subjectivity as manifest in the German source, which in turn suggests a new meaning and subjectivity is constructed in

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<sup>75</sup> Bassnett 1991: 36.

the English text. Noam Elcott suggests this is a key facet of Sebald's appeal to an English readership, suggesting he is, "nurtured by the lingual abyss called translation."<sup>76</sup>

Elcott notes how the German originals feature passages of English text (sometimes very brief, with abrupt transitions between German and English), which present a harsh juxtaposition of languages and serve to heighten the ramifications of differences between them. A prominent example is the narrator's quotation of Michael Hamburger's account of his family's exile from Germany and their arrival at Dover in November 1933<sup>77</sup>. Amongst the German text in *Die Ringe des Saturn* is the English sentence, "How little there has remained in me of my native country,"<sup>78</sup> which suggests a fissure of translation much deeper and more violent; as Elcott writes, "The violence of exile is inflicted on the tongue."<sup>79</sup> Elcott comments that Hulse's reproduction of these passages is "naive," in that it "steamrolls over the jagged text," and "flattens" the swings between German and English in Sebald's text. He suggests that, "[t]hese silent harmonies rob the English reader of Sebald's most daring linguistic device."<sup>80</sup>

## Word and image

Elcott cites Sebald's use of images as a crucial component of the textual surface, suggesting that Sebald, "lives in the contradictory and overlapping spaces between text and image."<sup>81</sup> This notion of contradictory and overlapping space is a direct evocation of the liminal, and the particular relationship between word and image in these texts contributes to the destabilisation of narrative subjectivity, especially in the reader's approach to the text as either fiction or memoir. The inclusion of images is a constant across the German, English and all other translations of Sebald's work. These include reproductions of paintings, drawings, facsimiles, etchings, newspaper cuttings, print advertisements, photographs of statues, landscapes, buildings, people (though not often – a photograph of the poet Ernst

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<sup>76</sup> Elcott 2004: 204. Elcott also comments that, "Hulse's widely lauded translations elegantly transpose the poetry of Sebald's prose," suggesting that the textual effect evident in Hulse's translations is in fact present in Sebald's German text (Elcott 2004: 206).

<sup>77</sup> TROS: 176.

<sup>78</sup> Sebald 1995: 220-221.

<sup>79</sup> Elcott 2004: 208.

<sup>80</sup> Elcott 2004: 207.

<sup>81</sup> Elcott 2004: 204.

Herbeck crops out his face, and each of the two texts contains a single picture of the author, one of which, in *Vertigo*<sup>82</sup>, is partially obscured).

The images included as part of the text approximate a document of reality, a record of something beyond the text itself, which serves to create a reality effect, as described by Barthes<sup>83</sup>. The content of the images corresponds to the content of the adjacent written content, and presents a document, a record of presence, as if to illustrate and purposefully convince the reader of particular narrative points. As such, these images are open to being both misappropriated by the author and misconstrued by the reader. Citing Barthes, Todd Samuel Presner describes how Flaubert and Michelet, “deployed certain narrative strategies to achieve a level of “aesthetic verisimilitude” in their descriptions of real events, objects, and people.”<sup>84</sup> Presner notes how Sebald similarly deploys textual strategies to achieve such a verisimilitude, his key strategy being the use of image.

### **Author/narrator**

The central ambiguity in Sebald’s deployment of the reality effect is the relationship between the identities of the author and the narrator. Critics such as Mark McCulloh, J. J. Long, and Anne Fuchs<sup>85</sup> are notably careful in making a distinction between author and narrator; McCulloh states that the narrator of *Vertigo* is, “ostensibly fictional”<sup>86</sup>. The reader of *Vertigo* receives contradictory information which at once serves to conflate and separate the narrator and author; the inclusion of photographs of the author is the most prominent factor of this ambiguity. Page 102 carries a reproduction of the narrator’s identification papers – mentioned adjacently in the text – which bear the name “Sebald”, and page 114 features a reproduction of the narrator’s temporary passport, which bears Sebald’s signature and a photograph of the author. The inclusion of these reproductions leads the reader to equate the narrator with Sebald the author, who is ostensibly non-fictional. Bianca Theisen comments that:

In *Vertigo*, the autobiographical narrator provides the times and places of his travel in northern Italy and recounts a visit to his native W. (Wertach), highlighting the apparent

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<sup>82</sup> V: 114.

<sup>83</sup> Barthes 1989.

<sup>84</sup> Presner 2004: 346.

<sup>85</sup> McCulloh 2003; Fuchs and Long 2007.

<sup>86</sup> McCulloh 2003: 85.



authenticity of his account with photographs, souvenirs such as entrance tickets or restaurant bills, and reproductions of artworks studied at tourist sites such as Verona and Padua. The acute reality effect of Sebald's prose meets the generic characteristics of the travelogue, whose narrator coincides with the traveling protagonist and who, giving the genre its autobiographical twist, corresponds to the author.<sup>87</sup>

It may be argued that in both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*, Sebald's first person narrator functions as a kind of avatar<sup>88</sup>, a temporary and textually bound embodiment of the author. Whether considered novels, memoirs, or travelogues, there is no reason why these texts should preclude the appearance of fictional characters, nor of a representation of Sebald himself. The unnamed narrators bear close resemblance to the author; they are men of Sebald's age and, in *The Rings of Saturn* the narrator is a German émigré academic living in Norfolk as Sebald was at that time. However, any such definitive statement is deftly sidestepped, and the author and narrator must be considered as separate entities, though not necessarily discrete. Yet the identification *is* courted, and thus the reader is asked to consider the liminal space between author and narrator, and the thresholds of each. What occurs would appear to be a becoming-other of author and narrator.

However, other information imparted by the narrator contradicts this assumption. The second section of the book, *All'estro*, begins as follows:

In October 1980 I travelled from England, where I had then been living for nearly twenty-five years...<sup>89</sup>

This suggests that the narrator had been living in England since 1955 or 1956. The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* states that he moved to England in 1966<sup>90</sup>, a claim reflected in official accounts of Sebald's biography<sup>91</sup>. Thus the biographical discrepancy affected in *Vertigo* posits its narrator as other to Sebald the author.

Similarly the first section of *Vertigo* features discrepancies regarding the biography of Marie Henri Beyle. The narrator never refers to Beyle as Stendhal, and focuses on Beyle's life as opposed to his writing, so that the literary figure of Stendhal is rendered

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<sup>87</sup>Theisen 2004: 164.

<sup>88</sup> Russell Kilbourn uses this term in discussion of the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*: "an avatar of a post-modern(ist) subjectivity," (Kilbourn 2007: 139).

<sup>89</sup> V: 33.

<sup>90</sup> TROS: 185.

<sup>91</sup> Sebald's biography on his publisher's website <<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/authors/279020/w-g-sebald/>>. Accessed 10 August 2010.

invisible. This has the effect of demarcating the subject of the narrator's story from the literary figure of Stendhal, a separation which is heightened in another temporal discrepancy regarding Beyle's age and date of birth:

And so now, in 1826, approaching forty, he sat alone on a bench in the shade of two fine trees...<sup>92</sup>

The speculative nature of this description marks it as clearly fictional, which makes the discrepancy seem all the more deliberate. Beyle was born in 1783<sup>93</sup>, and so was forty-two or forty-three years old at this time. The fictionalised Beyle is set apart from the biography of his real life counterpart, and there comes to exist a multitude of Beyles – the real life figure, his literary avatar Stendhal, and Sebald's Beyle. As the contemporary reader has no access to the "original", his or her conception of Beyle is via textual representation alone. Thus the figure of Beyle, distinct in these separate entities, becomes a composite of multiple conflicting representations.

Ann Pearson suggests that even the photograph of Sebald on his identification papers is intended to obscure rather than confirm an identity. The image bears a vertical black line through the subject's face, a "cancelation mark," which suggests a "kind of negation."<sup>94</sup> It suggests that, even if the identification papers show Sebald as the reader recognises him, the author may simply be constructing a character from these fragments of identity, the use of actual identification papers underscoring the reflexivity of this approach. The author draws fragments of identity not just from his own life. Pearson reminds us that next the narrator:

almost immediately signs himself into another hotel under the name of the long dead and somewhat dubious Austrian historian Jakob Phillip Fallmerayer [which] suggests we cannot make a straightforward identification of narrator and author.<sup>95</sup>

That the narrator uses Fallmerayer's name to check in to the hotel suggests that, just as the narrator could be Sebald, so could he be Fallmerayer. Identity is impossible to definitively locate. There is no rule that may debar Fallmerayer's appearance in the novel, or even the idea that Fallmerayer himself, having time-travelled to late-twentieth century Milan, is the

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<sup>92</sup> V: 26.

<sup>93</sup> Keates 1994.

<sup>94</sup> Pearson 2008: 267.

<sup>95</sup> Pearson 2008: 267.

narrator. It is certainly a far-fetched idea, unprecedented within the strictures the novel sets itself or tropes as evidenced in Sebald's work as a whole, but given the text is ostensibly a work of fiction, it is not impossible. Indeed, the idea of Fallmerayer travelling around late-twentieth century Europe, passing himself off as a man who may or may not be W. G. Sebald is rather appealing.

### **The narrator and the narrated**

This discussion underscores a more salient fact – the two entities of narrator and narrative subject can never be one. The notion of the “Sebaldian narrator” or “Sebaldian subject” manifests again and again in discussion of Sebald's particular narrative style – the investment and obfuscation of the author in the narrator, and the narrator's relationship with his particular landscapes and micro-narratives.

Richard Gray suggests that the saturnine narrator maintains a centrality to his narrative, and that:

like the rings of Saturn, these narrative rings move in a coordinated orbit around a single regulative center. In the case of Sebald's text, this center is the first-person narrator himself, who serves, like the planet Saturn, as the gravitational anchor that directs and choreographs the synchronized motion of the various narrative rings.<sup>96</sup>

This image cements the notion of the author as a Prospero-like conjurer, utterly in control of the storm around him, whole and stable, and absolutely impervious to its destabilising effects. Conversely, Russell Kilbourn suggests that the narrator lacks such a singularity and is dependent upon the landscape for self-definition. He identifies the Sebaldian subject as:

an extension of a post-Enlightenment and specifically modernist subjectivity, defined by its lack of self-presence, its non-coincidence with itself, and the consequent lack of coherent or authentic identity... [and] an avatar of a post-modern(ist) subjectivity... a subject that seeks to represent itself (or be represented) via radically ‘unpeopled’ settings.<sup>97</sup>

Of note here is the similarity between what Kilbourn identifies as the “unpeopled” landscapes through which the narrator wanders, and the notion of the dreamscape. Both

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<sup>96</sup> Gray 2009: 28

<sup>97</sup> Kilbourn 2007: 139.

are constructed entirely by the subject, the former as a conscious act of representation on the part of the writer, and the latter in an act of unconscious representation. In both, the narrated subject is objectified and becomes a kind of dream-object, something recollected and perhaps fantastical, a notion reminiscent of Humbert Humbert's exhortation to the reader, "Imagine me. I shall not exist if you do not imagine me."<sup>98</sup>

These texts are a very explicit illustration of Lacanian subjectivity<sup>99</sup>. In *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* no attempt is made to conceal the differentiation of the I that speaks from the I that is represented; the subject is forever divided by the space between the act of representation and the representation itself. A straightforward example of this is presented as the narrator of *Vertigo* first describes the novel's titular sensation. Walking aimlessly in Vienna he believes he sees Dante, "banished from his home town on pain of being burned at the stake":

When I walked faster in order to catch him up he went down Henrichsgasse, but when I reached the corner he was nowhere to be seen. After one or two turns of this kind I began to sense in me a vague apprehension, which manifested itself as a sense of vertigo.<sup>100</sup>

This sense of vertigo comes to characterise Sebald's novel; here it is the manner in which the narrator first experiences the sensation that is of note. "I began to sense in me," presents a division of subjectivity, a distinction between the represented "I" and the represented "me" which is subject to "vague apprehension".

This is exemplified in *Vertigo* with the narrator's account of Beyle's diagram of a battle scene<sup>101</sup>, in which Beyle identifies himself with the marker, "H". In constructing the diagram, Beyle fabricates an objective point of view. The narrator remarks:

of course, when Beyle was in actual fact standing at that spot he will not have been viewing the scene in this precise way, for in reality, as we know, everything is always quite different.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Nabokov 1959: 129.

<sup>99</sup> See Lacan 1977: 1-8. The division of the Lacanian subject begins when the infant sees its mirror image and learns to differentiate this image from itself. This division becomes irrevocable when the subject enters the order of the Symbolic, that is, when he or she acquires language. At this point the subject learns the word, "I", with which he refers to himself. However, this "I" merely represents him, and therefore he is divided between the voice that speaks and the "I" that is represented in the act of speech.

<sup>100</sup> V: 35.

<sup>101</sup> V: 6.

<sup>102</sup> V: 6-7.

This phrase, “everything is always quite different,” especially when prefaced so dryly with, “as we know,” serves to include the reader in the joke that, throughout *Vertigo* and indeed most of Sebald’s prose work, the diegesis is radically dislocated from the reality it represents – the joke being that “true” or “accurate” representation is impossible. Just as Beyle’s representation of himself within the diagram is impossible because he could not hold a point of view which includes himself, the narrator’s representation of himself within the text is a dislocation of “reality”; his narrative cannot replicate the “real” world so why should it even attempt to? Coming as it does in the first few pages of his first novel, “everything is always quite different,” reads – in retrospect – as a kind of mission statement for the hybrid literary genre Sebald goes on to forge.

Kilbourn observes that *The Rings of Saturn*, “typifies Sebald’s peculiar conflation of narrated and narrating object,”<sup>103</sup> and it is this particular configuration that discussion of Sebald’s work returns to. In describing the Sebaldian subject as, “an avatar of a post-modern(ist) subjectivity,”<sup>104</sup> he hits upon the fact that this embodiment of the narrator has particular boundaries. The represented narrator might indeed be viewed as a vessel into which the narrator attempts to invest himself from the present, an embodiment (from the immobility of his hospital room, as noted below) of his active mind. The expediency of the notion of the avatar is also apropos in that both the walking tour of Suffolk and the book itself are not of indefinite length. Each is within fixed bounds and the avatar of the narrated subject need not exceed these bounds.

Kilbourn notes that these temporal bounds are made explicit in the novel’s opening chapter:

a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages... Now that I begin to assemble my notes, more than a year after my discharge from hospital...”<sup>105</sup>

Kilbourn comments that, “the narrator-writer self-consciously recollects,” his hospitalisation<sup>106</sup>, drawing attention to the fact that the written word on the page is

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<sup>103</sup> Kilbourn 2007: 155.

<sup>104</sup> Kilbourn 2007: 139.

<sup>105</sup> TROS: 3-5.

<sup>106</sup> Kilbourn 2007: 155.

assembled from notes drawn from the narrator's thoughts of a year earlier, which in turn were of events a year before that. Gray comments that:

Autobiography by its very nature is structured around a dual temporality, the presence of the narrating self and the past of its narrated persona and experiences. Especially in its early chapters, *The Rings of Saturn* highlights this temporal dichotomy by stressing the disparity between the situation of the narrating I—confined to his bed in a hospital room in part as a physical and emotional consequence of his recounted journey—and the retelling of his experiences, encounters, and thoughts during the pilgrimage along the Suffolk coast . . . This temporal discrepancy is further accentuated by the narrator's proclivity to call attention to the acts of memory through which he accesses these former experiences, marked by his employment of self-reflexive phrases such as "I can remember precisely," . . . "I still recall." . . . or "I remember."<sup>107</sup>

This recollection specifies the division of narrator and narrated; the narrator narrates from a point in the future, and the narrative is rendered in the past tense, thus the figure of the narrator always exists concurrently at two points in time, at the moment of the events recalled and at the moment of writing, a dichotomy which creates a further – and irreconcilable – difference between narrating subject and narrated object.

Bianca Theisen also reminds us that the process of recollection necessitates a degree of fictionalisation in that it relies on a "spurious memory," and requires reconstruction into a "coherent narrative"<sup>108</sup>. She argues that this process attempts to "dissimulate the doubling of past and present, the narrated and narrating persona, the factual and the fictional."<sup>109</sup> In this sense, the necessity of a degree of fictionalisation in memoir works as obfuscation for a potentially much greater degree of fictionalisation; Sebald exploits the already self-evident space between facticity and fictionality, opening the chasm further in the knowledge that all that occurs within this space is obfuscated. We accept that a fraction of the narrative is fictional, but we can never know the quantity of that fraction.

McCulloh uses the example of light to illustrate (or illuminate), comparing this particular quality of Sebald's narratives with that which is, "not... *either* a particle or a *wave* but... having the properties of *both*,"<sup>110</sup> suggesting that the concepts of both subject and object are destabilised; the narrator himself may be rendered an object, and the objects with which he negotiates may assume a subjectivity. Such a conflation is deconstructive; it

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<sup>107</sup> Gray 2009: 31-32

<sup>108</sup> Theisen 2004: 164.

<sup>109</sup> Theisen 2004: 164.

<sup>110</sup> McCulloh 2003: 21.

dissolves the hierarchy that regulates subject and object. In *The Rings of Saturn*, as throughout Sebald's work, these categories cannot be placed in order or competition, but merely coexist, intersecting and metamorphosing, always becoming-other.

## Polyphony

Our pilgrim lets others do the talking, often.  
John Domini<sup>111</sup>

The presence of voices in the text other to that of the narrator has already been noted. These "voices" include intertextual citations and the voices of the people the narrator encounters. It is these latter voices that unsettle the subjectivity of the text most stealthily. John Domini suggests that Sebald:

repeatedly [abandons] personal detail for appropriated passages from older texts, as well as fragments from the correspondence and biographies of those that wrote them (a heteroglossia, that is, of multiple voices and effects).<sup>112</sup>

In such passages, the narrative voice remains constant; there are no quotation marks, paragraph breaks, or typographical shifts to assist in identifying particular voices. The surface of the text remains level, even when we suspect the narrating I is not the narrator we think we know.

In *Vertigo* the narrating voice briefly becomes that of the narrator's friend Salvatore Altamura<sup>113</sup>, and at other points the text is infused with unreferenced citations from the writings of the narrator's subjects (Stendhal, Herbeck, Casanova). This device is developed and deployed more extensively in *The Rings of Saturn*, where myriad voices are invited into the text to address the reader directly. Here the narrative I becomes the voice of the writers Michael Hamburger, Joseph Conrad, and François-René de Chateaubriand, the narrator's late friend Frederick Farrar, his hosts Mrs Ashbury and Thomas Abrams, and William Hazel, a gardener the narrator encounters at Somerleyton Hall. Each voice enters the text and supersedes the narrator to address the reader in the first person.

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<sup>111</sup> Domini 2005: 99.

<sup>112</sup> Domini 2005: 97.

<sup>113</sup> V: 129-132.

Furthermore, “the appropriated passages from older texts,” are not always readily apparent. The narrator quotes directly and at length from Conrad<sup>114</sup>, though does not cite a specific source and the reader is left unclear where exactly this quotation begins or ends, or indeed if there are multiple quotations. In other instances the narrative I becomes subsumed in an even subtler fashion, in moments when the narrator appropriates exterior texts as befits his present environment or preoccupation. Lost on Dunwich Heath<sup>115</sup>, he appropriates and reconfigures Edgar’s speech from Act Four, Scene Six of *King Lear*<sup>116</sup>:

EDGAR: Come on, sir, here’s the place. Stand still: how fearful  
And dizzy ‘tis to cast one’s eyes so low.  
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air  
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down  
Hangs one that gathers sapphire, dreadful trade;  
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.  
The fishermen that walk upon the beach  
Appear like mice, and yon tall anchoring barque  
Diminished to her cock, her cock a buoy  
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge  
That on th’ numbered idle pebbles chafes,  
Cannot be heard so high. <sup>117</sup>

Although in my dream I was sitting transfixed with amazement in the Chinese pavilion, I was at the same time out in the open, within a foot of the very edge, and knew how fearful it is to cast one’s eye so low. The crows and choughs that winged the midway air were scarce the size of beetles; the fishermen that walked upon the beach appeared like mice; and the murmuring surge that chafed the countless pebbles could not be heard so high. Immediately below the cliff, on a black heap of earth, were the shattered ruins of a house.<sup>118</sup>

This intertextuality, again without citation, is doubly playful, as the Lear speech is delivered by Edgar while he is disguised as Poor Tom. The approximation of a speech from a (famously) undecidable and multifarious subjectivity layers further pluralities onto the novel’s narrative subjectivity.

This also disrupts the stability of the text in other senses; it unsettles Sebald’s status as “author”, and it unsettles the reader’s position to the text, depending on whether he or she acknowledges the game Sebald is playing. Pearson asks:

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<sup>114</sup> TROS: 104.

<sup>115</sup> TROS: 174.

<sup>116</sup> *King Lear* 4.6.11-22; cited in Thiesen 2006: 569; Pearson 2008: 264.

<sup>117</sup> Foakes 1997: 327-328.

<sup>118</sup> TROS: 174.



if the line between intertextuality and plagiarism does not become dangerously blurred, since without the reader's nod of recognition the borrowed words pass as the author's own.<sup>119</sup>

I might assume that for many readers, myself included, Sebald's intertextuality is never fully grasped, and even that it may very well be impossible to give a full account of the intertextuality at play in *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*; without knowing the full breadth of Sebald's reading, it is impossible to know just to what degree intertextuality operates in these novels. This rather satisfyingly fulfils the criteria of the lacuna outlined in the introduction – the cannot-be-known, the anti-definitive – while also underscoring the notion of a limitless, unaccountable intersubjectivity.

These devices – other voices assuming the first person, the direct citation of other texts, and the unreferenced use of Shakespeare – recall the “plurality of consciousnesses” that exists in Bakhtin's polyphonic novel<sup>120</sup>. Here, these consciousnesses are greatly varied and come in many forms; each constitutes a micro-narrative which supplements and complements the voice of the narrator, and together they form a substantial portion of the text overall. However, these consciousnesses do not so much offer contrasting viewpoints as offshoots from the narrator's own thoughts; he engages with the otherness of these voices with great sensitivity, yet employs each predominantly to support his storytelling agenda (there is a sense of a narrator determined to be persuasive, hiding beneath a veneer of passivity).

With this in mind, I might dispute that *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* are truly polyphonic texts. James Zappen, in his summary of Bakhtin's position, argues that, “The author of the polyphonic novel, the characters, and the reader participate as equals in the creation of this truth.”<sup>121</sup> Zappen continues:

The characters participate in this ongoing dialogue not as objects of the author's consciousness but as “free people, capable of standing *alongside*,” agreeing or disagreeing with, even rebelling against, their creator.<sup>122</sup>

The Sebaldian narrator might be considered the inverse of this. Whereas Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky a polyphony of viewpoints manifest in multiple distinct and conflicting

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<sup>119</sup> Pearson 2008: 261-262

<sup>120</sup> Bakhtin 1984a: 81.

<sup>121</sup> Zappen 2000: 12.

<sup>122</sup> Bakhtin 1984a: 6; Zappen 2000: 12.

voices<sup>123</sup>, Sebald's narrating I presents multiple indistinct voices, coalesced toward a singular viewpoint.

In *The Rings of Saturn* (and *Vertigo*, to a lesser degree), there is not so much an open dialogue between voices as there is an afferent force drawing these voices toward that of the narrator, or rather, in line with that of the narrator. This would position Sebald closer to what Zappen identifies as, "traditional disciplines . . . [which] emphasize the centripetal forces that centralize and unify a language," in contrast to Bakhtin's assertion that polyphony is structured upon, "the centrifugal forces that decentralize and disunify."<sup>124</sup> This poses a question of whether the author engages with and creates a dialogue with these other voices, or merely draws upon them, as in citation. Do these voices contain dissent to any degree, or are they passive, and submissive to the author's or narrator's intent? Does the narrator seek to assemble a discursive collage of voices from which a collective truth may emerge, or does he manipulate these other voices to strengthen his own singular argument?

Bakhtin's theory of carnival is also useful in considering how these voices operate. These voices, of differing orders and registers, are brought together in the space of the text. In joining the collectivity of the text, each voice abandons its singularity and becomes part of a greater whole<sup>125</sup>. This ramifies with McCulloh's assertion that, "Sebald is interested in whether identity is somehow fluid, something that can be shared."<sup>126</sup> For instance, the voices which enter the text of *The Rings of Saturn* are fittingly from different orders, social classes, discourses, even eras. An equality is imposed; as stated, there are no quotation marks or paragraph breaks to assist in identifying the voice, a lack of formal differentiation of voices which resonates strongly with the carnivalesque. Furthermore, there are no notable shifts in register, diction or tone; each voice is rendered analogous with that of the narrator, presenting a semblance which is unexpected given the diverse background of the sources. One would not expect William Hazel to speak in the same register as Chateaubriand, just as one would not expect Michael Hamburger to speak as Conrad. Many voices are allowed to speak yet ultimately they all sound alike.

This leads to a question of whether a carnivalesque economy allows voices to remain distinct, equal but different, or whether it dissolves all difference absolutely. The

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<sup>123</sup> Bakhtin 1984a.

<sup>124</sup> Zappen 2000: 13.

<sup>125</sup> Bakhtin 1984b: 255.

<sup>126</sup> McCulloh 2003: 73.

homogenising effect of the narrative voice is certainly an equaliser, yet the homogeneity to which these voices are reduced becomes embodied in a subjectivity which is at all times in the possession of the narrator. “Our pilgrim lets others do the talking, often,” writes Domini<sup>127</sup>, yet it is always the pilgrim who is talking.

### Intersubjectivity

Of the many voices the narrator encounters, the one which allows him to ponder questions of singularity and otherness most directly is that of his friend Michael Hamburger. The narrator pays a visit to Hamburger and his wife at their home in the village of Middleton. Prior to his arrival, the narrator describes Hamburger’s move from Berlin to England at the age of nine. Initially he keeps Hamburger’s voice at a distance, drawing on the text of his memoirs<sup>128</sup>, which initially he cites only briefly, recounting a passage about the confiscation at customs of his grandfather’s budgerigars:

It was the loss of the two pet birds, Michael writes, and having to stand by powerless and see them vanish forever behind some sort of screen, that brought us up against the whole monstrosity of changing countries under such inauspicious circumstances.<sup>129</sup>

The narrative then retreats from Hamburger’s voice, referring to him as “he”, as the descriptive passage continues for about two hundred words, before Hamburger’s voice again returns to the narrative:

If I look back to Berlin, writes Michael, all I see is a darkened background with a grey smudge on it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear numbers in a gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rag.<sup>130</sup>

Hamburger’s recollections continue for several hundred words, until the narrator chooses to draw Hamburger’s words from another source:

My hallucinations and dreams, Michael writes elsewhere, often take place in a setting partly of the metropolis of Berlin and partly of rural Suffolk.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Domini 2005: 99.

<sup>128</sup> Hamburger 1973.

<sup>129</sup> TROS: 176-177; Hamburger 1973: 26; Hamburger’s text reads, “To lose those two birds, with so many other partings behind us, brought us up against the whole monstrosity of changing countries.”

<sup>130</sup> TROS: 177-178.

Hamburger's voice then continues, unhindered, for several hundred words more, until the narrator interrupts to announce his arrival at Hamburger's house<sup>132</sup>. Hamburger has not yet entered the text in person, as it were, yet his voice has dominated the narrative for the previous five pages. The narrator's sparse interjections ("Michael writes," "writes Michael," "Michael writes elsewhere,") initially identify "Michael" as an object other to the narrator, but this distinction collapses when Hamburger is cited at length, his voice allowed command over the narrative.

The narrator points out that Hamburger and himself have much in common. They are both émigré German writers living in the same region of the United Kingdom and they share, utterly coincidentally, the same acquaintance in Manchester, Stanley Terry, who each met at the age of twenty-two, twenty-two years apart in 1944 and 1966<sup>133</sup>. As the narrator spends more time with Hamburger he senses a strange kinship, so much so that his subjectivity begins to lose its exclusivity. The narrator recalls his first visit to Hamburger's house. Of being shown around, he writes:

a strange feeling came upon me, as if it were not he who had abandoned that place of work, but I, as if the spectacles cases, letters and writing materials that had evidently lain untouched for months in the soft north light had once been my spectacles cases, my letters and my writing materials. In the porch that led to the garden, I felt again as if I or someone akin to me had long gone about his business there... [T]he quite outlandish thought crossed my mind... that Michael was taking me round a house in which I myself had lived a long time ago.<sup>134</sup>

This follows the passage in which Hamburger's voice assumes control of the narrative, the textual occupation affected by Hamburger's voice succeeded by the narrator's assertion that Hamburger's personal belongings, and even his home, are or were once his own – a much more far-reaching occupation of otherness. McCulloh comments, "Can it be that he in fact is Michael or was once Michael?"<sup>135</sup> Upon having these thoughts the narrator dispels them and, "did not pursue them in the years that have passed since then, perhaps because it is not possible to pursue them without losing one's sanity."<sup>136</sup> The narrator, while bringing other voices into the group subjectivity of the text, acknowledges the danger of rescinding control of that subjectivity. McCulloh asserts the importance of resisting this:

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<sup>131</sup> TROS: 179.

<sup>132</sup> TROS: 181.

<sup>133</sup> TROS: 185-187.

<sup>134</sup> TROS: 183-185.

<sup>135</sup> McCulloh 2003: 73-74.

<sup>136</sup> TROS: 185.

By merging with the Other, consciousness would enter a realm that otherwise recedes from us – the realm of final certainty. Such certainty would be complete and irresistible, however, and would surely mean a descent into madness, as the narrator acknowledges.<sup>137</sup>

Such absolute rescinding of autonomy would render subjectivity unintelligible but, as noted, the narrative voice flirts with this notion throughout Sebald's work. This rescinding need not have solely negative connotations; it ramifies with the notion of the carnival, of a collective autonomy, a dissolution of boundaries and a fluid space. Though of course, as carnival-time has its own defined boundaries, this can only ever be temporary.

### **Liminal motifs**

This section moves away from the textual surface to consider particular motifs of liminality within the narratives of the texts. Here, the term *motifs* is employed to denote privileged instances, or intensities, of liminality; it comes to stand for images, themes, aggregations, and embodiments in which the liminal is accentuated. In discussion of *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*, this section is divided into two main categories. The first focuses on the hypnagogic and the vertiginous; there is a continuity from the preceding section in that the focus remains on the subject, though whereas that section discusses the textual embodiment of subjectivity, this section bypasses the textual surface to consider the narrators' evocations of liminal consciousnesses as manifest in (and at the intersection of) hypnagogia and the vertigo. The second part of this section focuses on Deleuzoguattarian models of the liminal as represented in descriptions of space and the image of the nomad. I will first however lay the ground for this discussion by considering a small selection of instances of liminality which are noteworthy but not necessarily analogous to these two models.

The opening chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* evokes the image of Gregor Samsa<sup>138</sup>, as the narrator finds himself confined to a hospital room in a state of immobility, transformed, as Gregor is, into a state of incapacitation. He gazes out of the window and at a familiar city and finds it "an utterly alien place."<sup>139</sup> He compares himself to Samsa,

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<sup>137</sup> McCulloh 2003: 22.

<sup>138</sup> Kafka 1993: 73-128.

<sup>139</sup> TROS: 5.

I could not help thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs the armchair and looks out of his room, no longer remembering (so Kafka's narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him.<sup>140</sup>

Metamorphosis, as represented by Samsa, is transparently analogous to the process of becoming-other and to the liminal phase in general; as stated, it provides Deleuze and Guattari with the central image of their theory of becoming<sup>141</sup>. The image is revisited in the closing chapter of *The Rings of Saturn* as the narrator considers the cultivation of the silkworm moth:

During their short lives, which last only six or seven weeks, they are overcome by sleep on four occasions and, after shedding their old skin, emerge from each one re-made, always whiter, smoother and larger, becoming more beautiful, and finally almost completely transparent.<sup>142</sup>

The shedding of a skin is interesting here, as is the notion of being “re-made”. Here the skin takes on a semblance of territory; it is a two-dimensional plane which provides the surface area of the territory of the body, and as it is shed, a deterritorialisation occurs. To be “re-made” suggests a reterritorialisation, or in this instance a series of reterritorialisations which constitute a gradual progression towards otherness. It is also of note that this process occurs when the silkworm is “overcome by sleep,” which suggests that sleep itself may be viewed as kind of chrysalis, as a site which engenders change.

The metamorphosis model has applications beyond subjectivity. The narrator recounts the history of Somerleyton Hall, the first stop on his journey. He describes its glory days in the mid-nineteenth century when its owner Samuel Morton Peto lavished every expense upon it, extensively rebuilding the house and redesigning the gardens and grounds. The narrator describes the house and grounds at night:

The most wonderful sight of all, according to one contemporary description, was Somerleyton of a summer's night, when the incomparable glasshouses, borne on cast iron pillars and braces and seemingly weightless in their filigree grace, shed their gleaming radiance on the dark.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> TROS: 5.

<sup>141</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1986.

<sup>142</sup> TROS: 275.

<sup>143</sup> TROS: 34.

This recalls the notion of the vespertine, of a coming-alive or an increase of activity as night falls. Darkness becomes light as the space of the night is corrupted by artificial illumination, a deterritorialisation which also deconstructs the binary of nature and civilisation. The image of radiance encroaching upon darkness has clear connotations of the Enlightenment, which in turn suggests the quest to establish an authoritative ethics and knowledge, to systemise and territorialise, and to dispense with the unfathomable and unaccountable<sup>144</sup>. As the Enlightenment sought to de- and re- territorialise ethics and knowledge, Morton Peto's nineteenth century endeavour seeks to reterritorialise the space of actual darkness – the night, a space reserved for sleep – and claim it as territory for the wakeful.

To step outside of the narratives for a moment, it is also worth commenting upon the structure of Sebald's texts, especially *The Rings of Saturn*. Each presents a series of becomings, from subject to subject, location to location, apparently seamlessly. Gray comments on *The Rings of Saturn*:

More than a mere compiler, however, this narrative consciousness is characterized above all by its capacity to choreograph subtle transitions and cross-references among disparate elements. The essence of Sebald's artistry in *The Rings of Saturn* is an art of inventive transitioning.<sup>145</sup>

This is best exemplified across the novel's Table of Contents pages, which read as succession of locations, names, and anecdotes, separated by dashes – described by Christopher Gregory-Guider as “hyphenated topoi”<sup>146</sup>. To illustrate:

In hospital – Obituary – Odyssey of Thomas Browne's skull – Anatomy lecture – Levitation – Quincunx – Fabled creatures – Urn burial<sup>147</sup>

This is more than a list; the dashes suggest a journey, a linear series of transitions. Here the dash comes to represent liminal space itself.

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<sup>144</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer propose that the Enlightenment itself is as much of a myth as the superstitions it attempts to displace (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972).

<sup>145</sup> Gray 2009: 54

<sup>146</sup> Gregory-Guider 2005: 431.

<sup>147</sup> TROS: Table of Contents.

### The hypnagogic and the vertiginous

The narrators of both *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* again and again call attention to their states of mind and states of consciousness. The narrator of *Vertigo* describes vividly his hypnagogic hallucinations (“my consciousness began to dissolve at the edges”<sup>148</sup>; “I imagined I heard a horse’s hooves on the cobbled square and the sound of carriage wheels; but the carriage itself did not materialise,”<sup>149</sup>) and the agony of insomnia (“There could be no prospect of sleep,”<sup>150</sup>; “Hours went by, never-ending hours, but rest eluded me”<sup>151</sup>). He is also aware of – and able to articulate – the particular conditions of consciousness he passes through in wakefulness. Whereas wakefulness may elsewhere be viewed as an even and sheer plane, the Sebaldian narrator details glitches and intensities in consciousness, and appears to be at all times aware that his wakefulness is as precarious as the liminal space at its thresholds.

*The Rings of Saturn* contains particularly rich descriptions of hypnagogia which, apt to the tone of the narrative, are imbued with anxiety and melancholia. The narrator recalls a house in Ireland in which he once stayed, and describes his bed:

Whenever I rested on that bed... my consciousness began to dissolve at the edges, so that at times I could hardly have said how I had got there or indeed where I was.<sup>152</sup>

This dissolving of consciousness is a vivid evocation of hypnagogia, recalling too the filmic trope of “the dissolve”, the gradual transition from one image to another. It suggests the notion of something solid becoming fluid, a transformation of matter dependent on specific conditions. Here the space of this bed is bestowed with almost magical properties in its singular ability to foster these specifics. It is the specificity of the site that has such an effect on the narrator, yet paradoxically once it has taken effect he is unable to say where he is. Indeed, he repeatedly has the sense that he is in a field hospital, “a battlefield somewhere in Lombardy over which the vultures circled, and, all around, a country laid waste by war.”<sup>153</sup> The image is so disparate from the tranquillity of the rural Irish house and

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<sup>148</sup> TROS: 210.

<sup>149</sup> V: 134.

<sup>150</sup> V: 93.

<sup>151</sup> V: 111.

<sup>152</sup> TROS: 207-210

<sup>153</sup> TROS: 210



of this magical bed which offers such sudden somnolence (though so in keeping with the tone of the narrative and the narrator's preoccupation with death).

The despair of this image is revisited in the narrator's account of the Norwich silk weavers, whose complex yet repetitive work, he imagines, must haunt their sleep.

It is difficult to imagine the depth of despair into which those can be driven who, even after the end of the working day, are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread.<sup>154</sup>

The repetitive nature of the work ingrains the activity within the subject, the anxiety of which comes to characterise the hypnagogic state. The phrase "into their dreams", bound by commas, adds weight to the spatiality of the metaphor, to the notion of a pursuit, of a despair given agency and making chase.

A startling account of hypnagogic hallucination occurs in *Vertigo*, in the final pages of *All'estero*. Following dinner with his friend Salvatore Altamura, the narrator sits alone at dusk in the Piazza Bra in Verona. He describes hearing horses' hooves, as alluded to above, and suddenly is overwhelmed by the recollection of an open-air performance of Aida he saw as a boy, and which he hasn't thought of since. He pictures the event:

The triumphal procession, consisting of a paltry contingent of horsemen and a few sorrow-worn camels and elephants on loan from the Circus Krone, as I have recently discovered, passed before me several times, quite as if it had never been forgotten, and, much as it had then in my boyhood, lulled me into a deep sleep from which – though to this day I cannot really explain how – I did not awake till the morning after, in my room at the Golden Dove.<sup>155</sup>

This presents an uncanny moment. The forgotten memory rises like a phantom; unrecalled since the event it refers to, it now asserts itself as being *of* the narrator. The narrator's journey back to his hotel room is also presented as uncanny; it occurs under a cloak of sleep, a somnambulism which presents the body as active and capable despite the absence of its resident wakeful subjectivity. This has connotations of something both dead and alive, and recalls the image of the phantom. I will return to theories of subjectivity displaced by sleep in later chapters.

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<sup>154</sup> TROS: 283.

<sup>155</sup> V: 134-135.

*The Rings of Saturn* offers intriguing examples of how the subject perceives language at these liminal sites. In his room at Southwold the narrator falls asleep whilst watching a TV documentary about Roger Casement, the early twentieth century British Consul and Irish Nationalist:

As my waking consciousness ebbed away, I could still hear every word of the narrator's account of Casement with singular clarity but was unable to grasp their meaning.<sup>156</sup>

The narrator is unable to grasp the meaning of words, spoken in English; the language of his adopted home has become at once foreign and familiar. These words remain perceptible to the narrator as audible speech, but are rendered devoid of meaning. This is contrasted with an occasion on which he falls asleep on the beach at Scheveningen:

When at last I reached the beach I was so tired that I lay down and slept til the afternoon. I heard the surge of the sea, and, half-dreaming, understood every word of Dutch and for the first time in my life believed I had arrived, and was home.<sup>157</sup>

Here, in contrast to the former disintegration of meaning, the narrator claims to understand every word. As before, the language with which he negotiates – Dutch – is foreign though has a closer relationship to his native tongue. He states that he believes he has for the first time found home, an identification with an other, to the degree that it obfuscates any prior sense of “home”. This effects a radical shift in subjectivity, a total displacement, a realignment of selfhood with what was other.

The term “half-dreaming” is interesting in its suggestion of hypnagogia – a hybrid operating simultaneously, half-dreaming, half-wakeful. This liminal state of consciousness creates the illusion that it holds the key to an encrypted system of meaning – not merely the comprehension of a foreign language, but an absolute understanding of a foreign language to the point that it displaces the subject's primary language. In Southwold, the loss of comprehension of a foreign (though very familiar) language effects a loss of subjectivity, a disorientation; the narrator is left without language altogether. In Scheveningen comprehension becomes inevitable and incomprehension impossible. The half-dreaming mind creates a supplementary system of meaning which overrides the primary system; an illusion of meaning is created which supersedes the intended “true” meaning of the Dutch

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<sup>156</sup> TROS: 104.

<sup>157</sup> TROS: 84-85.

words and comes to stand for something intrinsic to the subject. In both instances meaning, or lack of, is entirely within the subject – in Southwold an absence, in Scheveningen a presence.

The implicit anxiety of the description of the silk weavers and the Lombardy battlefield with this state resonates with a sensation the narrator of *Vertigo* describes repeatedly – vertigo itself. McCulloh notes that the original German title of *Schwindel. Gefühle*<sup>158</sup> is,

a play on words – a kind of punctuated pun... *Schwindel. Gefühle* is a recombination of the compound word *Schwindelgefühl* (“feelings of dizziness”) using a period to divide the word into its component parts, whereby Sebald exposes an ambiguity in the German language (*Schwindel* can mean “dizziness” as well as “swindle” or “deception”). Even as he destabilizes the meaning of the title, Sebald maintains the association with the compound *Schwindelgefühl*, suggesting vertigo. Thus the title works on three levels at once, creating a promise of irony, ambiguity, and authorial “sleight of hand”.<sup>159</sup>

The implied “swindle” here, McCulloh suggests, refers to an authorial sleight-of-hand, but it can also refer to the narrator’s self-swindling – his compulsion to propel himself into situations of vertigo. Zilcosky suggests the narrator is “trying to get lost,” that he is, “seeking out that proximity to madness that ancient travellers feared.”<sup>160</sup> Similarly, Massimo Leone suggests that in Sebald, “vertigo is not only passively endured but also actively sought.”<sup>161</sup>

This sensation of vertigo finds a direct correlation in hypnagogia. In hypnagogia a threshold is approached and crossed. As this occurs the subject experiences physical sensations. Often these sensations are akin to vertigo; Andreas Mavromatis reports that the sensation of suddenly falling is common to hypnagogia:

Quite often the fall forms part of a hypnagogic ‘dream’ in which the subject, for instance, finds himself falling off a cliff to escape a ferocious beast, or off a toppling ladder, missing a foothold while climbing steps or tumbling down the stairs at his home.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Sebald 1990.

<sup>159</sup> McCulloh 2003: 87-88.

<sup>160</sup> Zilcosky 2004: 105.

<sup>161</sup> Leone 2004: 93.

<sup>162</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 36.

Mavromatis cites Peter McKellar's assertion that this phenomenon is possibly universal<sup>163</sup>, and similarly Ian Oswald suggests this sensation is highly common:

The fall may seem to end with a sudden impact, or as a violent clutching for support, as if to arrest the fall.<sup>164</sup>

This sense of losing and then attempting to re-establish one's balance resonates strongly with the sensation of vertigo. Similarly, the apprehension Sebald's narrator feels as he gives chase to Dante manifests in the hallucinatory physical sensation of vertigo<sup>165</sup>. In these instances the narrator has a sudden lack of surety of himself in a given environment – not merely a lack of confidence, but what appears to be a sudden dissolution of the boundaries of the self, of what constitutes the self as discrete – separate from and other to all phenomena in proximity. In a sense, the ego fails temporarily; the subject is unable to differentiate between self and other, which in the case of the narrator of *Vertigo* results in absolute disorientation.

Here vertigo manifests as an apprehension at crossing a threshold – physical or otherwise. This threshold might have unappealing consequences, such as harm to the self, in falling for example, or it might put the integrity of the subject at threat, as in the case of crossing from one state of consciousness to another. Such a transit requires the loosening of ego boundaries<sup>166</sup>; as these boundaries are loosened the subject becomes more able to engage with otherness, and when further loosened the subject is able to become-other and transit from one state of consciousness to another. This liminal space represents a nodal point at the intersection of systems of meaning, from which the subject has access to both sleep and wakefulness, to the sensation of both balance and of falling.

Alongside literal instances of vertigo, the novel transposes the concept on to notions of the destabilised subject, which serves to evoke the risk of toppling from a stable sense of self into an unknown otherness. The most prominent instance of this occurs as the narrator visits Milan Cathedral:

Inside the cathedral I sat down for a while, untied my shoelaces, and, as I still remember with undiminished clarity, all of a sudden no longer had any knowledge of where I was.

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<sup>163</sup> McKellar 1979: 104.

<sup>164</sup> Oswald 1963: 43.

<sup>165</sup> V: 35-6.

<sup>166</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 12.

Despite a great effort to account for the last few days and how I had come to be in this place, I was unable even to determine whether I was in the land of the living or already in another place.<sup>167</sup>

This last line is one of the most memorable phrases – and ideas – within the novel. The narrator has found himself in a space of undecidability – the space of life or of death – and now a vertiginous tension holds him in place between these two theoretical positions. How has he reached this place? He has arrived in Milan having lost his passport and identity papers (upon recounting the story of how these came to be missing as he tries to take a room at a hotel, he remarks, “When I told my story all over again, it no longer sounded plausible, even to me,”<sup>168</sup> suggesting that even he has lost faith in his mislaid identity). In the cathedral he unties his shoelaces, admittedly already uncertain whose shoes he is walking in, and in doing so metaphorically steps out of the last vestiges of what is holding his subjectivity in place. He is now aware of no boundary between himself and the ultimate otherness of death.

This episode has a counterpart, albeit not so dramatic, in *The Rings of Saturn*, as its narrator recounts his viewing of Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*<sup>169</sup> in The Hague. Both instances are preceded by a night of insomnia; in Milan the narrator lies awake, waiting “for dawn to touch the tips of the aerials,”<sup>170</sup> while in The Hague, insomnia is the straightforward effect of external stimuli – noise penetrating the thin windows of his hotel room – again, urban civilisation projecting into the space of the night. He finds himself in a liminal not-asleep-yet-not-fully-awake state: “I was quite unable to harness my thoughts.” He continues, “Indeed, without knowing why, I was so affected by the painting that it later took me a full hour to recover, in front of Jacob van Ruisdael’s *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*.”<sup>171</sup>

What criteria, aside from the narrator’s particular state of consciousness, might precipitate such a reaction, this inability to harness one’s thoughts? The subject of Rembrandt’s painting perhaps – a seventeenth century autopsy, gruesomely rendered. The experience of standing before the painting effects a kind of obfuscation, a detachment of the narrator from his thoughts; the inferred reading is that the intellectual response is overridden by an other response – emotional perhaps, or aesthetic, or even spiritual. The

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<sup>167</sup> V: 115.

<sup>168</sup> V: 110.

<sup>169</sup> Rembrandt 1632.

<sup>170</sup> V: 111.

<sup>171</sup> van Ruisdael c 1665; TROS: 82-83.

particular flavour of the response is not specified, we are merely told that it is not of “thoughts”. The state that the narrator inhabits at that moment precludes such a response, and he remains in a state of sleep-becoming-awake, which in turn precludes the rigour of a wakeful subjectivity from which to summon such a response to the painting.

The narrator is later able to access something of this wakeful subjectivity in front of van Ruisdael’s landscape. This hour sees a shift in subjectivity across a continuum of states of consciousness, towards a rigorous, thoughtful wakefulness. Indeed, there is a resonance of this process in the title of the painting and the activity it depicts. The bleaching of fabrics, though designed by man, is an organic process – the only agents employed are water and sunlight. Again, the sun figures into this equation of wakefulness, signifying a pole of consciousness – an absolute wakefulness. The nature of this shift suggests that subjectivity is not inherently wakeful, and that the narrator’s subjectivity does not revert to a pure subjectivity of its own accord. It suggests that to achieve such wakefulness requires a kind of bleaching, and that subject positions in the continuum of consciousness are entirely constituted by external forces. Just as it is external stimuli that keeps the narrator awake the night before, it is van Ruisdael’s painting which affects a wakefulness here. Whereas the narrator of *Vertigo* experiences a dissolution of subjectivity in Milan Cathedral, seemingly pulled apart by centrifugal forces, here the narrator finds his subjectivity reaggregating, as if at the behest of centripetal forces, brought about by his focus upon this painting.

This resonates with a description in *Vertigo*, appropriated from Casanova’s memoirs, of how the mind shifts through degrees of lucidity:

[During his incarceration] Casanova considered the limits of human reason. He established, while it might be rare for a man to be driven insane, little was required to tip the balance. All that was needed was a slight shift, and nothing would be as it formerly was. In these deliberations, Casanova likened a lucid mind to a glass, which does not break of its own accord. Yet how easily it is shattered.<sup>172</sup>

Here, lucidity is akin to the “bleached” wakefulness the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* experiences as he views van Ruisdael’s painting – a pole of consciousness that is at once clear and pure, and brittle and precarious. Just as the far pole of consciousness is in close proximity to death (as evidenced in the narrator’s melancholy – see below), this extreme of

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<sup>172</sup> V: 56.

wakefulness, the narrator suggests, might be in close proximity to madness – a position which, again, suggests vertigo.

Like Casanova, the narrator of *Vertigo* becomes imprisoned in Venice, though of his own introverted melancholy rather in persecution for extroverted blasphemies:

On that first day of November in 1980, preoccupied as I was with my notes and the ever widening and contracting circles of my thoughts, I became enveloped by a sense of utter emptiness and never once left my room. It seemed to me then that one could well end one's life simply through thinking and retreating into one's mind, for, although I had closed the windows and the room was warm, my limbs were growing progressively colder and stiffer with my lack of movement, so that when at length the waiter arrived with the red wine and sandwiches I had ordered, I felt as if I had already been interred or laid out for burial, silently grateful for the proffered libation, but no longer capable of consuming it.  
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This sensation, so different from that which accompanies the narrator's viewing of van Ruisdael in *The Rings of Saturn*, follows an instance of waking in Venice, markedly different from the description of attempting to sleep in The Hague, which is troubled by "the din of traffic from the crossroads and every few minutes the dreadful squeal of the tram as it ground round the terminus track-loop."<sup>174</sup>

Waking up in Venice is unlike waking up in any other place. The day begins quietly. Only a stray shout here and there may break the calm, or the sound of a shutter being raised, or the wing-beat of the pigeons. How often, I thought to myself, had I lain thus in a hotel room, in Vienna or Frankfurt or Brussels, with my hands clasped under my head, listening not to the stillness, as in Venice, but to the roar of traffic, with a mounting sense of panic.<sup>175</sup>

While the narrator seems to savour this peace, it appears that the insomnia and panic experienced upon waking up in other cities affects a defence against melancholy. In Venice, the stillness and lack of external stimuli allows the narrator to become overwhelmed by *internal* stimuli; he sleeps soundly, but in wakefulness experiences sensations akin to death.

These instances (in particular the engagement with van Ruisdael's painting and the statement from *Vertigo*, "It seemed to me then that one could well end one's life simply

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<sup>173</sup> V: 65.

<sup>174</sup> TROS: 82.

<sup>175</sup> V: 63.

through thinking and retreating into one's mind,<sup>176</sup>) resonate strongly with Stendhal syndrome, the condition described by the narrator of *Vertigo* in his discussion of Beyle (though just as he never refers to Beyle as Stendhal, he never names the condition he describes). The symptoms of the syndrome – rapid heartbeat, dizziness, confusion, hallucinations – are analogous to vertigo, though brought on by the very specific circumstances of exposure to art or extreme natural beauty. The narrators of *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* appear to suffer similar symptoms on several occasions; again and again, there is a sense of the narrative subject being overwhelmed by an otherness (though often of horror as well as beauty).

In these instances the imaginary, as manifest in the relationship between the narrator and a particular object, temporarily obliterates the real, or at the very least achieves an effect which exceeds its apparent bounds, as in the case of *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields* when the narrator senses a shift in the quality of his consciousness as he views the painting. This is reflected in other occasions on which the narrator of *Vertigo* allows the imaginary to overwhelm him, such as the aforementioned sighting of Dante in Vienna, his hallucination of the performance of *Aida*, and at Heidelberg, as he recounts passengers on the train:

The last to come into my compartment of those passengers who had just boarded was a young woman wearing a beret of brown velvet whom I instantly recognised, without a shadow of a doubt, as Elizabeth, daughter of James I.<sup>177</sup>

This recalls the notion of a time-travelling Fallmerayer, but moreover it hints at the power of the imaginary, and the risk (or potential) of the vertiginous mind to incorporate it and allow it to supplant the real.

*The Rings of Saturn* offers two similar examples; the narrator gives an account of Thomas Browne's *Musaeum Clausum*<sup>178</sup>, a catalogue of both real and imaginary things with no distinction between each, and a lengthier discussion of Borges' short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*<sup>179</sup>, which centres on a conspiracy of intellectuals who aim to imagine and thereby create an entire world which ultimately comes to eclipse the primary world. These

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<sup>176</sup> V: 65.

<sup>177</sup> V: 254.

<sup>178</sup> TROS: 271; Browne 1683; the Browne text is available at <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/misctracts/museum.html>. Accessed 16 August 2010.

<sup>179</sup> TROS: 67-71; Borges 1981 [1940]: 111-22, trans. Alastair Reid.



citations balance a tension between wonder at the power of the imagination and fear of the threatened chaos if the order of reality, of what is *known* to be real, is rescinded.

### **The nomad and the extraterritorial**

The concepts of the nomad and the extraterritorial are drawn from a Deleuzoguattarian model of liminality, that is, the process of becoming-other and deterritorialisation. In this model, the extraterritorial is constituted by that which lies beyond territorialisation, that which is not reterritorialised, that which cannot be claimed. This corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari's nomadic subject, a subjectivity which is perpetually transient, which makes no claim upon territory and upon which territory makes no claims. The nomad is perpetual movement, perpetual becoming.

Sebald flirts with this notion of the nomad in both *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*. There is a tension of home and nomadism in his travelling narrators, particularly in the narrator of *Vertigo*, who we understand lives in England but does not refer to his home there, and visits his hometown in Germany yet feels little sense of home there either, despite the wealth of memories his stay brings to mind. He also embodies the nomadic in those he encounters on his journeys. In *Vertigo* he recounts arriving by train in Venice at night:

I slowly walked down the platform to the station hall, where a veritable army of backpackers were lying on the stone floor in sleeping bags on straw mats, close to each other like an alien people resting on their way through the desert. Out in the station forecourt, too, countless young men and women lay in groups or couples or singly, on the steps and all around.<sup>180</sup>

This description forms a playful reversal of the nomad and nomadic space. The space of the station hall and forecourt is, in essence, a straightforward example of Marc Augé's concept of the non-place<sup>181</sup>. It is a place which is passed through (on foot) by passengers embarking and disembarking the train – a nodal point of two modes, or velocities, of the non-place<sup>182</sup>. Yet the travellers who now occupy the space (denoted as travellers by their

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<sup>180</sup> V: 82.

<sup>181</sup> Augé 1995.

<sup>182</sup> Anne Fuchs also discusses Sebald's travelling narrator in relation to the non-place; see Fuchs 2007: 136.

backpacks) are in repose; night-time has enacted an inversion and the space of movement has become an uncanny space of slumber and stillness<sup>183</sup>.

The narrator describes these nomads as he passes amongst them, presenting an unacknowledged irony in his motion juxtaposed with their motionlessness. As he passes through however, the bodies begin to stir:

several began moving among their brothers and sisters still lying on the ground, as if they were preparing for the next stage of an arduous and never-ending journey.<sup>184</sup>

This passage reinforces the nomadic image in several ways. The implied fraternity of the travellers bonds them in solidarity; these are not individuals but a consolidated nomadic tribe (recalling also the notion of group subjectivity). Furthermore, the “never-ending journey” explicitly evokes the nomadic in denying the future possibility of any permanent station.

*The Rings of Saturn* features a similar instance, as the narrator comes across fishermen on the beach south of Lowestoft – a sight apparently familiar to him:

I have often found all manner of tent-like shelters made of poles and cordage, sailcloth and oilskin, along the pebble beach. They are strung out in a long line on the margin of the sea, at regular intervals. It is as if the last stragglers of some nomadic people had settled there.<sup>185</sup>

Again, the narrator invokes the image of the nomad but does not acknowledge the irony that these people are stationary and it is he who is in motion. Here, the notion of settling “on the margin of the sea,” is further problematic, in that it draws together the concepts of the nomad and of “settling”, and also the impossibility of settling “on the margin,” in a space which is fluid and ever-changing. The narrator analyses these settlers:

They just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them, and before them nothing but emptiness.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> The sleeping body may itself be considered a “non-place” in that sleep displaces wakeful subjectivity from the body’s performance of the self and renders it an object, though the above account of the sleepwalking narrator complicates and problematises this theory.

<sup>184</sup> V: 83.

<sup>185</sup> TROS: 51.

<sup>186</sup> TROS: 52.

This suggests a vertiginous subjectivity which actively seeks an engagement with otherness, much like Deleuze and Guattari's nomadic subject – to be as close to this otherness as possible without becoming engulfed. This is a perilous position, which because of the permanently shifting shoreline, can only ever be temporary.

The image of the shoreline dominates *The Rings of Saturn*. It is the ultimate extraterritorial space, shifting as the tide moves in and out, and with the break of each single wave. Writing on *The Rings of Saturn*, John Beck cites mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot's paper, *How Long Is The Coast Of Britain?*<sup>187</sup>, which uses fractals to calculate coastline lengths. Mandelbrot states that not only does the length vary because of the movement of the sea, but the length varies depending on the scale of measurement – the smaller the unit of measurement, the longer the measured length. To follow this line of enquiry to its logical conclusion it might be said that alongside shifts made by the coastline over longer periods of time, tides and individual waves may be considered a form of micro-liminality.

The territory of the sea becomes subject to dispute, despite or perhaps because of this fluidity; while English readers will be more familiar with the North Sea, the narrator refers to the sea alongside which he walks as the German Ocean<sup>188</sup>. It is a sea consisting predominantly of international waters (though its bordering nations each make a claim on sections of the seabed for the purpose of drilling oil). It is known by other names too – variants of the German Ocean (the German Sea, or the Germanic Sea) as well as the Frisian Sea, referring to the coast of the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. These attempts to definitively name the space of the sea fight against an essentially extraterritorial quality which refutes the definitive. Not only is it international, in name and spatially, but in its fluidity it is beyond territorialisation; it is the liminal space between nation states.

Perhaps the most notable example of the extraterritorial in *The Rings of Saturn* is Orfordness, a cusped spit upon which until 1983 lay a Ministry of Defence site. Now decommissioned, its purpose remains shrouded in secrecy; it is accessible to the public, but only by ferry from Orford, or a walk of several miles along the narrow spit from Aldeburgh in the north. The narrator notes its strange geography on his map<sup>189</sup> and is intrigued. He notes how, “over a period of millennia”<sup>190</sup>, the shingle spit formed, stretching further and

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<sup>187</sup> Mandelbrot 1967: 449; cited in Beck 2004: 85-6.

<sup>188</sup> TROS: 78.

<sup>189</sup> TROS: 233.

<sup>190</sup> TROS: 233.

further south alongside the existing coast, creating a kind of anti-hinterland, a space lying just beyond the coast rather than behind it. This supplementary land supersedes the original coastline, its outer shore coming to be the coastline itself, as if the land mass has grown an extra skin.

Along this stretch of coast in particular, the space of the shoreline cannot be territorialised because it is always shifting. Over centuries villages and towns along the Suffolk coast have been claimed by the sea. The narrator recounts the story of Dunwich, “one of the most important ports in Europe in the Middle Ages.”<sup>191</sup>

On New Year’s Eve 1285 a storm tide devastated the lower town and the portside so terrible that for months afterwards no one could tell where the land ended and the sea began.<sup>192</sup>

In this image the boundary of land and sea becomes indistinct; the sea stretches into what was the town, lying over streets and buildings (“more than fifty churches, monasteries and convents... hospitals... dozens of windmills,”<sup>193</sup>). For a time the remains of these buildings projected above the surface of the water; though abandoned, they remained markers of civilisation. In this state, the shoreline no longer exists as a distinct line. It is fragmented, the continuity of the sea disrupted by the projecting buildings, the continuity of the land disrupted by the unbound sea. Alternatively it could be said that the shoreline continues to exist but in a radically different state, unrecognisable as a distinct line, its liminality distended to a wide margin that continues to demarcate one from the other but is vague, and includes aspects of each that it attempts to delineate. This excessive liminality diminishes over time – buildings standing in the sea erode and collapse, and gradually a more distinct shoreline re-emerges<sup>194</sup>.

In *Vertigo* the counterpart to Dunwich is Venice. Like Somerleyton’s luminescence projecting into darkness, the promontory mass of its islands projecting into the Adriatic represents civilisation encroaching upon nature. It is however at threat from nature – from

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<sup>191</sup> TROS: 155.

<sup>192</sup> TROS: 157.

<sup>193</sup> TROS: 155.

<sup>194</sup> It is worth noting that the image of the tidal surge may be seen as analogous to sleep. Here the force of the sea is given form in a surge of water, which can be directly transposed onto an image of oncoming sleep – a force objectified, approaching and taking possession. The notion of force is key here too – it is something inescapable which, transposed onto sleep, suggests anaesthesia, or narcolepsy (the way in which the water of the storm surge remains, besieging the town, is also suggestive of narcolepsy).

the Acqua Alta tides, and, in the longer term, climate change<sup>195</sup>. It is geographically inhospitable to civilisation, and the intruding sea lends it the air of the dreamscape. In the narrator's first account of the city the sea and canals appear to exceed their bounds, the waters reaching up into the air:

The dampness of the autumn morning still hung thick among the houses and over the Grand Canal. Heavily laden, the boats went by, sitting low in the water. With a surging rush they came out of the mist, pushing ahead of them the aspic-green waves, and disappearing again into the white swathes of the air.<sup>196</sup>

This description paints Venice as part-concealed, of both this world and another. It is of the land, of civilisation, but also very much of the sea – the presiding element of the imagery is the water, which cloaks, hangs, obscures, haunts, and ultimately renders the city beyond definitive territory.

### **Summary**

*The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* explore notions of textual subjectivities through the liminal spaces that emerge between the original text and English translation, between the author and the narrator, the narrator and the narrated, between the many voices which constitute the narrative, and in the particular economy of these voices – how a haeccectic primary voice absorbs and marshals, but also in how that voice may be drawn towards and merge with an otherness, such as that represented by Michael Hamburger in *The Rings of Saturn*. The polyphonies of these texts are deftly managed; both texts display a mastery of voice in terms of the negotiation of haecceity and otherness. The reader never doubts the narrator in the way that he self-consciously doubts himself; the narrator does our doubting for us, and thus attains an authority which encompasses and encloses the discussion. In subsequent chapters I will discuss other manners in which polyphonies are instituted and managed, and whether these come to serve the narrative and maintain a sense of balance against forces which destabilise, or whether these seek to be a force of destabilisation in themselves.

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<sup>195</sup> See Fletcher and Spencer 2005.

<sup>196</sup> V: 52.

The liminal motifs presented in *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo* reflect and refract the textual processes described above, through a transposition on to physical processes, processes of consciousness, and conceptions of space and motion. With discussion of Sebald's travelling narrator, I introduce the concept of the nomad to the thesis; here a literal nomad in that the narrator is always in motion, but also a nomad of consciousness and subjectivity. In this sense the texts are travelogues of subjectivity – the narrator documents his journeys through consciousness, noting as much detail, flavour and idiosyncrasy as in his account of the physical landscape. In subsequent chapters I will apply this idea in ways which branch out from its conception, for instance in Murakami, in which the nomad is not a traveller of a physical landscape, but a traveller through a series of becomings, in a manner more analogous to Deleuze and Guattari's application of the term. In Van Sant the nomad becomes nomadic in every sense, in terms of physicality, consciousness, and subjectivity, resisting – deliberately, unwittingly, or reluctantly, all forms of stasis or reterritorialisation.

## Two

### Haruki Murakami

#### *Sputnik Sweetheart, Kafka on the Shore, and After Dark*

This chapter focuses on what are currently Murakami's three most recent novels in English translation, *Sputnik Sweetheart*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and *After Dark*. These novels are radically different to the work of Sebald in terms of genre, subject matter and in styles of narrative voice. In contrast to the literary and historical preoccupations of the Sebaldian narrator, Murakami takes as his subject matter the lives of contemporary Japanese characters. In the three novels discussed here these are mostly young characters, still within or recently passed through adolescence; their preoccupations (navigating first love, sexual desire) are offset by mystical quests and interventions from an obscure "other world" which reflect Murakami's overarching preoccupation of locating truth and meaning within the self. It is this other world, often referred to in the novels as the "other side", which draws the thesis toward these texts. In itself, the other side is an attractive concept for my research question – it is an enigma which is never unravelled, an unanswerable question, an indefinable quantity. Moreover, Murakami's schema of characters negotiating the space of this side and the other has direct ramifications for the project of liminal subjectivities.

Like Sebald, Murakami is principally concerned with issues of identity, transition and liminality, though he approaches these from fundamentally different angles, and with a radically different tone. Whereas Sebald takes an astringent, historical, scholarly tone, Murakami's novels feature a postmodern and carnivalesque breadth of influences (or indeed, a mutual deterritorialisation of radically other influences – most notably in *Kafka on the Shore* in the clash of Japanese folklore and Western iconography). The tone of the Sebaldian narrator is also characterised by its insularity; it engages with other voices but, as discussed, this occurs under certain conditions. This tone is also predominantly introspective; the majority of the narrator's communication is intrapsychic or directed towards his imagined reader. In contrast, Murakami institutes a dialogism between characters; much of these texts comprise of long sequences of dialogue in which the

characters' viewpoints contrast and collide. In every case, the narrative subjectivity is outward looking, which engenders a greater potential for a truer polyphony. This is also apparent in the wide array of narrative modes Murakami employs – first person, third person, epistolary, and in *After Dark* an innovative first person plural narrator.

### The texts

*Sputnik Sweetheart* follows a twentysomething narrator, K., who is in love with Sumire, who in turn is in love with Miu. Miu rejects Sumire's advances with an explanation of how, years previously, her self was divided in a traumatic incident which left her without the capacity for sexuality of any kind; she perceives that the absent half of her self is beyond reach, lost on the "other side". Following the rejection, Sumire vanishes, ostensibly to the other side, and the narrator attempts to find her. As he begins to understand her fate, he resists entering the other side, and accepts that he cannot follow her.

*Kafka on the Shore* features two parallel narratives. The first follows fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura as he runs away from his Tokyo home to the island of Shikoku. Shortly after his departure his father is violently murdered; simultaneously Kafka awakes in the grounds of a Shinto shrine covered in blood but apparently unwounded. The second narrative concerns Nakata, a man in his sixties who as a child fell into a coma and woke having lost the ability to read and write. In place of his previous academic prowess, he is able to converse with cats, and supplements his income tracing lost cats in his Tokyo neighbourhood<sup>197</sup>. One such assignment leads him the home of a man who claims to be making a flute from the souls of cats, and who inveigles Nakata to kill him. Nakata is then compelled to travel to Shikoku, to open and then close a mysterious portal, which corresponds to Kafka's attempt to travel into the other side to escape his worldly fate.

The narrative of *After Dark* takes place over a few hours in Tokyo. College student Mari stays out all night, reading in coffee houses to escape her problematic home life. Her sister Eri has been asleep for three months; on the night in question she is mysteriously transported to a room inside her television (analogous to the other side) where she is observed by a faceless man. Mari strikes up a new friendship with student and jazz trombonist Takahashi, and her translation skills are called upon to aid a young Chinese

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<sup>197</sup> This is a direct reference to the lost cat, and instigating incident, of Murakami's most famous novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (Murakami 1998b).



prostitute who has been assaulted by a man named Shirakawa, whom, it is implied, is the same man observing Eri on the other side.

### **Murakami and Sebald**

In comparing Murakami and Sebald, my first objective is to explore the different modalities of subjectivity in each set of texts, the ways in which subjectivity is destabilised, and the liminal processes which affect the destabilisation. In Sebald the destabilisation occurs by means of the narrating I and the other voices it negotiates and assimilates, the deployment of a reality effect, and the hybridity of genre; of fiction, memoir, travelogue and historical essay – devices which resonate with the use of liminal images such as the shoreline, the nomad, and the theme of vertigo. The most prominent difference in Murakami's novels is the explicit fictionality; the author makes no claim that his characters and narratives occupy any universe other than the singular fictional universe of each diegesis. However, just as a space of liminality exists between Sebald's fictionality and facticity, Murakami's deployment of tropes of magic realism opens up a liminal space between a reality and an unreality – a naturalistically rendered representation of contemporary Japan, and an otherness constituted by the other side, as well as devices from Japanese folklore, such as spirit projection<sup>198</sup>. It follows that whereas much of the discussion of the previous chapter focuses on the narrator and the construction of a narrative subjectivity, the focus here is more upon how subjectivity manifests in the construction of Murakami's characters. The discussion of subjectivity is primarily informed by Murakami's recurrent device of positing an apparent "core" of subjectivity within his characters. This is seemingly at odds with poststructuralist notions of the subject, yet Murakami repeatedly skews the apparent stability of the "core" through exterior interventions of division and displacement and ultimately creates a tension between the reassertion of this core and a continued dissolution or destabilisation<sup>199</sup>.

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<sup>198</sup> This is a feature of *Kafka on the Shore*, drawn from *The Tale of Genji*, an eleventh century text attributed to Murasaki Shikibu (English translation: Murasaki 1974 [1900]).

<sup>199</sup> To consider this facet of these texts within the context of Japanese literature from a Western perspective raises other issues of subjectivity. Kaoru Koizumi points out that the Japanese concept of subjectivity is already other to that of contemporary Western subjectivity, so that the reassertion of a core, rather than being a conservative insistence upon stability, may in fact be a destabilisation of conservative notions of subjectivity which – in opposition to Western notions – displace the source of meaning away from the subject, the individual subject always being secondary to the group subject of society. In this sense, Murakami's assertion of a core becomes in fact a revolutionary reaggregation of subjectivity (Koizumi 2003: 319-320).

All three novels feature prominent liminal motifs; there are evocative descriptions of hypnagogia throughout, and all three texts explore the space of the night and its liminal threat and potentiality. The theme of nomadism is revisited, though in a different context to the Sebaldian nomad; while travel is a key theme of *Sputnik Sweetheart* and *Kafka on the Shore*, this is always in relation to a fixed home, which is almost always returned to. The only exception is in the character of Sumire, who embodies nomadism in much more than her physical travel (from Japan to England to Greece), through her transitions of subjectivity prior to this, and in her ultimate transit from Greece to an altogether “other” place.

Sumire’s transitions of subjectivity also reverberate with Victor Turner’s theory of rites of passage, as she passes through liminal positions in the quest to forge an identity. This is a common theme of these texts; the characters are often young; Sumire and the narrator of *Sputnik Sweetheart* are in their twenties; Kafka is fifteen; Mari, Eri and Takahashi are in late adolescence. As I will discuss, these novels mark the onset of what Murakami himself refers to as a “responsibility” in his writing<sup>200</sup>, and there is a sense that the author is guiding his characters through the liminal toward a stable subjectivity, a marked shift from earlier novels in which an adult male protagonist moves away from a stable position to explore and/or become consumed by the liminal and unknown<sup>201</sup>. As I will discuss, there is debate over whether this creates a more conservative tone to his narratives or whether this new direction broadens and elucidates the negotiation with otherness.

It should also be noted that these texts are translations from the Japanese, and that the commentary applied to Hulse’s translation of Sebald also applies here, albeit with particular strictures<sup>202</sup>. These translations are by Philip Gabriel (*Sputnik Sweetheart* and *Kafka on the Shore*) and Jay Rubin (*After Dark*), and whereas Sebald closely supervised the translation of his work, greater liberties are taken with Murakami, suggesting a much wider lacuna between original and translated texts. Rebecca Suter notes that Murakami’s English language translators “tend to ‘domesticate’ foreign elements in Murakami’s fiction: culturally specific elements are often substituted with either generic or American

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<sup>200</sup> Rubin 2003: 274.

<sup>201</sup> see *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), *Dance Dance Dance* (1994), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1998b) and *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (2000)

<sup>202</sup> Whereas Sebald is translated by the English poet Michael Hulse (and Anthea Bell in the case of *Austerlitz*), Murakami is translated by Americans Alfred J. Birnbaum, Jay Rubin, and Philip Gabriel. This is not to suggest that Murakami necessarily has a greater readership than Sebald in the US, or that Sebald has a stronger readership in the UK. The work of both authors is widely translated, though Murakami came to an English readership via the US, and Sebald via the UK. In the UK both authors share the same publisher in The Harvill Press (since 2002 the paperback editions of each are published in the Vintage imprint).

equivalents, so that he does not sound ‘too Japanese’ in translation.”<sup>203</sup> Rubin offers an account of translating Murakami in which he cites the myriad issues with his translation of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and its publication in Western markets<sup>204</sup>. The three volumes of the Japanese original are condensed into one, and chapters are re-sequenced and in some cases omitted altogether. Rubin states that although Murakami approved the translation, he was, “uneasy that so much had been eliminated.”<sup>205</sup> This suggests a much greater distance between the original and translated texts than is the case with Sebald, and as such a much greater and more complex liminal space.

### Critical work on Murakami

Murakami’s work draws as much critical interest as that of Sebald, though given Murakami’s more extensive body of work, this criticism is more diverse in terms of both the texts covered and methodological approach. Particular attention is paid to the early “Trilogy of the Rat”, which in part owes its allure to the fact that, of the trilogy, only the final text *A Wild Sheep Chase*<sup>206</sup> is available in English translation outside of Japan. Two subsequent novels *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*<sup>207</sup> and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*<sup>208</sup> have drawn greater critical interest, especially in English language criticism. Much less attention has been paid to the three novels discussed here (although a body of criticism on *Kafka on the Shore* is growing slowly). These novels might be described by critics as lesser or minor Murakami; indeed, criticism of *Sputnik Sweetheart* for instance is rarely favourable<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>203</sup> Suter 2008: 36.

<sup>204</sup> Rubin 2003: 304-320.

<sup>205</sup> Rubin 2003: 306. Rubin also supplies an anecdotal account of the 2000 German publication of *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, which is of note in that it was translated from Gabriel’s English text (1999) rather than Murakami’s Japanese (Rubin 2003: 305), a two-fold alienation from the original Japanese, suggesting a further dissolution of the “original” meaning. This is of note in that it suggests an altogether “new” text – a far point on a continuum of decoding and recoding in which the English language is rendered a liminal point. Given Suter’s account of the English language translations of Murakami, this has far-reaching ramifications for the authorship – and the “original” message – of the three English language texts discussed here; meaning has not only been displaced from the original texts across the threshold of language, but also deterritorialised by the intervention of Rubin, Gabriel, and their editors.

<sup>206</sup> Murakami 1989 [1982].

<sup>207</sup> Murakami 1991 [1985].

<sup>208</sup> Murakami 1997 [1995].

<sup>209</sup> See Rubin 2003: 250-255.

The first two English language monographs of Murakami are Matthew Strecher's *Dances with Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*<sup>210</sup>, and Jay Rubin's more populist introduction to the author's work, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*<sup>211</sup>. Subsequently Michael Seats has published *Murakami Haruki: the Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Culture*<sup>212</sup>, and Rebecca Suter has published *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki Between Japan and the United States*<sup>213</sup>. In addition to these I draw on critical work by Philip Gabriel (also one of Murakami's translators), Steven Kellman, Amy Ty Lai, and Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel. I also cite Yukawa Yutaka and Koyama Tetsuro's interview with the author (translated by Rubin)<sup>214</sup>, and draw greatly on Kaoru Koizumi's wonderfully incisive thesis, *The Unknown Core of Existence: Representation of the Self in the Novels of Haruki Murakami*<sup>215</sup>.

### The other side

In the world of Sebald, the ultimate otherness is represented by the encroaching threat of death, madness, decay, or evil. The border between haecceity and otherness is not well defined; the narrative voice exists on the same continuum as these concepts, in the same extended liminal space, and strives to maintain a distance, to stave off a corruption of or by otherness and to maintain a discreteness and opposition. In Murakami, the border is very clearly defined. The notion of ultimate otherness is embodied in the "other side" and although the boundaries here may shift and be subject to degrees of fluidity, these boundaries very definitely exist. In Murakami, there is *this* side and the *other*.

This duality of haecceity and otherness frequently intersects with themes of consciousness – of the conscious mind and the otherness of the unconscious mind. However, this division is not always made along the latitude of consciousness; it may be related to other aspects of subjectivity, such as sexuality, as in the case of Miu in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, or the ability to perceive oneself, as in the case of Nakata in *Kafka on the Shore*. This otherness is almost invariably designated a spatial plane, which is commonly referred to, especially in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, as the "other side". Kaoru Koizumi states that,

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<sup>210</sup> Strecher 2002.

<sup>211</sup> Rubin 2003.

<sup>212</sup> Seats 2006.

<sup>213</sup> Suter 2008.

<sup>214</sup> Yukawa and Koyama 2003: 10-42; cited in Rubin 2003: 274.

<sup>215</sup> Koizumi 2003.

Murakami never specifically defines the nature of the other space. It can be a locus between life and death; a dream-like world; a psychical world; a world of blood and violence. In sum, the other world accommodates what is impossible in the ordinary world, or what is rejected in that formation.<sup>216</sup>

The other side manifests in differing ways in the three novels discussed here. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, the character of Miu has been divided in two, though only experiences the half of herself that exists on *this* side of the divide as her “self”. Sumire, the reader infers, makes a transit from this side to the other without sacrificing the unity of her “whole” self. The narrator attempts to trace her but as he approaches the threshold of the two worlds he begins to understand the nature of the other side and perceives a danger. He resists its draw and remains on this side.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, the other side is less clearly differentiated from this side. This is especially so in Nakata’s narrative thread, in which he is able to converse with cats and encounters strange figures, such as the grotesque cat-killer Johnnie Walker. This is elucidated late in the narrative, when a cat announces to Nakata’s friend Hoshino, “We’re on the border of the world, speaking a common language,”<sup>217</sup> which would seem to suggest that Nakata, who has possessed the ability to speak with cats since his childhood coma, has for a long time inhabited this threshold between this side and the other. Nakata’s quest to find the “entrance stone” also suggests a definitive crossing point between this side and the other, which intersects with the other narrative thread in which Kafka makes a clear transit to the other side as he becomes lost within a forest (representing a broad liminal space between this world and the other) and then through a clearing within the forest (a definitive portal between worlds)<sup>218</sup>. Kafka enters the other side as a means of escape from his problems on this side (he is a suspect in the murder of his father) but ultimately he returns to face up to his responsibilities and in doing so, assumes a stable adult subjectivity, the other side becoming, for him, a liminal space of rites of passage.

In *After Dark* the other side is represented as a dank room visible from this side via the television screen in Eri’s bedroom. Eri becomes trapped in this room and watched over

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<sup>216</sup> Koizumi 2003: 315-316

<sup>217</sup> KOTS: 482. This recalls Bassnett’s account of translation as “a process of decoding and recoding,” (Bassnett 1991: 16), and of a mid-point at which meaning has been decoded and is yet to be recoded – the paradoxical liminal site at which meaning has not ceased to exist but lies beyond the matter of language. This “common language,” is in a sense not a language at all, in that it is not differentiated from other languages but is beyond other languages.

<sup>218</sup> KOTS: 432.

by the malevolent gaze of a faceless man. She feels isolated and threatened in this space and strives to return to this side, though sees no means of achieving this. Ultimately this is achieved beyond the diegesis of the novel, as Eri appears back on this side with no suggestion of how she made such a return<sup>219</sup>.

The characters' relationship to this threshold of haecceity and otherness is a primary focus of this chapter. The discussion considers how characters negotiate otherness, and how the textual subjectivity conditions the characters' position to this otherness. In each text a boundary exists between this side and the other. This is sometimes constituted by a broad liminal space, such as the forest in *Kafka on the Shore*, sometimes by an invisible, imperceptible line, as in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, and sometimes by a distinct line, represented by a tangible object in the primary world, such as the TV screen in *After Dark*. In some cases characters are divided between these sides; in other cases characters remain whole and move from one side to the other, and sometimes back again. In the case of Nakata, Murakami presents a character living perpetually on the border. The nature of this boundary – its permeability or impermeability, its perceptibility or imperceptibility – is as much of interest as the dichotomy of this side and the other.

In early Murakami novels, the other side is explicitly related to the unconscious mind; it exists as the space of the core or “black box” of consciousness<sup>220</sup>. This allusion remains in his later novels, though it develops to include numerous other connotations; it may also be the space of sleep, of death, of loss, and, with direct reference to Freud, of mourning and melancholia. This multiplicity of meanings presents an apparent obscurity to the other side, which Koizumi attempts to delineate:

However metaphysical and abstract Murakami's inclination towards this so-called “other” world may be . . . the dichotomy of this and the other world reflects his endeavour to encapsulate the unknown, and often irrational forces inside the self, which could take on a status of psychical reality and exercise a dangerous power on the self.<sup>221</sup>

The unknowability of this otherness has the effect of a vacuum, drawing in a broad configuration of possible meaning. The other side comes to offer a plane upon which

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<sup>219</sup> AD: 175.

<sup>220</sup> For a discussion of this in relation to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (Murakami 1991), see Rubin 2003: 188.

<sup>221</sup> Koizumi 2003: 119.

Murakami can persistently examine the unknown and experiment with these constellations of meaning.

The binary of this side and the other also presents a question of primacy. In *Sputnik Sweetheart* the other side remains out of sight at all times. The narrator never succumbs to its lure, and the narrative voice itself never leaves “this” side. The other side therefore suffers an obfuscation, which indirectly ascribes a primacy to the narrator’s position on this side, rendering the other side an invisible supplement. Sumire questions whether this side or the other is primary reality, and ponders the ramifications of it not being the one she currently inhabits:

If this side, where Miu is, is not the real world – if this is actually the other side – what about me, the person who occupies the same temporal and spatial plane as her?<sup>222</sup>

This poses another question: if the other side is ascribed a primacy, what are the ramifications for *this* side, the world in which the characters’ (and the reader’s) primary experience occurs?

These three novels are of particular interest as they offer something of a sea-change in how Murakami presents this otherness. With *Sputnik Sweetheart*, the representation of the other side becomes broader and more multi-faceted, though there appears to be a conflict in readings of this new approach, between a reading of the insistence on refusing this otherness and maintaining a responsible engagement with this side, and a reading of an increased openness to this otherness. *Sputnik Sweetheart* is Murakami’s first novel following his experience documenting the Aum Shinrikyo gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995. Murakami published two books, *Underground*<sup>223</sup> and *The Place That Was Promised*<sup>224</sup>, (collected in English translation as *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*<sup>225</sup>), the former a collection of interviews with survivors of the attacks, the latter interviews with members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult. The interviews in *The Place That Was Promised*<sup>226</sup> build a picture of Aum members who either rejected the mainstream or felt that the mainstream had rejected them. In selecting an alternative lifestyle they unwittingly chose one which would culminate in terrorism, though each member interviewed by

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<sup>222</sup> SS: 176.

<sup>223</sup> Murakami 1997.

<sup>224</sup> Murakami 1998a.

<sup>225</sup> Murakami 2002.

<sup>226</sup> Murakami 2002: 213-309.

Murakami claims to have known nothing of the attack until it had taken place. The motive for the attack itself remains obscure, presenting a void of unknowability which resonates strongly with the other side.

Philip Gabriel and Yoshiko Yokochi Samuel both suggest that Murakami's experience of interviewing members of Aum Shinrikyo led him to reconsider his concept of otherness<sup>227</sup>. Samuel makes the claim that:

Murakami's experience in collecting and publishing the personal testimonies of survivors and perpetrators of the 1995 gas attack on Tokyo subway – that is, of those who have returned to “this side” after an ordeal on “the other side” – has helped him turn his attention more to “this side.”<sup>228</sup>

Gabriel is more direct in linking the experience of *Underground* with the writing of *Sputnik Sweetheart*, stating that, “*Sputnik Sweetheart* is Murakami's first attempt at “shaping [the Aum experience] into a narrative form.”<sup>229</sup> He suggests that *Sputnik Sweetheart* is in fact a direct descendent of *Underground*, noting that in the novel, “Murakami appropriates the kind of philosophically oriented, oral history-like confessional, especially of early childhood and youth, found in the interviews with Aum members,”<sup>230</sup> and suggests that, “Murakami borrows details and motifs from the lives of Aum members for his fictional characters.”<sup>231</sup> He claims that Sumire is, “an amalgam of features of several of them, particularly Namimura Akio, Kanda Miyuki, and Inaba Mitsuharu,”<sup>232</sup> and that Miu's experience is, “an echo of the chilling experience of the Aum member Inaba, who described how his ascetic training made his ‘subconscious be[gin] to emerge and sense of reality gr[ow] faint’.”<sup>233</sup>

It is impossible to not notice the similarity between Inaba's experience in Aum as recounted to Murakami, and Miu's experience in *Sputnik Sweetheart*; at one point Inaba states explicitly, “My consciousness had gone over to the other side and I couldn't get it back.”<sup>234</sup> Here the term “the other side” is used, as translated by Gabriel, serving as a direct precursor to the use of the term in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, the English translation of which is

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<sup>227</sup> Gabriel 2006.

<sup>228</sup> Samuel 2001: 138

<sup>229</sup> Gabriel 2006: 103.

<sup>230</sup> Gabriel 2006: 104.

<sup>231</sup> Gabriel 2006: 105.

<sup>232</sup> Gabriel 2006: 105.

<sup>233</sup> Gabriel 2006: 106; Murakami 2002: 242.

<sup>234</sup> Murakami 2002: 242.



also by Gabriel. Gabriel is explicit in citing this as a turning point in Murakami's representation of the other side:

In the pre-Aum fiction the "other world" is mostly menacing, with characters, as Rubin says, who are stymied in any search for spiritual meaning. But in his post-Aum novels – *Sputnik Sweetheart* and *Kafka on the Shore* – Murakami begins to reveal something different; an "other side" that is both accessible and from which one can return. Most importantly, this other side, while still frightening in some ways, is spiritually restorative. In his post-Aum fiction, I argue, Murakami extends the this world/other world thematic of his earlier work in an attempt to find a different relationship between the two: not a yawning abyss of separation, but rather an overlap in which the two worlds can touch in ways that are not explosive and deadly, but productive. These new narratives, and the characters' interaction with them, evince the other world as hopeful and even restorative to those who, in the final analysis, must live in the chaos that is reality.<sup>235</sup>

Gabriel presupposes that Murakami reconfigures his other world as a matter of reconciliation, and that *Sputnik Sweetheart* offers an other side which is other yet also part of a greater whole. This would seem to dispute the fact of its otherness; it is as if Murakami attempts an assimilation of otherness to restrain it within sanctioned boundaries – an otherness which permits alternative lifestyles such as those of the Aum members in the hope that such inclusion within a group whole will preclude the violent otherness of terrorism. On the one hand, the other side remains precarious, invisible and inaccessible, on the other it is a sanctioned and necessary space. Gabriel suggests that *Sputnik Sweetheart*,

attempts to create a newly imagined relationship between the two worlds. Instead of ending up a world of loss, the other side is now a world of reconciliation, restoration, and above all, hope.<sup>236</sup>

That *Sputnik Sweetheart* represents a change Murakami's treatment of the other side is undisputed. However, Koizumi and Samuel argue that rather than a more open engagement, Murakami chooses to relegate the other side to a definitively secondary position. As he sanctions the space of otherness, he simultaneously designates it an inferior status. Samuel notes that,

unlike the previous works, [*Sputnik Sweetheart*] focuses more on reality on "this side" than fantasy on "the other side." K, for example, refuses to be lured into "the other side" while on the island, [and] returns to Tokyo.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Gabriel 2006: 116.

<sup>236</sup> Gabriel 2006: 121.

<sup>237</sup> Samuel 2001: 138.

Koizumi offers a contrast with the earlier novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, in which the protagonist is divided in alternate chapters between “Hard-Boiled Wonderland” which represents the space of his conscious mind, and “The End of the World,” which represents the space of his unconscious mind. Here the space of otherness is presented as, “a utopian construct . . . a peaceful, communal life.”<sup>238</sup> Koizumi surmises that, “the End of the World appears to be a better alternative to [the] conscious world.”<sup>239</sup>

This would seem to stand in opposition to Gabriel’s assertion that *Sputnik Sweetheart* contains a more positive rendering of otherness. Compared to the utopia in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, the other side as represented in Murakami’s more recent fiction is a space which one must return from and which cannot sustain the self. As the narrator of *Sputnik Sweetheart* ultimately surmises, an open liaison with the other side is impossible:

I dream. Sometimes I think that’s the only right thing to do. To dream, to live in the world of dreams – just as Sumire said. But it doesn’t last forever. Wakefulness always comes to take me back.<sup>240</sup>

Whereas such an ongoing engagement with the other side was possible and even desirable in Murakami’s early work, it appears to have become stigmatised, a refuge from a primary reality which can only ever be temporary.

This shift, and its consequences for Murakami’s representation of the other side, extends beyond *Sputnik Sweetheart* into *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark*. In *Kafka on the Shore* Kafka returns from the other side and assumes an adult responsibility. Rubin compares Kafka’s “clear-cut decision to abandon the attraction of lotus-land,” to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*<sup>241</sup> in which the narrator, “decided to linger for ever in the forest while his shadow returned to the real world.”<sup>242</sup> He cites a 2003 interview in which Murakami accounts for the emergence of this responsibility:

Murakami: I have no regrets about [the conclusion of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*] now. It was the most honest conclusion I could come up with at the time . . . If I were to write that story now, it would turn out differently . . . probably because my view of

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<sup>238</sup> Koizumi 2003: 171.

<sup>239</sup> Koizumi 2003: 171.

<sup>240</sup> SS: 226.

<sup>241</sup> Rubin describes *Kafka on the Shore* as a “quasi-sequel” to *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (Rubin 2003: 270).

<sup>242</sup> Rubin 2003: 274.

the world and maybe of the function of the novel has changed. It's a simple matter of a sense of responsibility.<sup>243</sup>

Murakami's new sense of responsibility posits a conservative tone in these texts, as the other side, previously imbued with a positive energy as a playful alternative to or refuge from the regimented order of this side, becomes associated with a darkness – a danger, a chaos, a fatalistic lure, and a dangerous lack of responsibility.

This is most notable in *After Dark*, in which Eri's withdrawal from wakefulness leads to her becoming trapped in the other side and watched over by a malevolent gaze. Here the other side is not the "lotus-land," Rubin refers to:

It smells like a room that has not been cleaned for some time. The window is shut tight, and the air does not move. It's chilly and smells faintly of mould. The silence is so deep it hurts our ears. No one is here, nor do we sense the presence of something lurking in here. If there was such a thing here before, it has long since departed.<sup>244</sup>

Whereas Sumire's journey to the other side is a necessity when her existence on this side becomes no longer tenable, Eri's imprisonment on the other side seems to be a kind of punishment for refusing to engage with the world on this side – a warning that to rescind an engagement with conscious, wakeful reality, is to rescind all control of the self.

### **Textual subjectivities**

Across Murakami's fiction there occurs a negotiation with otherness which engenders a polyphony in the modes the author employs at the surface of the text and amongst the voices of characters. The former is evident in the graphological variations in *Kafka on the Shore* and to a lesser degree in *Sputnik Sweetheart* (the use of different typefaces and other textual effects), and in the first person plural narrator of *After Dark*, which approximates a cinematic gaze and affects an intimate and sometimes sinister complicity with the reader. The latter is evident – explicitly so – in extended passages of dialogue between characters which occur throughout all three novels.

In addition to this, notions of "stable" and "unstable" subjectivity are deconstructed via the assertion that the characters hold a "core" of identity, an idea which

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<sup>243</sup> Rubin 2003: 274; Yukawa and Koyama 2003: 35.

<sup>244</sup> AD: 108

serves to effect an illusion of centred subjectivity (and which consequently lends the text itself the illusion of a stable centred subjectivity). This is destabilised as the characters suffer assaults upon this unity of self, being divided in two, as in the case of Miu in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, or displaced from the body, as with Eri in *After Dark*. The narrative itself becomes destabilised as no answers are offered to the fundamental questions posed at its supposed narrative core. For Miu, there is no reunification of self, and no answer to the enigma of the division. In *After Dark* there is no answer to Eri's displacement, and in *Kafka on the Shore*, no answer to the question of who killed Kafka's father. In refusing teleological closure, the text eludes stability just as stability eludes the characters. In each case, the construction of the narrative voice is fundamental to this treatment of textual subjectivity.

### **The narrative subject**

The narrative voice of *Sputnik Sweetheart* achieves a centred subjectivity in its early chapters, in which the only voice is that of the narrator, K. The narrator however is not the primary character; the narrative takes as its focus the life of the object of the narrator's unrequited love, Sumire. Rubin suggests that the narrator, "functions primarily as a window on Sumire," and that his desire for and focus on Sumire conditions his own position in the narrative<sup>245</sup>. Later, as the narrator recounts the stories told to him by Sumire and Miu, the singularity of the narrative voice becomes other to a much greater degree, as it shifts from intimate and subjective first person to the illusion of an omniscient third person.

The narrative voice becomes other absolutely with chapters eleven and twelve<sup>246</sup>, which are given over entirely to documents the narrator finds on floppy disks belonging to Sumire. Rubin draws attention to the otherness of the voice in these chapters: "Especially when her writing is quoted, the cuteness quotient can go off the charts."<sup>247</sup> It is, at least in Gabriel's English translation, difficult to note a distinction between the "cuteness" of Sumire's voice and that of the narrator, though the shift between voices is also denoted graphologically, by a change in typeface; Sumire's voice is rendered sans serif, which lends it a less distinguished and more simplistic, perhaps childlike, perhaps unfussy, appearance.

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<sup>245</sup> Rubin 2003: 250.

<sup>246</sup> SS: 143-154; 155-176.

<sup>247</sup> Rubin 2003: 250.

These interventions appear to unsettle the centred subjectivity constructed in the early chapters, though the narrator retains control of the narrative as a whole; the stories told to the narrator by Miu and Sumire are at all times modulated through the narrator's own voice. Chapters Eleven and Twelve are framed by the narrator as "found" documents; Chapter Ten closes with the narrator stating, "I set my pointer on Document 1 and double-clicked the icon,"<sup>248</sup> and Chapter Thirteen opens with, "I read each document twice."<sup>249</sup> The narrator reminds the reader that we are privy to these documents only through his reading consciousness; Sumire's narrative voice is mediated through a textual subjectivity over which he is master. This recalls the flirtation with polyphony present in *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn*, which is willing to give voice to otherness yet retains ultimate control, and thus fails to achieve a genuine polyphony<sup>250</sup>.

*Kafka on the Shore* is more convincing in its drawing of voices from multiple sources and discourses. The odd-numbered chapters follow the story of Kafka via a first person narration, and I will below offer a detailed analysis of how this narrative subjectivity operates with regard to the theme of sleep and wakefulness. The even-numbered chapters follow the story of Nakata, through a greater array of narrative devices; the early Nakata chapters consist of army intelligence reports of the "Yamanashi incident", a strange event of mass hypnosis which prefigured Nakata's childhood coma<sup>251</sup> and a letter from Nakata's teacher, written some years after the event<sup>252</sup>. While a third person narrative seems appropriate for a character who refers to himself only in the third person, Nakata is entirely absent from some later chapters, which focus on his travelling companion Hoshino<sup>253</sup>. These fluctuations resist the establishment of a stable narrative voice, and owing to short chapters of just a few thousand words, it is never long before a new voice takes command of the narrative. Hence one voice becomes another becomes another, instating in the text a polyphonic chain of becoming-other.

The most consistent voice of the novel is that of Kafka, which is, initially at least, constructed as being entirely of wakefulness. Kafka's first three chapters, which in terms of character exposition are fundamental, are framed by the narrator's sleep:

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<sup>248</sup> SS: 142.

<sup>249</sup> SS: 177.

<sup>250</sup> Bakhtin describes a genuine polyphony as that which "is not constructed as the entirety of a single consciousness which absorbs other consciousnesses as objects, but rather as the entirety of the interaction of several consciousnesses, of which no one fully becomes the object of any other one." (Bakhtin 1984a: 14).

<sup>251</sup> KOTS: 12-17; 25-31; 64-71.

<sup>252</sup> KOTS: 102-111.

<sup>253</sup> KOTS: 291-296; 458-464; 482-493.

Then I close the curtain and fall back to sleep.  
conclusion of Chapter 1.<sup>254</sup>

It's nearly dawn when I wake up.  
opening of Chapter 3.<sup>255</sup>

I shut my book and look for a while at the passing scenery. But very soon, before I realise it, I fall asleep myself.  
conclusion of Chapter 3.<sup>256</sup>

I'm asleep when our bus drives across the huge new bridge over the Inland Sea. I'd seen the bridge only on maps and had been looking forward to seeing it for real. Somebody taps me on the shoulder and I wake up.  
opening of Chapter 5.<sup>257</sup>

I shove the phone into the pocket of my backpack, turn off the light and close my eyes. I don't dream. Come to think of it, I haven't had any dreams in a long time.  
conclusion of Chapter 5.<sup>258</sup>

Kafka is constructed through his wakeful acts; all that is narrated falls within wakefulness, and everything beyond wakefulness escapes the narrating I. This posits narrative subjectivity definitively within wakefulness and ramifies with Koizumi's assertion that, "Murakami sees consciousness as the site of the self."<sup>259</sup> To be unable to perceive oneself or others from within sleep makes apparent sense for a first-person narrator, yet in Murakami this is unusual; frequently across his fiction, characters narrate from within states other to wakeful consciousness (*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* being notable cases in point).

Here this device posits Kafka as a character of the wakeful world, existing in a primary realm of reality. Later he will deviate from this schematic, and the final instance in these examples appears to suggest the possibility that an otherness which is not dream will come to fill the voids between his periods of wakefulness. He falls asleep but does not dream; indeed, he continues to narrate from this position; he is asleep yet aware that his sleep is absent of dream. This perhaps explains the narrative lacuna between states of wakefulness – if the narrator does not dream, then sleep is a void and therefore impossible to represent.

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<sup>254</sup> KOTS: 11.

<sup>255</sup> KOTS: 18.

<sup>256</sup> KOTS: 24.

<sup>257</sup> KOTS: 32.

<sup>258</sup> KOTS: 46.

<sup>259</sup> Koizumi 2003: 211.

Like *Kafka on the Shore*, the chapters of *After Dark* alternate between stories concerning Mari (awake in the dead of night) and Eri (perpetually asleep), though whereas in the former novel the more stable textual subjectivity is achieved through the first person narration of Kafka, here the text achieves a greater stability via an exterior narrative voice. *After Dark* constructs a first person plural narrator, exterior to the central characters of Mari and Eri, which Suter suggests is “a parody of the extradiegetic narrator of the traditional realist novel, the purely external observer that does not get involved with the story.”<sup>260</sup> This has the effect of rendering the reader complicit with its narrative gaze. Suter states:

[T]he question of gaze is . . . clearly foregrounded and problematized . . . “we” slowly approach the characters in a cinematographic way . . . seeing the protagonists “as though we were a camera.”<sup>261</sup>

As I will discuss, in Eri’s story this device achieves a sinister effect, with the narrative voice reflexively commenting upon its own gaze (and the manner in which this gaze “holds” Eri’s body). In Mari’s story the device soon becomes all but invisible; overwhelmed by action and dialogue, it assumes the effect of an omniscient third person narrator, more apparently exterior and therefore not so overtly intrusive. This action and dialogue renders the character of Mari more accessible, more individuated and whole, than that of her sister Eri, who remains asleep throughout her narrative and as such engages in only intrapersonal communication. Mari engages in conversations with several other characters – Takahashi, Kaoru, Komugi, Korogi, and Guo Dongli – and via these interactions the reader is given access to her thoughts. Like Kafka, her character is constructed upon this wakeful subjectivity.

For Eri, this first person plural narrator is particularly problematic. It serves to construct a gaze within which is held the object of her sleeping body, which Michael Seats suggests constructs, “sometimes alarming viewing positions for the ‘reader’.”<sup>262</sup> This is explicitly acknowledged in the reader’s first introduction to Eri:

The room is dark, but our eyes gradually adjust to the darkness. A woman lies in bed, asleep. A young beautiful woman: Mari’s sister, Eri. Eri Asai . . . We allow ourselves to become a single point of view, and we observe her for a time. Perhaps it should be said

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<sup>260</sup> Suter 2008: 126.

<sup>261</sup> Suter 2008: 125-126.

<sup>262</sup> Seats 2006: 91.

that we are peeping in on her . . . Her small, well-shaped lips are tightened into a straight line.<sup>263</sup>

Here the narrative voice acknowledges that it is “peeping” and also sees fit to comment on Eri’s “well-shaped lips”; the passive sleeping object and active viewing subject are placed in sharp contrast. Suter argues that this device makes, “the narrator and the implied reader even closer,”<sup>264</sup> yet when compared to the textual treatment of Mari – engaging in dialogue, sharing thoughts, participating in an objective, wakeful reality – Eri seems the more distant character. Whereas Mari’s subjectivity is represented as wakeful, active, and in the midst of dialogue, Eri is constructed through the representation of her sleeping body and its absence of her “self”; she is a sleeping body and nothing more – in Suter’s words, an “unaware and passive object.”<sup>265</sup> A discrepancy forms in the reader’s distance from each, and the stability of the narrative as a whole is unsettled as the reader is repeatedly drawn close and then held back as the chapters alternate.

### The core self

Whereas the Sebald texts announce an elusion of singularity whilst covertly achieving a monological effect of flatness, Murakami explicitly posits in his characters the notion of a “core self.” Writing on *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Matthew Strecher identifies a room within the “maze-like hotel,” which represents the protagonist’s unconscious, as “the core, the centre of his whole being,”<sup>266</sup> and similarly, the narrator of *Dance Dance Dance*, “discovers a musty, dust-filled room in a deep corner of his mind.”<sup>267</sup> Strecher identifies Murakami’s first use of a “black box” metaphor for this core in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*:

when the protagonist is told by a scientist who has been tinkering with electrical circuits in his brain that the core consciousness is like the ‘black box’ used to record flight data on aircraft: it contains all the information necessary to form the individual identity, but it is impervious to attempts to open it and observe its contents. This is identity.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> AD: 25.

<sup>264</sup> Suter 2008: 125.

<sup>265</sup> Suter 2008: 127.

<sup>266</sup> Strecher 2002: 83.

<sup>267</sup> Strecher 2002: 83.

<sup>268</sup> Strecher 2002: 83.



A black box is something which is viewed in terms of its exterior, its interior beyond perception or knowledge<sup>269</sup>. It is a singular entity, undivided and impenetrable, and a container of objective truth.

The idea of the self as a black box is problematic here; the subject, as I choose to understand it, has only an illusory core, and therefore the self has no core other than the brute physicality of the body, the fact of consciousness, and the separateness from others. The subject is an irrevocably divided construct; rather than emanating from an interior core, its source of meaning is displaced away from the individual. In apparent contrast to this, Murakami endows his characters with a particular essence – an identity which is unique and, in theory, indivisible. However, the notion of the core as a black box resonates with theories of the unconscious; the black box is a repository of information and meaning, possibly encrypted, lying beyond primary consciousness, not immediately accessible, if at all, but a record nonetheless. It is a site where meaning endures, beyond its displacement from consciousness. Koizumi makes this explicit in stating that the black box “is a metaphor for the unconscious, which Murakami also defines as the core of consciousness,”<sup>270</sup> and suggests that it is “the self’s relation to its unknown core component which simultaneously anchors and destabilises itself.”<sup>271</sup> It is unclear however if Murakami is positing this core as the origin of meaning, or the product of subjectivity; that is, if it is something inherent from which identity emanates, or if it is an arbitrary centre which accrues over time in a kind of sedimentation of meaning. This calls to mind the image of Orfordness in *The Rings of Saturn*, and of extraterritorial matter which is always shifting, never static, and forever resists stability.

In *After Dark*, Mari and Takahashi concur that neither has been able to reach Eri, as if her core self is sequestered and always has been, even prior to her sleep<sup>272</sup>. It is suggested that her natural beauty, which led to her becoming a model, has affected a passivity in her and has rendered her a screen upon which others project their desires<sup>273</sup>. As such her identity is not disrupted by sleep, characterised as it is by her physical appearance and her

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<sup>269</sup> The black box was conceived of in the 1940s and the first prototype was developed by David Warren at the Aeronautical Research Laboratories in Melbourne Australia between 1953 and 1958. The OED makes reference to an article in *The Daily Telegraph* of 3 July 1964, which states, “The flight recorder is an indestructible ‘black box’ which automatically records the key functions in the aircraft... The ‘black box’ can..tell what went wrong in a crash.” “black, *a.*” The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 17 Jun. 2009 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>>.

<sup>270</sup> Koizumi 2003: 133.

<sup>271</sup> Koizumi 2003: ii.

<sup>272</sup> AD: 125; 127.

<sup>273</sup> AD: 128-129.

body; in sleep, she remains the socially constructed version of herself that others see. Clearly this concept is deeply problematic. An alternative reading presents itself in the idea that the alienated aspect of Eri's self, the "active" aspect which has been displaced by this affected passivity, is the part of her which travels to the other side and which gains autonomy through the need to assert itself and escape from the other side's prison-like bounds. The division of these aspects of Eri would seem to underscore a rhetoric which suggests that the individual is more than the fragmented subject and also that the notion of a core self is reductive.

Mari's core self is represented as radically different to that of Eri. While Eri is defined by her physical appearance and others' perceptions of her, Mari is defined by her mind rather than her physical appearance<sup>274</sup>. Takahashi questions how two sisters born to the same parents and raised in the same environment could be so different, asking, "At what point do you go your separate ways?"<sup>275</sup> This question implies a genetic essentialism and has connotations of a gendered sameness, and of these characters having to actively mark out difference rather than individuality being inherent.

The concept of sameness is revisited at the novel's close. Mari lies alongside her sleeping sister in bed. She listens for "reverberations" of Eri's consciousness:

The place where they originate is not far from here. And Eri's flow is almost certainly blending with my own, Mari feels. We are sisters, after all.<sup>276</sup>

This appears to undermine the notion of a singular individuated core, suggesting instead that there may be a coincidence of identity, a moment of intersubjectivity. It is of note that this moment is not only as the sisters are in physical proximity, but also as each is entering the liminal state of hypnagogia, Mari from wakefulness, Eri from sleep.

The notion of a unified core self is reflected and countered in the condition of the text itself. With regard to the "open question" or "lacuna", Murakami seems determined to invest his narratives with enigma. He refuses definitive answers to the questions posed, and rarely offers complete resolutions to the teleologies he constructs. Within the texts discussed here there are many questions never resolved, for example, where does Sumire

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<sup>274</sup> This is indicative of a limiting duality common to Murakami's women, who are defined by either the body, such as Eri, or the mind (Mari, Sumire, Miu) a binary which is rarely deconstructed within the text.

<sup>275</sup> AD: 16.

<sup>276</sup> AD: 195.

disappear to? What really happened to Miu when her self was divided? What is the nature of the mysterious room that Eri travels to? What is her connection to Shirakawa? What happened to Nakata within his childhood coma to alter his subjectivity in such a way? Who killed Kafka's father? Each novel constructs these questions with clarity and places each prominently within the narrative, yet no answers are ever divulged. This leaves the narrative open to accusations of opacity, while simultaneously enticing a readership which anticipates definitive answers yet derives pleasure from speculation and from having such answers withheld.

In analysis of *Kafka on the Shore*, Seats questions the meaning of the "entrance stone" or *iriguchi*, the enigmatic something which Nakata is charged with searching for. He suggests that the undecidability of the *iriguchi*:

invokes the simultaneous enticement and threat of the liminal . . . the possibility of both redemption *and* oblivion. Certainly, apart from its function as a key signifier of the liminal and the threshold of abjection, the 'meaning' of the *iriguchi* remains obscure to the very end of the narrative.<sup>277</sup>

This undecidability is enticing, yet it places the stability of meaning in threat. Rubin suggests that the author himself refuses to place any specific meaning on his narratives or the images each deploys: "Murakami stubbornly asserts that the images in his work are not symbols and that he himself does not understand their 'meanings'"<sup>278</sup>. This suggests that the unconscious of the author extends to the unconscious of the text, with no intervention or attempt to decode the images that manifest in the text. As with the decentred subject, meaning is displaced away from the body of the text. These questions and riddles function in the text much in the same way that questions of identity function in the characters – the possibility of a core truth is tantalisingly offered, then withheld. The repetition of this device over the body of Murakami's work builds into a rhetorical position: beneath the teleological mysteries and questions of identity, there is no core of meaning. Just as the subject is constructed by exterior forces, the space beyond the surface is blank and mutable, its meaning constructed by the reader.

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<sup>277</sup> Seats 2006: 337.

<sup>278</sup> Rubin 1992: 493.

## Division, displacement

The concept of the core, with its insistence upon wholeness, also includes within it the possibility of division. The narrator of *Sputnik Sweetheart* states an awareness of his own wholeness:

How well do we really know ourselves? When I was young I began to draw an invisible boundary between myself and other people.  
SS: 60.

This has clear parallels with theories of the self and subjectivity; it recalls the process through which the infant learns to differentiate itself from exterior objects, drawing boundaries to achieve individuation. The use of “began” however suggests the need to continue to draw these boundaries, that failure to do so will risk losing haecceity and wholeness. The process and maintenance of drawing boundaries and placing divisions between the self and other also suggests a question of boundaries drawn *within* the self. Psychoanalysis deploys the term “splitting of the ego” in several contexts, sometimes paradoxically. It can refer to a defence mechanism employed in fetishism to protect the ego, a process of identification and transference experienced in clinical practice, and, most straightforwardly, the splitting of the personality into two or more parts<sup>279</sup>. After splitting, only one of the part-egos is experienced by the subject as a “self”; the other remains but is driven into the unconscious.

Strecher notes that many characters in Murakami are, “suddenly disconnected from some crucial part of themselves, forced to lead their lives as half-individuals.”<sup>280</sup> The most notable cases of the divided self are the narrator of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, and Miu, the object of Sumire’s desire in *Sputnik Sweetheart*. Miu tells Sumire, “The person here now isn’t the real me . . . I wish I could have met you when I was whole.”<sup>281</sup> She later recounts to Sumire the incident in which her self was divided<sup>282</sup>. As a student she visits an amusement park which she could see from her apartment; she brings binoculars and plans to ride the Ferris Wheel in the hope of seeing her apartment. However, the park closes with Miu trapped in a gondola on the wheel. She falls asleep, and upon waking looks through the binoculars to her apartment and sees herself, an other self, making love to a

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<sup>279</sup> see Laplanche and Pontalis 1988: 427-429.

<sup>280</sup> Strecher 2002: 131.

<sup>281</sup> SS: 51.

<sup>282</sup> SS: 158-172.

man, Ferdinando, whose advances she has previously rejected. At this point her memory of the event comes to an end. Following this, she perceives in herself a split, as if she has been cut in two. Her hair turns white, and the half of her that remained in conscious reality (the half that she continues to perceive as her self and with whose voice she speaks) is left without the capacity for sexuality of any kind. She questions, “Which me, on which side of the mirror is the real me?”<sup>283</sup> The use of the word mirror is of note, evoking the mirror stage in Lacan’s developmental model<sup>284</sup>. However, whereas the Lacanian subject is able to differentiate between itself and the other as a result of the mirror stage, Miu cannot. She perceives one half of her divided self as the seat of subjectivity yet she does not trust that it is her true self, “the real me.”

The subjectivity of the divided character is represented from the opposite perspective in *Kafka on the Shore*, in which the character of Nakata – whose division is, again, the result of a mysterious “otherworldly” experience – does not perceive himself as “the real me,” but is altogether alienated from the concept of selfhood. The division of Nakata occurs in childhood, following a coma. According to his teacher he had been a very bright, if resigned, boy<sup>285</sup>; when he wakes from the coma he has no capacity for learning, can no longer read or write, and most notably, no longer refers to himself in the first person. He uses “I” as a speaking subject, and “Nakata,” when referring to himself, as in this dialogue with the cat Otsuka:

“I know. It’s easy to forget things you don’t need any more. Nakata’s exactly the same way,” the man said, scratching his head.<sup>286</sup>

This reference to himself in the third person suggests that he views himself as an object, an entity other to the I that speaks. His speaking self has become fractured from his physical self, which appears to carry a trace of this separation within itself, commented upon as Otsuka notices that Nakata has a very faint shadow:

“Your problem is that your *shadow* is a bit – how should I put it? – *faint*. I thought this the first time I laid eyes on you, that the shadow you cast on the ground is only half as dark as that of ordinary people.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> SS: 172.

<sup>284</sup> Lacan 1977: 1-8.

<sup>285</sup> KOTS: 109.

<sup>286</sup> KOTS: 48.

<sup>287</sup> KOTS: 53.

The faintness of his shadow implies that he is in some way opaque – light passes through his body, he is somehow inherently ethereal, or more simply, his shadow, the mark he casts on the world, is faint because it is the shadow of only half of him. Read in conjunction with his alienated sense of self (his inability to refer to himself as “I”), this half-shadow suggests that Nakata is divided not only between his speaking and physical selves, but from his “core” self, which lies somewhere exterior to both his voice and his body.

This recalls the case of Miu, and Strecher’s description of characters, “disconnected from some crucial part of themselves.”<sup>288</sup> However, whereas Miu comes to accept the division in her self, Nakata moves toward attaining a wholeness. As his quest nears its conclusion, a subjectivity emerges. “It’s not just that I’m dumb,” he says, towards the end of his narrative,<sup>289</sup> using “I” in reference to himself for the first time. Here he also displays a sense of reflexivity as he analyses his particular state of being, concluding that he is “empty inside”<sup>290</sup>. He continues to refer to himself as Nakata, but from this point refers to himself intermittently as “I” and also takes an active interest in reuniting the disparate parts of himself: “I have to get the other half of my shadow back,” he says<sup>291</sup>.

Like Nakata, Kafka’s subjectivity is literally fractured. “Kafka” is itself a false name, assumed to conceal the narrator’s identity upon running away from home. Seats comments that, “[a]s a signifier, the proper name ‘Kafka’ brings into play a huge range of connotative possibilities as to how the narrative and characters are to be ‘interpreted’.”<sup>292</sup> Kafka has chosen the name for the Czech meaning of “crow” rather than as homage to Franz Kafka, though that connotation remains in play. Speaking to Miss Saeki, an older woman on whom he develops an Oedipal fixation, he says, “I have to get stronger – like a stray crow. That’s what Kafka means in Czech, you know – *crow*.”<sup>293</sup>

This statement problematises the reader’s understanding of Kafka. Up to this point Kafka has referred to another character as “Crow” – the mysterious “boy named Crow”. This Crow is a kind of hallucination, an imaginary friend – a manifestation of an aspect of Kafka which he objectifies and projects outside himself. Gabriel argues that Crow is Kafka’s *ikiryō*, meaning “spirit of the living,” that is, the ghost of one still alive<sup>294</sup>. Crow

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<sup>288</sup> Strecher 2002: 131.

<sup>289</sup> KOTS: 329.

<sup>290</sup> KOTS: 329.

<sup>291</sup> KOTS: 330.

<sup>292</sup> Seats 2006: 336.

<sup>293</sup> KOTS: 340; the Czech for crow is actually “vrána”; “kavka” translates as jackdaw.

<sup>294</sup> Gabriel 2006: 130.

appears to possess much greater strength than Kafka, and is able to supersede Kafka's voice to give firm instructions. On his first appearance he initiates a game, ordering Kafka to imagine a sandstorm: "I do as he says, get everything else out of my head. I am a total blank."<sup>295</sup>

Kafka is a "total blank," yet the "I" remains, highlighting another division of subjectivity, independent of Crow; Kafka is blank, absent, yet his narrating voice remains present, maintaining the agency to refer to the other's blankness. At a further exterior position, Crow's voice enters the text, rendered in bold typeface. This affects a clear distinction between voices, instituting an opposition of the standard typeface of Kafka's first person narrative, and an other, stronger, more emphatic mode of address. Crow's text asserts a greater authority than Kafka's, which resounds with the notion of the super-ego<sup>296</sup>, a role which Crow certainly fulfils in Kafka; despite being merely an aspect of his host, he appears to be wiser and more articulate, functioning at different times as a guide, a calming influence, and a conscience. He maintains a steady, unflustered tone; when Kafka is under pressure he turns to Crow for help, and when Crow is unavailable, he flounders:

I search for the right words. First of all I look for the boy named Crow, but he's nowhere to be found. I'm left to choose them on my own, and that takes time.<sup>297</sup>

That Crow is always outside of and separate to Kafka makes Kafka's statement to Miss Saeki all the more surprising; it subverts the description of Crow as exterior in his direct first person to narration to the reader. The reader is already aware that Crow is an aspect of Kafka, but here he becomes explicitly aligned with Kafka – Kafka and Crow become one, become whole. This marks an important development in Kafka's journey through the liminal. He takes on the powerful mantle of Crow and attains a new strength in uniting these disparate aspects of himself.

These notions of division are made even more explicit in Murakami's short story *Sleep*<sup>298</sup>, in which the unnamed female narrator discovers she is able to survive without sleep. She finds she enjoys her sleepless life as she is able to fulfil her social duties as a wife and mother, and have time to herself, which she spends reading novels. She achieves this perpetual wakefulness through separating mind and body:

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<sup>295</sup> KOTS: 3.

<sup>296</sup> See Laplanche and Pontalis 1988: 435-438.

<sup>297</sup> KOTS: 266-267.

<sup>298</sup> Murakami 1993: 74-109.

It was easy once I got the hang of it. All I had to do was break the connection between my mind and my body. While my body went about its business, my mind floated in its own inner space.<sup>299</sup>

She recalls a time in college when she first experienced insomnia (or “something like it”<sup>300</sup>) which leaves her feeling tired in the daylight hours, never fully awake nor asleep. Her second experience of sleeplessness is “nothing like that insomnia, nothing at all. I just can’t sleep. Not for one second.”<sup>301</sup>

Aside from that simple fact, I’m perfectly normal. I don’t feel sleepy, and my mind is as clear as ever. Clearer, if anything. . . In terms of everyday reality, there’s nothing wrong with me. I just can’t sleep.<sup>302</sup>

Suter comments that the narrator’s “‘new self’ is amazed at how easy it is to separate mind and body and make them work independently.”<sup>303</sup> She continues:

If during her first insomnia the narrator lived the separation between mind and body passively, as a disconcerting state in the face of which she was powerless, now she actively appropriates it, cultivating it as a resource that allows her to be herself while simultaneously continuing to play her part. To overcome the sense of alienation from her role as wife and mother, the narrator decides to distance the reality that has been imposed on her and to live in two different worlds at the same time.<sup>304</sup>

This resonates with the displacement of subjectivity which occurs with Eri, as the camera-like narrator objectifies her sleeping body, and her subjectivity is displaced, manifesting in a mysterious room on her TV screen. It also ramifies with an event in *Kafka on the Shore*, in which Kafka is passed out in the grounds of a Shinto shrine in Shikoku as his father is murdered hundreds of miles away in Tokyo. It is postulated within the novel that this is an instance of spirit projection, an event which sees the subject displaced from the body and able to travel away from the body across space or time. This concept is first mentioned in reference to Nakata; the doctor treating Nakata during his childhood coma suggests that Nakata is experiencing such an occurrence:

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<sup>299</sup> Murakami 1993: 96.

<sup>300</sup> Murakami 1993: 74.

<sup>301</sup> Murakami 1993: 76.

<sup>302</sup> Murakami 1993: 76.

<sup>303</sup> Suter 2008: 160.

<sup>304</sup> Suter 2008: 161.



It might sound strange to put it this way, but it seemed like the real Nakata had gone off somewhere, leaving behind for a time the physical container, which in his absence kept all his bodily functions going at the minimum level needed to preserve itself. The term “spirit projection” sprang to mind . . . the soul temporarily leaves the body, goes off a great distance to take care of some vital task and then returns to reunite with the body.<sup>305</sup>

In each case, subjectivity is displaced from within the bounds of the body during sleep. The sleeping body becomes a site which is not inscribed by subjectivity, or by the wakeful “performance” of the self, which in turn suggests a question of how identity is performed during sleep.

In summary, the core of the self comes to reverberate with the space of the other side. It is whole and undivided; it is the unconscious – an otherness interior to the characters, separate from physicality and the conscious mind yet inextricably linked to the exterior otherness, what might be understood as a space of the collective unconscious, as embodied in the notion of the other side. These exterior and interior forms of otherness appear to interact and effect ruptures within the characters – a division in Miu, a displacement in Eri, a permanent liminal hypnagogia in Nakata.

### **Liminal motifs**

As with Sebald, the Murakami texts present a wide array of liminal motifs; the hypnagogic and the nomadic are present, though approached from new angles. Here we see the hypnagogic evoked with greater focus on physicality and the body, and while less attention is paid to the potentially obfuscated liminal site, as evoked in the Sebaldian narrator’s moments of existential disorientation, Murakami professes a site of elucidation, a peak rather than a trough, a liminal site which is inclusive rather than exclusive of the states it bridges.

In addition to these discussions, the Murakami texts offer the opportunity to discuss two further tropes of the liminal – the night, a space which can be theorised via notions of the vespertine, the non-place, and the carnivalesque – and the rites of passage, as embodied in the space of adolescence. The narrative of *After Dark* is bound within the temporal confines of a single night; in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Sumire makes her transition to the other side at night, and similarly the narrator attempts to trace her across that boundary in

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<sup>305</sup> KOTS: 70.

darkness. In these instances, night appears to attain a kind of agency and effects a carnivalesque liminality which engenders such transitions. The adolescent characters of Kafka and Mari are shown to move through liminal rites of passage, toward a stable adult identity; in contrast, Sumire, already beyond adolescence, refuses a stable identity and negotiates a nomadic identity as she opts for new becoming after new becoming.

### Hypnagogia

Hypnagogia is a very prominent model of liminality in these texts. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, all three of the main characters encounter the other side while in the proximity of sleep. Miu loses part of herself while in a hypnagogic state, Sumire makes her transit to the other side, and the narrator resists its pull, both from the space of hypnagogia. *Kafka on the Shore* features two central occurrences of sleep. One concerns an incident of spirit projection – Kafka’s murder of his father – and the other occurs when the young Nakata and his classmates fall asleep while on an excursion with their young teacher, Setsuko; his classmates wake, but Nakata remains in his coma for weeks and emerges with a radically altered subjectivity. In *After Dark*, Eri sleeps while Mari is awake; Mari engages with otherness, while Eri’s self-imposed solitude renders her a singular object for the narrator’s gaze and the sexually threatening gaze of Shirikawa.

The dichotomy of a primary wakefulness and a supplemental sleep is apparent in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, in which the space of wakefulness is privileged as a site in which one may be alert to engage with life and open to otherness. The privileging of wakefulness is present in advice given to the narrator which he passes on to Sumire:

“What’s important is being attentive. Staying calm, being alert to things around you... The part about being alert... not prejudging things, listening to what’s going on, keeping your ears, heart, and mind open.”<sup>306</sup>

The narrator implies that wakefulness is a necessity for engagement with other things; he even suggests thinking about “a cucumber in a fridge on a summer afternoon”<sup>307</sup> to enhance this alertness, which ramifies with the idea of a continuum, as discussed in *The Rings of Saturn* in relation to the “bleaching” of consciousness. The idea of “keeping your ears, heart, and mind open,” suggests a receptiveness to and an engagement with that

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<sup>306</sup> SS: 45.

<sup>307</sup> SS: 46.

which lies beyond the self, such as sensory experiences or interpersonal encounters. This viewpoint re-asserts a primacy of wakeful alertness and contrasts with the depiction of Eri in *After Dark*, adrift and isolated in the oblivion of sleep. Murakami uses the metonymy of heart and mind, referring to Eri's "heart and mind at the bottom of the sea,"<sup>308</sup> which would seem to suggest that sleep effects an absence of the self from the surface of the body at the very least, and perhaps a total displacement from the body.

With this prioritisation of wakefulness already instated, Murakami pays particular attention to sites of hypnagogia, constructing his characters in this state on frequent occasion, and never neglecting to evoke how proximity to sleep affects these characters' subjectivity. In an airport departure lounge, the narrator of *Sputnik Sweetheart* states that he is "in the midst of [an] illogical dream – or uncertain wakefulness."<sup>309</sup> Shortly afterwards he "wakes"<sup>310</sup>; a border of consciousness is crossed, though it is unclear what state of consciousness has he entered if he was already within wakefulness. The continuity of consciousness is disrupted, recalling the sensation of "waking" from a dream, only to discover one is still within the dream.

The physical effects of hypnagogia are evoked in a description of Sumire from Miu's perspective. Miu wakes in the night and finds Sumire in her room, "crouched like an insect between the door and the wardrobe."<sup>311</sup> Sumire is in a trance; she does not respond to Miu's voice, though, "[h]er eyes were open, but unseeing,"<sup>312</sup> presenting a paradox – the ghost of wakefulness manifest in sleep, or vice versa. Miu helps Sumire into her bed, and watches as she closes her eyes and appears to fall into a more definite sleep<sup>313</sup>. Later, she finds Sumire has woken and is relatively lucid, though she remains within the hypnagogic and is unable to coordinate her fingers to button her pyjamas<sup>314</sup>. This hypnagogic episode immediately precedes Sumire's disappearance and transit to the other side, and appears to prefigure the transit, as if her paradoxical state of consciousness were a pre-condition. This might appear to confound the narrator's earlier assertion that an alert wakefulness is necessary to engage with otherness.

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<sup>308</sup> AD: 52.

<sup>309</sup> SS: 92.

<sup>310</sup> SS: 93.

<sup>311</sup> SS: 122.

<sup>312</sup> SS: 123.

<sup>313</sup> SS: 125.

<sup>314</sup> SS: 126.

The manner in which sleep and wakefulness act upon each other as disruptive agents is illustrated in another instance in which the two states take on a weight as each struggles for dominance. Sumire telephones the narrator at night and he struggles to wake himself; he says, “Just holding this phone I feel like I’m holding up a crumbling stone wall.”<sup>315</sup> Here the weight of sleep is embodied in the image of the stone wall; if he lets the wall fall, he will fall back into sleep. Similarly, Sumire remains in a semiconscious state as she tries to put on pyjamas following a deep trance: “It took some time to get all the buttons fastened. Her fingers wouldn’t work right.”<sup>316</sup> Here Sumire, still partially within sleep, lacks conscious control of her body, which itself becomes the site of a struggle between the two states, between the conscious desire for activity and control, and the pull towards inactivity and the oblivion it represents.

Murakami repeats the event of being roused from sleep by a telephone call in *After Dark*, as Mari is woken by Takahashi:

“Practice over?” she asks, but she hardly recognises her own voice. I am me and not me.<sup>317</sup>

In her hypnopompic state, Mari is both her sleeping self and wakeful self, yet fully neither. Her confusion and failure to recognise herself upon waking suggests an apparent rupture between these selves. She has remembered that Takahashi has been attending band practice, but she “hardly recognises her voice,” suggesting a partial, fragmented and arbitrary continuity from a previous period of wakefulness; she is able to recall an event which is definitively exterior to her, yet her voice, a core aspect of her wakeful self, becomes something other to her, an object outside of her self. The act of waking necessitates that Mari’s sleeping subjectivity incorporates the otherness of her wakeful subjectivity, for example, that she recognises her voice as her own, and allows her wakeful subjectivity to re-establish itself. This process is repeated upon each instance of waking, and it follows that there would be an equivalent upon falling asleep; we might therefore conceive of a continuity to one’s sleeping self which must re-establish and reassert itself upon each instance of falling asleep.

Murakami offers an alternative model in Mari’s next encounter with hypnagogia. As she falls asleep, “a thick cloak . . . envelops her.”<sup>318</sup> This image of hypnagogia carries

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<sup>315</sup> SS: 32.

<sup>316</sup> SS: 126.

<sup>317</sup> AD 179-180.

connotations of concealment, Mari's wakeful self becoming obscured by a "thick cloak"; it bestows upon sleep an agency to conceal the subject's wakeful self from external perception, beyond the surface of the body. Mari is rendered as Eri – an object. The narrative does not follow Mari into sleep – that is, the Mari who is enveloped by sleep – but remains at a distance, observing her sleeping body. It acknowledges that this body is not Mari and that she is out of sight, but it is reticent to follow.

Murakami offers his fullest, most lingering evocation of hypnagogia in his description of Nakata in *Kafka on the Shore*:

Nakata let his body relax, switched off his mind, letting things flow through him. This was natural for him, something he'd done ever since he was a child, without a second thought. Before long the borders of his consciousness fluttered around, just like the butterflies. Beyond these borders lay a dark abyss. Occasionally his consciousness would fly over the border and hover over that dizzying, black crevasse. But Nakata wasn't afraid of the darkness or how deep it was. And why should he be? That bottomless world of darkness, that weighty silence and chaos, was an old friend, a part of him already. Nakata understood this well. In that world there was no writing, no days of the week, no scary Governor, no opera, no BMWs. No scissors, no tall hats. On the other hand, neither were there delicious eel, no tasty bean-jam buns. *Everything* is there, but there are no *parts*. Since there are no parts, there's no need to replace one thing with another. No need to remove anything, or add anything. You don't have to think about difficult things, just let yourself soak it all in. For Nakata, nothing could be better.<sup>319</sup>

That Nakata "switched off his mind, letting things flow through him," suggests he actively embraces this otherness, and that it is accessible not through the "alertness" stipulated in *Sputnik Sweetheart* but through the decision to forsake an alert consciousness. The sentence, "Occasionally his consciousness would fly over the border and hover over that dizzying, black crevasse," suggests a vertigo of consciousness akin to that described by Sebald, and the physical sensation of falling described by Mavromatis and Oswald in their respective accounts of hypnagogia<sup>320</sup>. However, to Nakata this is a far from unpleasant sensation; he is not afraid of this darkness, it is "a part of him already." He finds the darkness comforting ("nothing could be better") as it represents a wholeness that he is unable to attain in wakefulness. Yet it is also a kind of oblivion; nothing is differentiated, all is one.

That this is a comforting experience for Nakata places him in opposition to almost every other character across all three texts, for whom wakeful engagement is paramount

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<sup>318</sup> AD: 193.

<sup>319</sup> KOTS: 90.

<sup>320</sup> Mavromatis 1987: 36; Oswald 1963: 43.

and oblivion is dangerous. Even Sumire, who makes an apparently successful transition to the other side, does not share Nakata's ease and acceptance of oblivion. It would appear that, despite the apparent privileging of wakefulness, of this side over the other, that an engagement with the other via hypnagogia (even a total engagement as in the case of Nakata) need not engender a precarious subject position. It may even be desirable.

### The night

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator's account of Somerleyton at night hints at the vespertine, a coming alive as night falls, and an inversion of day and night which privileges the night as a space of activity. Each of the Murakami texts engages with the space of night extensively and offers a range of models for considering its liminality. Night is, in turn, ascribed a primacy over day, is located as a non-place, and as a carnivalesque space.

*Sputnik Sweetheart* considers Sumire's lifestyle as non-circadian; she is neither strictly diurnal nor nocturnal but lives across the day and the night, sleeping when she wants, being awake when she wants, and using neither sleep nor wakefulness to demarcate day and night. This coincides with the narrator's description of her as a "wild, cool, dissolute," bohemian<sup>321</sup>, and aligns her with a carnivalesque disregard for such lifestyle boundaries.

The space of the night becomes prominent later in the narrative as the site of the narrator's encounter with the other side. This particular night occurs on an unnamed Greek island as the narrator attempts to find the missing Sumire. It is described not as a passive darkness or merely an absence of day, but as a space of great activity, as exemplified in the narrator's account of dusk falling:

Moment by moment the blue of the sky turned deeper, a large circular moon rising from the sea, a handful of stars piercing holes in the sky. A breeze blew up the slopes, rustling the hibiscus.<sup>322</sup>

This recalls the concept of the vespertine in Sebald, in particular the evening activity signified by the "gleaming radiance" of illuminated glasshouses<sup>323</sup>. Here, it presents a reversal of the anticipated lessening of activity; the transitional space of dusk sees not a

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<sup>321</sup> SS: 6.

<sup>322</sup> SS: 183.

<sup>323</sup> TROS: 34.

withdrawal of the day's activities but an announcement of the oncoming night – stars pierce holes in the sky; a breeze arrives to disturb the peace. Here, nightfall is an agent of instigation, and later acquires an even greater agency, as the narrator is awoken by a strange music, “far-off,” and “barely audible,”<sup>324</sup> yet intrusive enough to wake him. He identifies it as having, “the uneven, sharp sound of live music,” which gives it an immediacy and presence, and places it in opposition to something, “played through speakers.”<sup>325</sup> He considers that Sumire might be “listening to the same music,”<sup>326</sup> and is drawn towards the sound. He walks toward the summit of a hill from where he perceives the music originates and as he approaches the source he perceives a change in himself:

I looked up at the sky then, under the moonlight, and glanced at my palm. With a rush of understanding I knew this wasn't my hand anymore. I can't explain it. But at a glance I knew. My hand was no longer my hand, my legs no longer my legs.<sup>327</sup>

The narrator's sense of self is destabilised. His body is present yet he no longer perceives it to be his own. His subjectivity is displaced yet remains, exterior to his physical body, which he is able to observe as if it is other to his consciousness, which continues to narrate in the first person. The music, the mysterious source of which he never reaches, wakes him from sleep, and lures him into this particular state of consciousness adjacent to the other side. This state of consciousness instigates a disorientation akin to the hypnagogic, and in this proximity to otherness the stability of subjectivity begins to erode:

Bathed in the pallid moonlight, my body, like some plaster puppet, had lost all living warmth. As if a voodoo magician had put a spell on me, blowing my transient life into this lump of clay. The spark of life had vanished... Someone had rearranged my cells, untied the threads that held my mind together.<sup>328</sup>

The narrator resists the draw of the other side and the nature of this boundary remains uncertain<sup>329</sup>. However, his experience at this threshold hints at Sumire's fate. Her

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<sup>324</sup> SS: 184.

<sup>325</sup> SS: 184.

<sup>326</sup> SS: 184.

<sup>327</sup> SS: 185-186.

<sup>328</sup> SS: 186.

<sup>329</sup> This particular effect of darkness is not unprecedented in Murakami. Koizumi notes that in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, darkness, “dissolves all certainties,” (Koizumi 2003: 59). She cites the novel: “Everything – names, sensations, places – dissolved and was swallowed into darkness,” (Murakami 1989: 275; Koizumi 2003: 59), reflecting the destabilisation of selfhood as described by the narrator of *Sputnik Sweetheart*.

disappearance is described as “like smoke”<sup>330</sup>, which presents a very canny visual image of becoming-other – of something perpetually in motion from its point of origin which is initially visible but disperses to become invisible. It also carries connotations of transience and concealment – it can be opaque, a smokescreen, or smoke in the wind. It can also be sulphuric, as if emerging from the underworld, which in conjunction with the Greek location suggests an allusion to Orpheus.

An alternative perspective on the space of the night is offered in *After Dark*, the title of which explicitly locates the content of the narrative within this darkness. Each chapter begins with the image of a clock face, announcing to the reader precisely what time of night it is; the novel opens at five to midnight, and closes a few hours later at ten to seven in the morning, as the, “new sun pours new light on the city streets.”<sup>331</sup> One narrative strand concerns Mari, who remains in downtown Tokyo having missed the last train home to her middle class suburb, possibly deliberately<sup>332</sup>. The narrative follows her through a succession of spaces, and documents her interaction with a succession of people.

For Mari, the night city is a liminal space. She is a young woman away from home, and this particular night comes to be a rite of passage for her. Her experience of the night-time space of the city recalls *The Catcher in the Rye*<sup>333</sup> as she passes through coffee shops and a hotel, and comes into contact with people from radically different social orders; it seems no coincidence that *After Dark* was written shortly after Murakami completed his translation of Salinger<sup>334</sup>. Mari is however much more self-contained than Holden Caulfield; she never commands the narrative and is always represented via the third person. Even at this remove, she is taciturn and reticent to impart anything about herself, despite Takahashi’s best attempts to solicit such information.

She passes through coffee houses, a deserted park, and a love hotel – a short-stay hotel for the purpose of sex, here named “Alphaville” after Godard’s 1965 film, which also features a succession of night-time spaces<sup>335</sup>. These spaces could all be considered as within the category of the non-place, in that they fulfil Augé’s definition of space which resists anthropological categorisation<sup>336</sup>. This is not to say a space devoid of people, but a space

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<sup>330</sup> SS: 103.

<sup>331</sup> AD: 198.

<sup>332</sup> AD: 19.

<sup>333</sup> Salinger 1951.

<sup>334</sup> Salinger 2003.

<sup>335</sup> Godard 1965.

<sup>336</sup> Augé 1995.



through which people pass rather than inhabit. The non-place is an unstable and liminal space, as opposed to the stable space as defined by the fixture of inhabitants. Some of the spaces in *After Dark*, such as the love hotel and Takahashi's rehearsal space, might also be considered vespertine, seeing an increase in activity as night falls. Others – the coffee shops, the park, the space of the city as a whole – see a decrease in activity as night falls, and might represent the non-place more acutely than in daylight hours. At night, the space of the city becomes depopulated; as the narrative opens at midnight, the coffee house is busy:

Many different kinds of people are taking meals and drinking coffee . . . the street is bright enough and filled with people coming and going – people with places to go and people with no place to go.<sup>337</sup>

Half an hour later, “The number of customers has decreased markedly . . . the atmosphere suggests a deeper stage of night.”<sup>338</sup> Here the “deeper stage” refers to a lessening of activity, yet the narrative shortly takes an about turn to introduce a marked increase in activity.

For Mari, the night becomes a space which engenders a series of particular interactions. She meets and converses with Takahashi, the love hotel manager Kaoru and her employees Korogi and Komugi, and Guo Dongli, a Chinese prostitute. These are people from radically different social orders, though almost all of them are of a lower social class than middle-class Mari. They are of this space whereas Mari is apparently not; Kaoru says to her, “[T]his is not the kind of neighbourhood where respectable girls ought to be spending the night.”<sup>339</sup> Yet Mari, far from home, is very much at home in this space; the narrative avoids any threatening overtones which might locate Mari as a vulnerable young woman in the city at night, and presents her as not othering herself from her surroundings but embracing them. Mari and Kaoru treat each other as equals, extending respect and hospitality to each other.

For Victor Turner, one of the most prominent facets of liminality is the “blend” of “lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship.”<sup>340</sup> Turner argues that within the liminal phase there exists a state of *communitas*, an unstructured community in which

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<sup>337</sup> AD: 6.

<sup>338</sup> AD: 31.

<sup>339</sup> AD: 58.

<sup>340</sup> Turner 1969: 96.

all are equal<sup>341</sup>. This resonates with the space of the carnival, which is a temporal though not strictly liminal space, as no progression is made through it; when the carnival ceases, the post-carnival state is as the pre-carnival. However, there are instances of liminality within the carnival, as participants move from fixed positions in the social hierarchy to an equality beyond, or an inversion of, the hierarchy – the beggar becomes the king and vice versa<sup>342</sup>. Here, the term *communitas* is particularly appropriate; everyone is a participant, both a spectator and a performer, and all are rendered equal.

The love hotel itself may be considered a space of carnival in that it is a sanctioned space in which people may engage in sexual activity. Mari concludes her night in the city returning to the love hotel to take up Kaoru's offer of using one of the vacant rooms to sleep<sup>343</sup>. Mari differs from the love hotel's usual clientele – visitors who hire rooms for sex rather than sleep – and her act of sleeping deterritorialises and re-carnivalises its space. With the act of sleeping, the love hotel becomes a "sleep hotel"; it is now characterised not merely by acts of lovemaking but also by an act of sleeping. This further destabilises its classification as a non-place; somebody is sleeping there, and sleep, in this instance, connotes a homeliness: "Alone in this offbeat room, [Mari] feels, if anything, protected."<sup>344</sup>

In summary, *Sputnik Sweetheart* presents night as irrevocably other, a space which one might be wary of, and in which one must keep one's guard against disruptive forces of otherness. *After Dark* presents a contrast in that it invites the reader into this otherness, and renders it a space of engagement, of carnival, and of interactions which may not occur outside of this space. Here, the night is a liminal space which engenders new alliances, and new becomings. It is a treasured and vital space.

### Rites of passage

The proliferation of young characters in Murakami's recent fiction, in conjunction with the author's predilection for sending his characters on various kinds of quests (out of their realm of comfort and into an otherness, as it were) presents a clear example of Turner's theory of rites of passage. To reiterate, Turner's theory offers a means of theorising the

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<sup>341</sup> Turner 1969: 94-130.

<sup>342</sup> In discussion of Bakhtin these carnival inversions are often précised as the "world turned-upside-down," (Dentith 1995: 72).

<sup>343</sup> AD: 155.

<sup>344</sup> AD: 170.

liminal space between childhood and adulthood; it comprises the individual leaving the “fixed point” of childhood identity and entering into a liminal period of adolescence, during which, “the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.”<sup>345</sup> This is followed by a third phase in which the passage is completed:

The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and “structured” type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.<sup>346</sup>

Like models of translation, Turner’s model is notable in that its definition relies as much upon the exit as it does upon the entrance of the phase. For Turner there is no way of theorising or acknowledging that which enters the liminal phase but which does not successfully complete the transition; in this model the phase is always exited, and the subject is always reterritorialised.

Turner’s account of the liminal phase is particularly applicable to Kafka’s journey, especially in the conclusion, in which Kafka emerges bearing an adult responsibility. Kafka’s rites of passage appears to have two arcs. First, there is a large arc that corresponds to the entirety of his narrative thread – he runs away to Shikoku, leaving behind the “earlier fixed point,” of the family home, and returns at the close of the narrative and assumes a responsible adult subjectivity. Second, there is the briefer but equally significant arc in which he leaves behind the safe “fixed point” of his friend Oshima’s log cabin to enter the dangerous space of the forest and cross to the other side. Again, he returns having progressed to a more mature subjectivity. As he progresses through these liminal arcs he assumes an ambiguity by, respectively, taking on a name which is not his own – Kafka – and by eluding, evading, or exceeding his wakeful self as he crosses to the other side. Upon his return, his “reaggregation or reincorporation,” Kafka must do the “right thing,”<sup>347</sup> and return first to this side, and then to Tokyo to hand himself into the police. In doing so, he makes himself subject to the, “ethical standards binding incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.”

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<sup>345</sup> Turner 1969: 94.

<sup>346</sup> Turner 1969: 95.

<sup>347</sup> KOTS: 505.

*Kafka on the Shore* was written as Murakami worked on his aforementioned translation of *The Catcher in the Rye*<sup>348</sup> and the introduction of younger protagonists to Murakami's fiction, to which the author positions himself as paternalistic guide (re: his assertion of "responsibility"<sup>349</sup>) appears to be no coincidence. *Kafka on the Shore* takes a similar bildungsroman form to *The Catcher in the Rye*; Kafka and Holden Caulfield are both teenagers on the run, both heavily burdened with a sense of guilt and responsibility. Whereas Holden's leads to a breakdown<sup>350</sup>, Kafka's leads to an absolute – if temporary – negation of his existence, as he crosses to the other side. He heads into the apparently boundless forest that surrounds Oshima's log cabin, within which lies the entrance to the other side. Oshima has warned him, "once you get lost in these woods, believe me, you stay lost,"<sup>351</sup> but as he moves forward into the forest he remarks, "No need to mark any more trees, no need to remember the path back."<sup>352</sup> By crossing to the other side, from which he initially has no intention of returning, he forsakes his wakeful life altogether.

However, in Murakami's topography of the other side as it manifests in *Kafka on the Shore*, Kafka's attempt to escape his responsibilities is futile. It is already stipulated that – for Kafka – responsibility extends beyond wakefulness into the otherness of his dream life and imagination. As he begins a sexual encounter with a young woman, Sakura, he asks her permission to imagine her naked<sup>353</sup>. She is surprised at the request; he responds, "Imagining something's very important, so I thought I'd better tell you."<sup>354</sup> Later he reads notes Oshima has been taking in his research on Adolf Eichmann. Oshima cites the epigraph of Yeats' *Responsibilities*, "In dreams begins responsibility,"<sup>355</sup> which strikes a chord with Kafka – in his guilt over his father's death, and in his encounter with Sakura.

She'd said, I don't get it. You didn't have to tell me that! Why don't you just go ahead and imagine what you want? You don't need my permission. How can I know what's in your head? But she got it wrong. What I imagine *is* perhaps very important. For the entire world.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Salinger 1951; Murakami 2003. Steven Kellman states that *Kafka on the Shore* was written "while Murakami was translating *The Catcher in the Rye*" (Kellman 2005: 143); Rubin suggests that "the invitation to translate *The Catcher in the Rye* had only come from the publisher after he had completed the first draft of *Kafka on the Shore*," (Rubin 2003: 297).

<sup>349</sup> Rubin 2003: 274.

<sup>350</sup> Salinger 1951: 5.

<sup>351</sup> KOTS: 125.

<sup>352</sup> KOTS: 427.

<sup>353</sup> KOTS: 97.

<sup>354</sup> KOTS: 98.

<sup>355</sup> KOTS: 141; Yeats 1916.

<sup>356</sup> KOTS: 142.

Murakami bestows Kafka with a conscience from which he cannot escape, no matter what state of consciousness he inhabits. This changes only once Kafka has returned from the other side and assumed a responsible, adult subjectivity. He tells Sakura he had a dream about her. “A pretty raunchy one, I bet?” she says. He replies: “Could be... But it was just a dream.”<sup>357</sup> His post-liminal, more stable position appears to allow a delineation of the content of dream and wakeful reality. His dream is now just that – his own subjective fantasy, exempt from responsibility and with no danger of its content bleeding into a shared reality.

Ultimately it would seem that Kafka’s completion of the liminal phase is smooth and absolute. Amy Ty Lai suggests that, “Kafka’s maturation depends on his decision not to remain in... ‘the other world’s suspended state,’ but to go back to Tokyo and take his place as a responsible member of society.”<sup>358</sup> As such, Turner’s description of the liminal phase accurately reflects Kafka’s liminal subjectivity; Kafka’s decision to return home and face up to his responsibilities demonstrates very clearly the successful resolution of a liminal passage.

*Sputnik Sweetheart* and *After Dark* feature comparative instances of the liminal phase. In *After Dark*, Takahashi gives up on dreams of playing trombone in a jazz band to train as a lawyer, completing the phase and assuming an adult subjectivity. Mari seeks a becoming-other through stepping away from her family and immersing herself in a foreign language and culture – as the narrative nears its close she announces to Takahashi her imminent departure to China<sup>359</sup>. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Sumire has already left behind adolescence yet remains in a liminal phase. She appears to have completed the phase when she abandons her bohemian lifestyle to take gainful employment, but it becomes clear that this is simply another step in an ongoing liminal chain. As I will come to discuss, she does not assume a stable adult subjectivity; rather her nomadic subjectivity perpetuates, and becomes further destabilised until its absolute dissolution in her transit to the other side.

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<sup>357</sup> KOTS: 504.

<sup>358</sup> Ty Lai 2007: 172-173.

<sup>359</sup> AD: 187.

## The nomad

Given that Turner's model of liminality allows only for the successful completion of the liminal phase, it is necessary to look elsewhere for a model with which to discuss Sumire's negotiation of the liminal. One apparent model is that of the nomad.

In discussion of Sebald, the nomadic is confined an almost literal nomadism – a physical transience. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Sumire becomes similarly nomadic in that she travels from Japan to England to Greece (and then on to another plane of existence entirely), but moreover her subjectivity may be described as nomadic in that she moves from one position to another, in a perpetual movement of becoming. First, she transforms from bohemian to salarywoman. She takes a job as Miu's assistant and Miu acquires new clothes for her, and changes her hairstyle to something she (Miu) considers to be smarter. The narrator barely recognises her<sup>360</sup> and Sumire herself considers it a kind of defection from her previous lifestyle<sup>361</sup>. In her desire for Miu, she also "becomes" a lesbian, though there is no suggestion that she was heterosexual before this becoming, merely that through her desire for a woman she becomes classified as lesbian. Soon she loses all sense of her original self; she, "finds herself transformed (willingly, but unnervingly) into someone she no longer recognizes."<sup>362</sup>

"I have this strange feeling that I'm not myself anymore... it's as if I was fast asleep and someone came, disassembled me, and hurriedly put me back together again."<sup>363</sup>

She perceives these changes as having originated externally – that she has no conscious control over them. The idea that the change happened in sleep suggests a site of vulnerability, of reduced defences that allows an exterior force to intervene and alter identity. Sumire's speech also suggests sleep as a metaphor for obfuscation: "it's as if I was fast asleep," suggests the change began to happen without her noticing. The term "fast asleep" is also notable in that it presciently describes how Sumire becomes locked in sleep when she crosses to the other side. The OED defines the adjective *fast* as:

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<sup>360</sup> SS: 66.

<sup>361</sup> SS: 67.

<sup>362</sup> Strecher 2002: 132.

<sup>363</sup> SS: 77.

- 1 a. Firmly fixed in its place; not easily moved or shaken; settled, stable.  
 1 f. Of a colour: That will not quickly fade or wash out; permanent.  
 2 c. Frozen.<sup>364</sup>

This contrasts with the fluidity of becoming-other, and again suggests states of consciousness as corresponding to conditions of light, of night and day, or an absolute darkness of unconsciousness and a “bleaching” of consciousness, as described in discussion of *The Rings of Saturn*. The notion of a rigid position impervious to light, resistant absolutely, suggests a stasis of consciousness beyond the subject’s agency, a position as precarious and potentially dangerous as the fluidity of becoming other.

The act of writing serves to place Sumire within another continuum of becoming. Sumire is “struggling to become a writer”<sup>365</sup>. She already writes, and the reader is made aware that she has actually written several long, rambling novels<sup>366</sup>. Her success has been limited; she hasn’t published her work though neither has she shown any desire to. She remains in the process of becoming-writer; while the act of writing may suggest an alienation from primary wakefulness, Sumire writes but does not become consumed by the act of writing – she remains very much engaged in her wakeful activities. Where she may fail in creating written fictional narratives<sup>367</sup> she succeeds in creating her own authorial narrative, assuming the role of author so as to author her own life. She drops out of college when it fails to meet her needs<sup>368</sup>, she challenges the narrator on his reading habits (“Why Nizan, of all people? She sounded like she was trying to pick a fight.”<sup>369</sup>) and even when she walks around the park it is with the, “enthusiasm of a pilgrim making her way through sacred hills.”<sup>370</sup> However, she could also, “get so engrossed in her thoughts at times she’d forget to eat.”<sup>371</sup>

The events and activities the narrator describes suggest that Sumire is attempting to create a self-image from outside herself, to engage with aspects other to herself in the hope of achieving a fully realised self. It might be said that this approach is somewhat adolescent

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<sup>364</sup> “fast, *a.*” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 16 Jun. 2000 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50082576>>

<sup>365</sup> SS: 3

<sup>366</sup> SS: 149.

<sup>367</sup> SS: 13-14.

<sup>368</sup> SS: 4.

<sup>369</sup> SS: 14-15.

<sup>370</sup> SS: 13.

<sup>371</sup> SS: 4.

in that she remains at the liminal stage of attempting to forge an identity. This process is evident in her attempts to self-mythologise; for example:

Sumire wanted to be like a character in a Kerouac novel – wild, cool, dissolute. She'd stand around, hands shoved deep in her coat pockets, her hair an uncombed mess, staring vacantly at the sky through her plastic framed Dizzy Gillespie glasses, which she wore despite her 20/20 vision. She was invariably decked out in an oversized herringbone coat from a second-hand shop and a pair of rough work boots. If she'd been able to grow a beard, I'm sure she would have.<sup>372</sup>

The narrator asserts that, however arbitrary or fanciful these becomings may appear, Sumire's desire to become other is genuine. It is not important whether or not this represents a lack of security in her pre-ordained or expected identities for someone of her age, gender, and nationality; the desire unsettles notions of identities as pre-ordained, static, and impermeable. In Sumire's nomadic subjectivity it is perfectly possible for her to grow a beard.

Following her transformation from bohemian to salarywoman, this fluidity becomes a stasis, and she finds herself unable to write:

"It's not that I want to give up writing," Sumire said. She thought for a moment. "It's just that when I try to write, I can't. I sit down at my desk and nothing comes – no ideas, no words, no scenes. Zero. Not too long ago I had a million things to write about. What in the world's happening to me?"<sup>373</sup>

Strecher sees this as a very significant becoming-other:

Having given up her passion for writing... she is no longer the same Sumire; she has already begun her journey to the "other" world she predicted earlier, from which she will never return as herself.<sup>374</sup>

This suggests that there is no return for Sumire, and presupposes another kind of becoming; to stop writing is not necessarily to be drawn backwards into a previous identity, but rather is a becoming within a new temporal context which engenders further movement in the nomadic process of subjectivity.

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<sup>372</sup> SS: 6.

<sup>373</sup> SS: 68.

<sup>374</sup> Strecher 2002: 133.



In turn, this suggests the idea of the subject as its own author. The narrator compares life to fiction, recalling notions of authoring the self. He likens particular Sumire's old and new lives to two kinds of fiction, or two different stories.

"You don't know the plot; the style's still not set. The only thing you do know is the main character's name. Nevertheless, this new fiction is reinventing who you are. Give it time, it'll take you under its wing, and you may very well catch a glimpse of a new world. But you're not there yet, which leaves you in a precarious position."<sup>375</sup>

The narrator's explanatory speech posits this transition as "precarious," suggesting a danger to such shifts in identity. However, Murakami's characters repeatedly demonstrate that stasis is impossible and such shifts are inevitable. In the case of Sumire, nomadism appears to be nothing less than necessity in the project of the self.

### Summary

These three novels present an economy of wholes, fragments, and displacement. The construct of the "other side" is fundamental in Murakami's diegetic universe, and his aggressive insistence upon this otherness and its potentiality – both positive and negative – make these texts vital to my research question. The liminal motifs which reflect and refract issues of subjectivity serve to elucidate and crystallise, to transpose from textual to tangible, across a broad range of points – the hypnagogic, the night, rites of passage, and the nomadic – which in turn serve to open up the discussion for subsequent chapters. Of particular interest, and carried forward to Van Sant, is the conception of the night as not merely a liminal site between molar entities of daytime, but as an agency which imposes a liminality upon space – place becomes non-place, a governed space becomes carnivalesque, and, in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, engenders a gateway to an absolute otherness.

My discussion of Turner's rites of passage also carries forward to Gondry and Van Sant; its application here seeks to privilege adolescent liminality as a key mode of becoming. In Murakami, as if guided by the author's benevolence, such becomings are successful transits from one stable position to another. The case of Sumire stands out as problematic, and yet her nomadism encompasses this – it is presented as a positive force, a necessity in her being, the need to remain in motion and to exceed boundaries. As with

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<sup>375</sup> SS: 69.

Sebald's mastery of textual subjectivities, Sumire's nomadism presents a mastery of subjectivity in that she is always able to keep moving, to keep becoming, even when, as in her transit to the other side, no means of moving or becoming appear to be available. Her final return to "this side" represents an absolute fluidity. She emphasises to the narrator that the transition has not been smooth ("It wasn't easy. But somehow I managed it,"<sup>376</sup>) yet she achieves a truly nomadic subjectivity, travelling to an absolute otherness, a site of absolute deterritorialisation, and then returning, reaggregating, with a distinct and recognisable subjectivity apparently intact.

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<sup>376</sup> SS: 227.

## Three

**Michel Gondry**

***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind***

**and *The Science of Sleep***

With this chapter and the following chapter on Van Sant, I seek to broaden the discussion of liminal subjectivities through a consideration of filmic texts. While Gondry's and Van Sant's films are very clearly of a different form to the texts discussed in previous chapters, there are notable connections with Sebald and Murakami, these films address issues of subjectivity, identity, memory, and loss, and feature motifs of hypnagogia, nomads, adolescent liminality, and the extraterritorial.

Where the texts differ is in the modalities of subjectivity presented, and the means by which these are constructed. Like the Sebald and Murakami texts, these films construct a textual subjectivity through a play of particular modes; in the novels these modes are voices and narrative styles, while here these modes are definitively filmic. Moreover, whereas the novels allow a more open analysis of these modes, here modes are deployed with a very particular precision, toward the construction of each film's protagonist. The novels have the benefit of a narrator, whether first or third person, a voice which whether stable or unstable remains a constant presence in the interface between reader and text. Here that interface is the screen itself, and the equivalent to the narrative voice may be seen as the invisible director's deployment of modes to construct in his protagonist a haecceity, so that this protagonist may function as at the very least a primary character, and at most a proxy narrator.

I will discuss in detail how Gondry and Van Sant construct their protagonists as haecceitic, as *of* the text, through a drawing together of the subjectivities of protagonist and text. In each instance, this is primarily through the depiction of each protagonist's interior world, sometimes through devices such as point-of-view shots and voiceover, but especially through the evocation of subjective dream-space. This lays the ground for

discussion of how this haecceity, like that of the literary narrators, comes to engage with otherness through polyphonies and intersubjectivities.

### The texts

Directed by Gondry from a screenplay by Charlie Kaufman<sup>377</sup>, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* features a protagonist, Joel Barish, who discovers his ex-girlfriend Clementine has had her memories of him surgically removed, and in retaliation decides to do likewise. The space of his dream becomes the space of his experience of the relationship, as he is guided from one memory of Clem to another, from the most recent to the very first. Almost immediately, his sleeping self acquires a reflexivity – he is aware that the procedure is taking place. He re-experiences each memory as it is erased, and decides from within his sleep state that he does not want to erase his memory of Clem. Unable to wake himself from the procedure, he instead tries to hide her amidst unrelated memories, especially those of his childhood. This tactic ultimately fails, but as his final (that is, his very first) memory of Clem is deleted, she whispers to him, “Meet me in Montauk,” Montauk being the site of their first meeting. The narrative is bookended by the after effects of the procedure. In a lengthy pre-title sequence, Joel travels to Montauk, obeying the instruction of his dream-Clem. There he re-meets Clem and the two, encountering each other as strangers, begin a relationship anew. The close of the film follows the pair as they discover each has undergone the procedure, and that they previously shared a romantic relationship. They decide to try again despite the acknowledgement that the relationship will likely fail a second time.

*The Science of Sleep*, from Gondry’s own screenplay, follows protagonist Stéphane as he becomes romantically interested in his neighbour Stéphanie. He discovers she shares his creative spirit and together they plan to make a short animated film featuring Stéphanie’s model horse. Stéphanie believes Stéphane’s friendship is purely platonic (partly through the misapprehension that Stéphane is interested in her friend Zoe), and Stéphane’s attempts to become closer to Stéphanie are problematised by his childlike disregard of social norms and a pathological insecurity regarding her interest in him. The reappearance of Stéphane’s mother Christine, and the advice of a misogynist colleague, Guy, also intrude upon Stéphane’s desire. Moreover, his propensity to confuse sleep and wakefulness has an ever-

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<sup>377</sup> Kaufman 2004.

increasing effect upon his behaviour, which begins to trouble and ultimately alienate St  phanie. The narrative concludes with an impasse, as St  phane and St  phanie clearly have a great affection for each other, yet St  phane cannot overcome his particular mental state, and can only ever be with St  phanie within his dreams.

The protagonists of both films spend much of each narrative within sleep. In *Eternal Sunshine*, the sedated Joel’s dream-space becomes a reconstruction of the relationship as he undergoes the pseudo-medical “Lacuna procedure”. For Joel, the sleep of the Lacuna procedure functions as the space of memory, represented naturalistically, albeit in reverse linearity, and reflexively experienced by the protagonist. This space distorts as, from within sleep, Joel attempts to thwart the Lacuna procedure, and reconfigure the structure of his memory to hide the object of his lost love. The romantic narrative of *The Science of Sleep*, in contrast to *Eternal Sunshine*’s theme of retaining a love object, takes the form of a more traditional pursuit of a love object. However, it confounds many aspects of the romantic narrative by refusing the protagonist St  phane access to the object of his desire, and ultimately takes a very different approach to *Eternal Sunshine* with regard to notions of intersubjectivity and love. The representation of sleep also differs from that of *Eternal Sunshine*, resembling less a recalled reality and more a “free dream”. The mother of protagonist St  phane remarks, “Since he was six he’s inverted dreams and reality,” and as the narrative progresses, so does St  phane’s confusion and inability to delineate one state from the other. In contrast to the notion of inversion, the narrative as filtered through the subjectivity of St  phane seems to suggest less rigid and more diffuse states of consciousness, imbued with elements of sleep and wakefulness.

In both films, the protagonists’ consciousness is represented and delineated through the use of contrasting modes. This is achieved through the self-conscious signification of polarised, apparently discrete diegeses; each film consists of a “whole” diegesis (and what lies beyond it – voiceover dialogue, the score, other content at the textual surface) and two sub-diegeses, an exterior diegesis depicting the objective wakeful reality, and an interior diegesis, depicting the protagonist’s dream-space. The wakeful diegesis is represented through a naturalism which is contrasted with the fantastical elements of the dream-space. With *Eternal Sunshine*, the exterior diegesis takes a linear form, spanning the night in which Joel undergoes the Lacuna procedure, and the interior diegesis of Joel’s sleeping subjectivity takes a reverse linearity, and manifests as the scenes of his relationship with Clem, from the moment Joel falls into sedated sleep, to his first meeting

with Clem. *The Science of Sleep* employs a much looser narrative structure, instating a similar discrete economy of modes via delineating signifiers, and then ushering in discord through progressively deploying these signifiers interchangeably, to create a more diffuse hypnagogic reverie.

In *Eternal Sunshine*, sleep assists in the act of reconstruction, whereas in *The Science of Sleep*, sleep is a deconstructive agent. This dynamic also applies to sleep's influence on the central relationships of each film. In *Eternal Sunshine*, sleep creates a space in which Joel and Clem can communicate telepathically and plot their reunion. In *The Science of Sleep*, Stéphane's progressively ambiguous hypnagogia and subsequent unusual behaviour serves to alienate him from others around him, most notably Stéphanie, who struggles to understand his peculiar relationship between dream and reality. Joel's sleep is notable for an element of reflexivity; within the dream-space, he soon realises he is in fact asleep. In contrast Stéphane rarely seems to know when he is asleep, or indeed awake. In his dream-space he shows no awareness that he is asleep, even though it is much more visually other to this wakeful space than that of Joel. At certain moments, such as upon waking and discovering traces of his somnambulist activity, he questions whether he is awake or asleep, but he never appears to definitively *know*.

In *The Science of Sleep* there is a strong assertion of this unknowability; it appears to offer great potential for the imagination and creativity, yet it hinders successful living. Furthermore, this unknowability is applicable to Stéphane's relationship with Stéphanie; just as he can never truly know his own state of consciousness, he can never truly know Stéphanie. Whereas the apparent telepathy of *Eternal Sunshine* puts forward a case for intersubjectivity, *The Science of Sleep* confounds it. This theme however, despite the key difference in approach, binds the two films together and underlines Gondry's preoccupation with the potential for intersubjectivity. In both films the protagonist wishes to know, and then to assimilate his love object, and in each case that desire is problematised and/or thwarted. Ultimately the two films respond conversely to the romantic genre. *Eternal Sunshine* insists upon a utopian love which exceeds the boundaries of individuated subjectivity, and *The Science of Sleep* puts forward a treatment of love which asserts that, however strong love might be, it can never exceed such boundaries, and the subject remains a singular individual no matter how strong the desire to become one with the love object.

The discussion of motifs explores how Gondry finds visual means of representing the liminal, in particular his specific visual interpretation of hypnagogia in *The Science of Sleep*, and an amplification of Sebald's preoccupation – the shoreline – in *Eternal Sunshine*. The construction of interior and exterior diegeses also facilitates discussion of how particular objects function across the threshold of dream and reality, how the transition from one space to the other affects a translation or distortion, and how these objects are further complicated by issues of intersubjectivity and territorialisation. The territorial is also central to notions of space in these films; in *Eternal Sunshine*, memory is represented via space – as memories bleed into each other, so do the locations of memory, an effect achieved through innovative editing and set design. Similarly, in *The Science of Sleep*, notions of territory come to impose upon and enclose the protagonist's desire, setting boundaries which sometimes succeed and sometimes fail to constrain him, but which always serve to complicate and problematise.

### Critical work on Gondry

Gondry's films, the most recent of the texts discussed here, are slowly accruing a body of critical work. *The Science of Sleep* has, it seems, so far been neglected, though there is a growing body of work on *Eternal Sunshine*, which provides much material for critics discussing notions of memory, science, and ethics. It is discussed in great detail by José van Djick<sup>378</sup>, Christopher Grau<sup>379</sup>, Bert Cardullo<sup>380</sup>, and Verena-Susanna Nungesser<sup>381</sup>. José van Djick's work is of particular interest; he writes of the science fiction element of *Eternal Sunshine* and notes how cultural theorists such as Walter Benjamin locate “the “matter” of memory . . . in the tangibility of mediated objects,”<sup>382</sup> and discusses the ramifications of the objectification and digitalisation of memory.

The film is more frequently alluded to in discussion of other texts, by critics such as Michele Pierson<sup>383</sup>, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon<sup>384</sup>, Neil Scheurich<sup>385</sup>, and Allan Cameron<sup>386</sup>.

These allusions however often offer as much insight as in depth studies. Mentioning the

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<sup>378</sup> van Djick 2004.

<sup>379</sup> Grau 2006.

<sup>380</sup> Cardullo 2007.

<sup>381</sup> Nungesser 2009.

<sup>382</sup> Djick 2004: 358.

<sup>383</sup> Pierson 2006.

<sup>384</sup> Jeon 2009.

<sup>385</sup> Scheurich 2008.

<sup>386</sup> Cameron 2006.

film alongside Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*<sup>387</sup>, Neil Scheurich draws attention to the focus on subjectivity; the narrative of Scott's film, from Philip K. Dick's novel<sup>388</sup>, discusses the notion of authentic versus inauthentic subjectivity in the post-human construct of the android, which ramifies with notions of how memory constitutes such authenticities in *Eternal Sunshine*<sup>389</sup>.

### **Textual subjectivities**

In both *Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep*, the interior worlds of protagonists Joel and Stéphane function as a window on aspects of their subjectivity which remain hidden from other characters. Here I discuss the construction of these interior worlds, and how each achieves a haecceity, placing the protagonist close to the textual surface, as a kind of interface between viewer and text, so as to achieve an identification and an investment in the narrative. I discuss how these worlds come to intersect with the primary wakeful world of each film, and how a liminal space between the external and internal begins to effect a diffusion, a deconstruction, or deterritorialisation of interior and exterior. Beyond this, I discuss how the protagonists' subjectivities come to engage with other subjectivities within the texts; both narratives are structured around romantic relationships and the positioning of each partner, of Clem, and of Stéphanie, within the protagonist's gaze and in proximity to his subjectivity opens a discussion of intersubjectivities, the success or refusal of which comes to condition the narrative outcome.

### **Filmic modes and diegeses**

*Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep* construct their respective protagonists across both wakefulness and sleep, and in each case this is achieved via an economy of separate and distinctive diegeses. I use the term diegeses to refer to distinct paradigms of filmic modes which create a particular reality; within the "whole-diegesis" defined by boundaries and surface of the text itself are two sub-diegeses – two sets of modes which conflict and contrast, one representing the protagonist within wakefulness, the other within sleep.

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<sup>387</sup> Scott 1982.

<sup>388</sup> Dick 1968.

<sup>389</sup> Scheurich 2008: 9.



In both instances here, wakefulness is defined by a naturalism achieved via natural lighting, naturalistic performances from the actors, and often handheld camerawork. Again, in both instances, though to varying degrees, dream-states are defined by modes which conflict with this naturalism. In *The Science of Sleep* these modes are overt; Gondry constructs a distinctive universe of animation, music, bright and artificial lighting, and expressionistic performances. We see clouds floating indoors, we see a model horse apparently come to life, and we see the protagonist Stéphane depicted with preposterously large cartoon hands. In the dream-space Gael García Bernal performs Stéphane as articulate and effusive in contrast to the shy and hesitant counterpart of the wakeful diegesis; furthermore his interaction with other characters is modified – he appears to have sexual access to his co-worker Martine, and is able to battle and overrule his boss, Monsieur Pouchet. He is also able to “fly” (Gondry films his dream-city in a water tank, and Stéphane flies/swims over the city).

The surface of *Eternal Sunshine* is never disrupted to the same degree as that of *The Science of Sleep*, though this of course corresponds to what the dream-space of each text is intended to represent – a fantastical wish-fulfilment in *The Science of Sleep*, and a space of memory in *Eternal Sunshine*. In *Eternal Sunshine* these modes are less distinct; the dream world much resembles the wakeful world but for specific distortions of space and time, and for particular glitches and deviations (the spines in a bookstore are turned in towards the shelf; the protagonist tries to get a look at his love rival – he spins him around but sees only the back of his head, as if this man has no face).

Alongside the denotation of wakeful reality and dream, this economy of diegeses also serves to instate a particular character as the protagonist of each film, and to “embed” the subjectivity of that character within the text, to make that subjectivity haecceitic through a “drawing together” of the protagonist and textual surface. In each case we see the protagonist’s dream-space, a space internal to that character, and portions of the film are given over absolutely to the representation of this interior space. We do not see the dream-spaces of other characters, and no character other than the protagonist has access to the dream-space that we see. Thus the viewer is made complicit in his dreaming mind; we come to perceive that the narrative or textual subjectivity is *akin* to that of the protagonist – we see things from his point of view, both in his wakeful reality and dream-space. A distance remains between the subjectivity of protagonist and text; as in the discussion of Sebald’s narrating subjected and narrated object, the textual subjectivity coincides to a

degree with that of the protagonist, but as the protagonist remains an object within the text – as represented by an actor and a performance – the subjectivities of text and protagonist can never be entirely analogous<sup>390</sup>.

The construction of the protagonist and the economy of diegeses are introduced early in each narrative, serving to orientate the viewer in regard to the specific paradigms of modes. *Eternal Sunshine* opens on Joel: a close-up on his face as he wakes in bed, lit by the morning sun. He turns his head towards the source of the light, and the film cuts to a shot from his perspective – an upwards shot out of the window, into the hazy morning sky. The viewer sees what Joel sees; the gaze of the viewer and the protagonist is aligned unequivocally, creating a rare but tactically positioned moment of coincidence of character subjectivity and textual subjectivity. The first dialogue is his internal monologue, heard as extradiegetic voiceover. This device is integral to the fabric of the text; that is, a component of form as well as of content. No other character is permitted this degree of subjectivity; the viewer hears no other character's internal monologue and is permitted to no other character's thoughts beyond what is uttered within the diegesis, thus this device introduces the viewer to Joel's specific perspective and privileges that perspective. It is also of note that the voiceover coincides with shots of him reading from and writing in his journal. Journal writing is a record of intrapersonal communication<sup>391</sup> and here Joel's voiceover does not posit the viewer as its recipient; his speech is quiet and reflective, indicative of internal rather than external monologue. It does not institute the dichotomy of speaker and addressee, rather the viewer is privy to it, left with a sense of eavesdropping rather than of being addressed. Thus Joel's voice does not become the singular "voice of text", speaking to or at the viewer, but rather the foremost voice; other voices come into play and become *of* the text, but none achieves the primary status of Joel's voice.

*The Science of Sleep* opens within Stéphane's dream-space, which likewise suggests that the viewer has been offered privileged access to the mind of this character beyond his existence in a wakeful, objective world, thus favouring his position amongst characters, and placing him between the viewer and all other characters. The narrative moves outward from this point, toward an external, wakeful diegesis, which foregrounds and prioritises the site of sleep. Stéphane's confidence and happiness in the dream-space contrasted with his

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<sup>390</sup> This problematic is addressed in Gasper Noé's *Enter The Void* (Noé 2009) which is shot from the protagonist's point of view, filming from behind his head (thus retaining him as an object within the diegesis) until the character's death, when the camera assumes his direct point-of-view as he negotiates a notional afterlife.

<sup>391</sup> See Jensen 1984: 237-247.

subsequent unease and trepidation in the wakeful world suggests this space is where he feels most at home. The space in which we first see Stéphane comes to be a key trope of his dream-space: “Stéphane-TV” – a mocked-up TV studio, constructed predominantly from cardboard but featuring also a drum-kit and a kitchen area from which Stéphane performs a kind of cookery TV show, communicating recipes for dreams to his imagined audience. The space also features two small windows concealed with roller blinds, which in a later scene he unfurls to correspond with the opening of his eyes in the external diegesis. These windows turn out to in fact be small screens upon which his wakeful gaze is projected, as if Stéphane’s dream-self is seeing what his wakeful self sees, but at a remove, through a lens of hypnagogia.

As in *Eternal Sunshine*, the first dialogue is a monologue from the protagonist, though it is delivered within the diegesis, not as voiceover. In this scene Gondry reflexively plays with the construction of his protagonist; we see Stéphane speaking into a camera, one of the mocked-up cardboard cameras present in the studio, a dream facsimile of a camera. The viewer never views through that particular lens – Gondry’s camera always shoots from behind or from the side of the mocked-up camera, and Stéphane’s gaze never meets that of the viewer; as in *Eternal Sunshine*, there is no a dichotomy of speaker and addressee – this is an intrapersonal communication. Stéphane is asleep, or on the edge of sleep; his dialogue occurs within the space of his sleep (again, the viewer is positioned as eavesdropper) and does not exceed it.

In contrast to the surety of the dream-space (Stéphane’s apparent confidence and vivacity; the fixed and steady camera-work; the controlled environment of the studio), the wakeful diegesis conveys a precariousness and disorientation. The very first shot of the wakeful diegesis occurs at the close of the opening credit sequence, and the first fraction of a second is obscured by a lens flare. We see Stéphane as he travels through the streets of Paris in the back of a taxi, scanning the buildings for his mother’s apartment (it becomes clear that he hasn’t been in the city for some time). The lens flare serves to temporarily exacerbate his disorientation. It is also indicative of the naturalism that characterises the wakeful diegesis. Gondry makes use of natural light and García Bernal’s performance of introversion to denote an objective reality which Stéphane exists within rather than presides over. This juxtaposition of modes continues as the film progresses, one representing a vivacious mastery, the other a nervous disorientation, until a diffusion begins to occur, and the diegeses begin to overlap.

This notion of an overlap is explored earlier in *Eternal Sunshine*, in the context of hypnagogia, with Gondry evoking Joel's hypnagogic experience as he enters the Lacuna procedure. Here, modes of the dream-space are introduced progressively, alongside established modes of the wakeful diegesis. With an inciting action reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, Joel takes a pill, a sedative we presume, prescribed by Mierzwiak, chief technician and inventor of the Lacuna procedure. Shortly afterwards we see him stumbling through his apartment, falling sideways into a shelving unit, and saying to himself, "Okay, okay..." as if in acknowledgement and acceptance of the fast effects of the drug. Joel next revisits his last interaction before reaching the threshold of sleep – a brief conversation with his neighbour, Frank. Gondry keeps Joel in close-up in the foreground, while Frank remains indistinct beyond, identifiable only by the colour of his clothes, a blur of red and blue. We see Joel's face in close-up; he appears puzzled and we infer that he is aware that this is a repetition and is beginning to dispute its authenticity. He begins to realise that he has crossed or is at the threshold of consciousness. This experience reflects the particular circumstances of his hypnagogia – it is the effect of a sedative, and Joel, even upon his realisation, is unable to fight against it; this hypnagogia bypasses the vertiginous sensations described in discussion of Sebald. The "tipping point" does not exist for Joel; he is beyond that point as soon as he digests the sedative.

As Joel moves further towards sleep, we see him represented in a space which we come to understand more clearly as being a dreamscape. Clem is present in his apartment; they eat a meal as if they are still a couple, and we infer that this is a memory interior to Joel. Yet even at this stage, he is seen to experience and respond to stimuli from the external diegesis. He becomes distracted by a disembodied voice – in the external diegesis Patrick (one of the Lacuna technicians and, unbeknownst to Joel, his love rival) tells co-worker Stan that he stole Clem's underwear. Joel responds to this information, telling Clem, "There's someone here. He stole your underwear." Gondry cuts back and forth between Joel in his dream-space and Patrick and Stan in the external diegesis; the viewer sees and hears Patrick speak in the external diegesis yet continues to hear his speech in the internal diegesis, his voice modulated and distorted, and its source invisible. This would suggest that, at this stage of Joel's hypnagogia, these diegeses are not yet discrete, but porous or overlapping, the distortion a condition of the threshold. The differentiating signifier is Joel himself – as Gondry cuts quickly between the internal and the external we are aware of the doubling of his body, asleep and prostrate in the external, and active and disorientated in the internal.

### Extended liminal moments

These moments of liminality come to be fundamental in maintaining the economy of internal and external. In their evocation of threshold space, they serve to remind the viewer of both the space that holds these worlds apart and the protagonist that binds them together.

Some minutes into the narrative of *The Science of Sleep*, the dream-space re-emerges, denoted by the modes described in the account of the opening sequence. Stéphane is settling into his life in Paris, and has begun a new job at a printing press. We enter the dream-space via the Stéphane-TV studio, a set the viewer recognises as representing an internal, dream aspect of the protagonist. Already disillusioned by his job, Stéphane places a photograph of his boss Monsieur Pouchet in a frying pan and begins to heat it (revisiting the notion of a “recipe” for dreams). Next we see Stéphane at the office, though his hands appear to be abnormally large and he is unable to carry out the delicate job of typesetting. The office also appears to be subject to an aggressive breeze, and his co-workers speak in a nonsensical language he is unable to understand (reflecting his difficulty as a Spanish speaker in understanding the French language; unlike Sebald’s narrator’s hypnagogic grasp of Dutch, for Stéphane sleep affects an obfuscation of foreign language). The scene progresses to broad slapstick as he battles his co-workers, and further modes of the dream-space are introduced (Stéphane “flies” over the city; buildings are represented by two dimensional cut-out drawings), before a sudden return to the wakeful diegesis and the Stéphane-TV studio.

Here the film presents its first extended liminal moment. We see Stéphane in his dream-space, troubled by the sound of a public address system. Gondry cuts sharply to the external diegesis and we see Stéphane asleep in his bed, the sound of his alarm clock corresponding to the PA system in his dream. Gondry cuts to the Stéphane-TV studio where Stéphane lifts the aforementioned roller blinds to reveal the two screens, upon which we see the image of his hand reaching out to turn off the alarm; we then cut to a shot of Stéphane in his bed, reaching out to the clock. This presents a doubling of dream-Stéphane and physical-Stéphane, simultaneously coalesced and juxtaposed. As before, Gondry uses lighting and acting styles to differentiate between states. García Bernal plays dream-Stéphane as alert and animated, over-excited and short-tempered; physical-Stéphane is passive, sluggish, and struggles to keep his eyes open. The Stéphane-TV studio is

artificially lit, bright and hyper-real, whereas Stéphane's bedroom is lit by natural light from the window, reflecting from a light-coloured building on the far side of the street.

From this sequence we infer that the space of the Stéphane-TV studio is analogous to the conditions of hypnagogia. Gondry's treatment of the space corresponds to some modes of the dream-space, yet does not contain any of the more expressionistic modes from the previous sequence which seem to represent a deeper level of dream. That deeper level has its own narrative logic, within which scenes from Stéphane's waking life become distorted. Stéphane-TV is predominantly a space of Stéphane alone (on one occasion we see his mother in the studio, on another we see Stéphanie, though in neither instance is this in the context of a re-enactment or distortion of a scene from external diegesis). Stéphane-TV is characterised by its adjacency to wakefulness, and to Stéphane's wakeful subjectivity within his physical body, as suggested by the roller blinds' correspondence to eyelids, which when lifted offer dream-Stéphane the gaze of his wakeful self.

This liminality is teased out further as the scene progresses and the viewer is taken to a much more precarious balancing point between sleep and wakefulness. The telephone rings again, and Stéphane is disturbed a second time; Gondry then cuts back and forth between the external diegesis and Stéphane-TV as he negotiates a conversation from his hypnagogic state. Another doubling occurs; in the external diegesis Stéphane sits up in bed and picks up the telephone, apparently awake. We hear the voice of a woman – his mother – who asks how his first day at work went. The conversation occurs in two versions simultaneously – one wakeful, one within sleep; in the space of Stéphane-TV, Stéphane also speaks on the telephone to his mother, but whereas the apparently wakeful Stéphane soberly explains to his mother that his job is dull and not what he had anticipated, dream-Stéphane is indignant. Angrily (and apropos to the dream logic of the Stéphane-TV studio) he asks, "Are you trying to mock me on the air? A creative job, is that what you call it?" His responses to his mother vary greatly between the two states; there is a continuity to the conversation across both (Stéphane is unhappy in his new job and blames his mother, who found the job for him), but Gondry's fast edits between diegeses present a sharp contrast in García Bernal's acting style<sup>392</sup>. The fast cutting between one diegesis and the other leaves the viewer to ponder the co-existence of both, and we see an extended liminal moment consisting of incompatible, contrasting and conflicting systems of meaning.

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<sup>392</sup> It is also of note is that the wakeful conversation is conducted in French, while Stéphane alternates between English and French within the dream.

The object of the telephone reoccurs later in the narrative in a similar scene of hypnagogia, this time manifesting more explicitly as a bridge between sleep and wakefulness<sup>393</sup>. As Stéphane and Stéphanie speak on the phone, Stéphane edges closer to sleep and makes a request of Stéphanie:

STÉPHANE: Keep on talking to me for a little while, because I always thought it was possible to talk from my sleep. I feel that I'm falling down into a black hole.

Stéphane begins to fall asleep. His speech becomes mumbled and nonsensical, prompting Stéphanie to ask, “Stéphane? Are you here?” Instantly his speech becomes loud and clear as he announces, “No, I'm there! I'm there!” We see him asleep in bed, his lips unmoving, and hear his voice as Stéphanie does, as non-diegetic dialogue, modulated through the telephone line. Stéphanie asks him to describe what he sees. We follow Stéphane through a rural setting in his dream-space as he narrates to Stéphanie through the telephone; we cut between his excited description of his surroundings and her delighted reception. Eventually we cut back to Stéphane, asleep in his bed, the telephone receiver still pressed to his ear. We hear Stéphanie's voice through the telephone: “Stéphane, are you asleep?” and we infer that the preceding conversation has occurred only within Stéphane's sleeping mind, that Stéphanie's side of the conversation was a fabricated projection of Stéphane. Thus the textual subjectivity is again drawn towards that of Stéphane, and Stéphanie – the Stéphanie whose delighted reception we heard – becomes relegated to an object within Stéphane<sup>394</sup>.

Similar liminal moments occur in *Eternal Sunshine*, the opening sequence of which offers a rich evocation of the hypnagogic, as Joel emerges from the “sleep” of the Lacuna procedure. As he wakes he appears disorientated and in mild pain; he sighs and grunts as he tries to sit up in bed; he glances down at his body as if he doesn't recognise it – a simple yet clear evocation of hypnagogia. In this instance Joel's disorientation is particularly appropriate as he is waking from a process in which a portion of himself has been removed, so he is in fact familiarising himself with an altered version of his subjectivity. Gondry creates a lens flare as Joel steps outside to his car, as in the establishing shot of the

<sup>393</sup> This echoes the conclusion of *Sputnik Sweetheart*, which sees Sumire telephone the narrator, apparently from the “other side”, the telephone transmission becoming a link between otherwise discrete worlds.

<sup>394</sup> This is indicative of a problematic which I will expand upon in discussion of the contrasting approaches of *The Science of Sleep* and *Eternal Sunshine* to issues of intersubjectivity.

external diegesis in *The Science of Sleep*; here he shoots toward the sun but crops it from the frame so that light bleeds in from the edges, obscuring detail. This partial obfuscation, in conjunction with Joel's adjacent sleep, suggests Joel is still not fully awake, as if the sun itself cannot yet be fully assimilated into his wakeful perspective – that which lights his world, also obscures it.

Latter engagements with the hypnagogic liminal occur in relation to the particular circumstances of the Lacuna procedure, the circumstances of Joel's "sleep" and how it constructed by the diegeses. In the external diegesis, we see Joel asleep on his bed and attached to the Lacuna technicians' memory-erasing equipment. Within his dream-space, we witness Joel develop both a growing awareness and reluctance of the procedure. The dream-Joel searches for ways to bring the procedure to a halt, discussing his quandary with Clem (within the dream), who implores him to attempt the obvious: "Wake yourself up." Dream-Joel lifts his hands to his face and holds his eyes wide open; "This is working like gangbusters," he declares sarcastically. However, a moment later in the external diegesis, Joel, lying prostrate on his bed, opens his eyes. The viewer takes Joel's point-of-view directly; an indistinct image fills the screen and gradually comes into focus – the ceiling of his apartment. The success of this seems to surprise dream-Joel, and he rebounds to dream-space almost immediately, telling Clem, "It did work, for a second. But I couldn't move." Here, the differentiating signifier of Joel's body ceases to differentiate; it corresponds to both his physical and dream selves – the double momentarily appears to become singular as dream-Joel coincides with physical-Joel, and a wholeness is achieved for a brief liminal moment.

This device is revisited later in the narrative to construct a second liminal moment. In this latter instance dream-Joel has not attempted to wake himself, rather he appears to have woken as the result of a trauma within the dream: Clem is taken from him (as she is again and again, but this time from a point of apparent safety, Joel having "hidden" her in a memory of infancy). Joel's eyes open and again the camera takes his point-of-view, focusing on the faces of Stan, Mary and Mierzwiak, peering over the bed, alarmed at his apparently wakeful state. This time he does not rebound to dream-space. He remains in his physical body for a longer period and his eyes fill with tears – we infer in response to the realisation that Clem will soon be gone from his memory entirely – and he returns to sleep only when Mierzwiak injects him with a sedative. Joel's point-of-view shot of Stan, Mary and Mierzwiak slowly dissolves from focus and Gondry cuts back to Joel's dream-space.



In these instances, the conscious but still prostrate body of Joel calls to mind the paralysed narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*. In both cases, a doubling occurs; Sebald's narrator is present within his paralysed body and via memory within the active body of the walking tour a year before. Similarly Joel is present within his motionless body and within his active sleeping subjectivity. In both instances the doubling occurs as an active subjectivity, of dream or imagination, exceeds the body and manifests in a memory of a past self. Sebald stages this past presence by literary and photographic means, Gondry by cinematic means – a shot of Joel prostrate on his bed is juxtaposed with a shot of an active Joel in the dream space. Unlike Sebald, who presents a distinct temporal dichotomy between states (“a year to the day” TROS: 3), Gondry returns more than once to the site of the bed, of Joel's body, and explores both states contemporaneously, as when Joel hears the voices of Patrick and Stan from within sleep, when Joel attempts to wake himself, and finally in a moment of trauma.

Beyond these extended interfaces of diegeses, *The Science of Sleep* offers another means of representing this liminality between sleep and wakefulness, via a particular visual trope. In the title sequence and a second time, late in the film, Gondry films the creation of “Spin Art” paintings, which he explicitly states is intended as a representation of hypnagogia<sup>395</sup>. A derivation from the Action Painting movement, Spin Art developed in the 1960s with the work of Alfons Schilling and Annick Gendron; paint or ink is dropped onto a rotating canvas, and centrifugal forces draw the paint away from the centre of the canvas toward the edges, creating kaleidoscopic patterns. The emphasis is very much on the process of creation rather than the final image, and Gondry's own addition to the form is in filming the image as it comes into being, placing his camera directly above the image and rotating it at the same speed as the spinning turntable so that the turntable does not appear to be moving<sup>396</sup>.

This technique is embedded within the text; it fills the frame, becoming the viewer's only focal point. In the opening title sequence, we see trails of ink drawn away from the centre of the screen; a sensation of gravity is created, a centrifugal force akin to the pull of sleep at the hypnagogic moment. The movement suggests a progression, a moving away from a central static point in all directions, and offers an alternative model to linear

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<sup>395</sup> Gondry 2006 [DVD commentary, 2007].

<sup>396</sup> An early experiment with the technique saw Gondry collaborate with the musician Björk to configure a piano into the apparatus so that as particular notes were played, corresponding coloured inks were released onto the canvas. This is documented in a short film entitled *Spin Art* (Gondry 2003 [1997]).

transition from one fixed state to another. It suggests instead, a dissolution of wakefulness into a dispersed sleep.

Gondry deploys this device a second time later in the narrative, in the scene discussed above in which Stéphane and Stéphanie talk on the telephone as he falls asleep. This time there is a notable difference in the device: the film plays in reverse, so that the ink droplets move centripetally from the dispersed outer edges towards the central point, before vanishing. The corresponding visual image of the reversed Spin Art approximates the experience of falling asleep as described in Stéphane's dialogue, as he says, "I feel that I'm falling down into a black hole." It evokes the sensation of being drawn towards a point, until he vanishes, and passes from one dimension into another. This proves a versatile model of hypnagogia, functioning in both directions, and providing an interestingly paradoxical argument – that falling asleep (and waking) can be mapped on to processes of both divergence and convergence.

Finally, this visual leads to a fortuitous image of the sleeping body. As Stéphane approaches the threshold hold of sleep, we hear Stéphanie's voice:

STÉPHANIE: You know you could never see someone fall in a black hole, because the image of the traveller who passes the horizon would slow down until it would remain stuck in the same position. The state he was when he crossed the line.

The image of the traveller having reached this threshold resonates with the image of the body in repose, as it reaches sleep and the movements of bodily wakefulness cease. The body becomes static as subjectivity is displaced away from the surface.

### **Diffusion and deconstruction**

In the scenes described above, Gondry evokes states of dream, wakeful reality, and hypnagogia via specific paradigms of modes, which remain discrete and only come together in moments which cut sharply between diegeses. The boundary between diegeses remains hermetic; modes from each diegesis never appear in the same frame. While this rule is applied to the entirety of the narrative of *Eternal Sunshine*, *The Science of Sleep* diverges, and as

the narrative proceeds, the boundary becomes progressively permeable, as Gondry introduces modes from his dream-space into the wakeful reality Stéphane shares with others.

Stéphane's mother remarks that since he was a child he has inverted dreams and reality, a notion which implies a binary, and while this applies to the clearly delineated states of sleep and wakefulness depicted early in the film, in later sequences Gondry depicts Stéphane in much more diffuse states, imbued with elements of both sleep and wakefulness. Often these scenes also feature the object of Stéphane's affection, Stéphanie. In one such scene Stéphane proposes making an animated film of Stéphanie's model boat. Stéphanie charges him with making the sea; he suggests strips of paper to be configured in a paralactic movement, but Stéphanie argues it should be more "special" than paper. She takes him to the kitchen sink and turns the tap; "water" pours from the tap, but rather than water, the viewer sees a stop-motion animation with cellophane representing water. "Cellophane!" they declare in unison. The viewer infers that Stéphane and Stéphanie see real water, but translate this – simultaneously – into a substance with which they can recreate water for their film. As they make this translation, Gondry makes a parallel translation, presenting what is interior to both of them as a visual mode in the exterior diegesis. These modes – stop-motion animation, and the practice of representing one object (water) with a metaphorical other (cellophane) – have until this point been seen only in Stéphane's dream-space.

What follows moves further into a coalescence of modes. Looking for material with which to create clouds, Stéphanie finds clusters of down feathers and throws them into the air. Naturally, they fall to the floor – until Stéphane contrives a device to keep them in the air. He plays chords at the piano as Stéphanie throws clusters of down into the air. When Stéphane happens upon the "correct" chord, he affects the suspension of these "clouds" mid-air. Stéphane explains: "Each structure has its own resonant frequency!" The explanation, within the diegesis, could be an extension of the previous rationale – Stéphane and Stéphanie are imagining this, and Gondry is translating it directly to the viewer. However, this instance is a step away from the cellophane water, in that it is the chords Stéphane plays which keep the clouds afloat – not simply their imaginations. Whereas water-as-cellophane is a simple translation, here the piano creates an interjection<sup>397</sup>.

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<sup>397</sup> This corresponds to the use of the piano in his collaboration with Björk; whereas certain notes released certain coloured inks into the Spin Art image, here certain chords keep clouds afloat.

These modes function in a similar manner to the voiceover in that they represent at the surface of the text something which is internal to the characters. While this is a given in the dream-space – indeed, fundamental to how the dream-space is constructed – the arrival of these modes in a wakeful space which Stéphane shares with Stéphanie is startling; a textual boundary is breached, and a liminal space opens up between the real and the imaginary, leading the viewer to question the nature of the state being depicted. That this occurs in a shared space also suggests a kind of telepathy, a binding together of these characters at a textual level – for a moment it seems that Stéphanie’s subjectivity becomes equal with that of Stéphane. However, as I will discuss with regard to notions of intersubjectivity, there are very few such instances in *The Science of Sleep*, and all are only momentary.

The deployment of modes becomes progressively diffuse, though only, from this point onwards, in scenes depicting Stéphane alone. He is shown falling asleep in the bath, and familiar modes are deployed to represent his dream-space. As in the diegesis of wakeful reality, Stéphane is depicted in the bath, though here the bathwater is represented by strips of cellophane, the earlier scene with Stéphanie setting a precedent for this particular signification of water. In his dream, he writes a letter to Stéphanie. He attempts to write in French, a language he is not entirely proficient in, and dream appears to affect a further alienation of language and meaning. The resulting letter is almost nonsensical. He creeps naked across the hallway to Stéphanie’s apartment to deliver the letter, slipping it under her door. Here his skin is coated with strips of cellophane from the bath, presenting an interesting hybrid moment – he has entered a wakeful, physical space bearing remnants of the dream-space. The space of the hallway between apartments is real; it does not differ in representation between wakeful and sleep states. However, Stéphane’s body is represented as within sleep, as denoted by the strips of cellophane. When he wakes, back in the bath, his face registers his cognizance of the dream, but then he notices a notepad and pen alongside the bath, and wet footprints, which he follows from the bathroom to Stéphanie’s apartment door. He is left pondering whether dream was in fact reality, and it transpires that dream and reality have in fact coincided.

Gondry deliberately confuses the viewer’s perception of the pre-established economy of modes so as to evoke Stéphane’s own confusion, a device further exploited in later scenes which are framed as dream sequences. One such sequence shows Stéphane pursued by police – the scene is filmed in an exterior location and makes use of natural

lighting, handheld camerawork, and existing architecture, as opposed to the water-tank cityscape of previous dreams. Given the previous designation of modes, this would be read as a space of wakefulness, yet both Stéphane's getaway vehicle and the police car that pursues him are constructed from a material previously seen in the Stéphane-TV studio – cardboard (Stéphane's car is a miniature which he barely fits inside; the police car a real car, coated with cardboard panels, the word "POLICE" crudely painted on). As the narrative nears its conclusion, the disorientation caused by Stéphane's "inversion" of dream and reality is allowed greater and greater textual representation, so that the viewer comes to share in the protagonist's confusion.

### **Polyphony**

As the discussion has made clear, *Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep* rely upon a multiplicity of filmic modes to construct their respective diegeses. Of course, even a straightforwardly naturalistic narrative film may rely on a wealth of modes, albeit modes which are co-dependent and coalesced in the aim of creating a stable diegesis which allows the suspension of disbelief. In Gondry's films it is the clash rather than cohesion of modes that is distinctive. Such clashes of modes correspond to the contrasting voices at work in Sebald and Murakami, which function to subvert stable and whole subjectivities to varying degrees – the voices of characters and conflicting modes of word and image in Sebald, and the various narrative modes at play in Murakami. The filmic modes of Gondry's films serve to both stabilise and destabilise textual subjectivity; modes work in tandem within each diegesis, and the modes of contrasting diegeses work in opposition, serving to construct and maintain the boundary between spaces of wakefulness and dream (this dynamic is of course subverted in the progressive deconstruction of diegeses in *The Science of Sleep*).

As in the literary texts, polyphony may manifest as a clamour of disruptive, destabilising force, apparent in both content and form, or it may manifest as a "performance" of polyphony, a self-signifying flirtation with multiple voices which does not destabilise the text but rather reasserts a unified centre, assimilating that dissenting otherness into a singular, monological whole. Ultimately, Gondry's films appear to fall into the latter category; despite the great array of conflicting and disruptive modes at play, these films appear to achieve a stability of textual surface – something close to an integrated wholeness, to the illusion of a centred textual subjectivity. Gondry's deployment of modes

is far-reaching; there are radical departures from naturalistic representation, and from mainstream editing, lighting, and set design, and both films appear heterogeneous, in terms of filmic modes, narrative devices, and at the level of suspension of disbelief. Yet while the diegeses operate to their own specific, conflicting rules, there are no significantly upsetting interruptions to the surface of the text. The previously discussed liminal moments at the interface of diegeses serve to establish the terms and conditions of how these function in conjunction, as a whole-diegesis. Even when deconstructed in *The Science of Sleep*, the economy of diegeses is quite straightforward; the deployment of fantastical modes signifies dream, and as soon as that trope is established it can be taken for granted, much as the tropes of magic realism become commonplace in Murakami. Thus, when Gondry cuts back and forth between the internal and external at great frequency, the viewing experience remains “smooth” – there is no sense of “jarring” despite the vacillation between representations of radically different states of consciousness. In this sense, the illusion of unity Gondry creates is reminiscent of *Vertigo* and especially *The Rings of Saturn*, in which the surface of the text *appears* to be stable despite the polyphony of voices at play in the text.

### Intersubjectivities

A separate economy of polyphony functions at the level of the characters, their voices and dialogue. In contrast to the polyphony of modes, this is radically at odds in the two films. In *Eternal Sunshine*, contrasting viewpoints manifest in the duologues of Joel and Clem which convincingly portray the dialogism of a fractious or fracturing relationship; however, the voices present in the love-triangle subplot of Mierzwiak, Stan and Mary offer no contrast to that of the primary narrative, instead presenting more an echo of Joel and Clem’s relationship than a discordant or alternative viewpoint. It is as if the subplot exists to reaffirm and bolster the thesis of the primary narrative, that is, the assertion of an essentialist romantic love.

*The Science of Sleep* however presents a series of characters much more diverse in voice. Beyond Stéphane and Stéphanie, the screenplay gives voice to the exuberant misogyny of Guy, the romanticism of Christine, the cynicism of Zoe, and the pragmatism of Monsieur Pouchet. The designation of such broad attributes might appear mechanistic yet the interaction of these voices achieves more of a carnivalesque economy, and indeed

the designation does not remain static – Christine has her heart broken, Guy’s exuberance turns to dejection and alienation, and Monsieur Pouchet goes against his better judgement and publishes a highly uncommercial calendar which Stéphane has proposed.

The contrast in voice is never more present than in the relationship of Stéphane and Stéphanie. Initially these two characters appear very alike; they are both shy, creative artists, and the echo of their names suggests an inherent oneness – a Platonic destiny. However, this emerges as a simple rhetorical device; Gondry thwarts the expectation that, however similar the voices of these two people may seem (so much more similar that those of outspoken Clem and introvert Joel), these are two individuals who will never speak as one. The moment in which Stéphane and Stéphanie see the same spectacular things, and which the viewer, included in their intersubjectivity, sees too (cellophane as water, clouds kept afloat indoors by the resonant frequency of piano chords) becomes a rhetoric with which Gondry subverts a key trope of the romantic-comedy genre: *The Science of Sleep* presents a moment of intersubjectivity and then refuses the promise of its potential. Stéphane’s romantic hopes are raised and subsequently dashed, leading the viewer to retrospectively ponder whether this startling scene was indeed of his own, and just his own, imagination.

As the narrative progresses, the voices of Stéphane and Stéphanie are most often heard in conflict, as they argue more and more and their communication becomes less and less successful. In later scenes, Stéphane speaks from within his hypnagogic reverie which operates on an entirely different logic than the wakeful world Stéphanie speaks from. The dialogue of each appears out of context with the other. Stéphanie attempts to decipher what Stéphane says to her, or shouts at her, but can’t because it makes no sense; “You’re manipulating me,” she says, “I... I don’t understand!” He leaps from topic to topic with the logic of dream, proffering non-sequiturs and abstract thoughts, and interjecting obscene sexual comments. He is somehow unable to respond directly to what Stéphanie says to him, and she is unable to interpret his convoluted utterances.

The way in which the viewer is positioned to see both Stéphanie and Clem is fundamental to issues of intersubjectivity. In both instances we see each primarily via the gaze of the protagonist, sometimes directly, when the gaze of the camera is aligned with the view of the protagonist, but moreover in the sense that the viewer’s understanding of everything within the text is mediated by the subjectivity of the protagonist. The protagonist is always positioned between the viewer and Clem or Stéphanie, which is

further problematised by the fact that both protagonists spend considerable amounts of time asleep or in states of consciousness beyond a (comparatively) objective wakefulness. In wakefulness each protagonist is permitted an apparently open and interactive subjectivity, and in sleep a closed and hermetic subjectivity, within which the love object becomes alienated from its real life counterpart and reconfigured via the subjectivity of that which desires it.

Whereas ultimately Stéphanie emerges as a distinct subjectivity in her own right, the case of Clem remains problematic. Clem exists in the external diegesis of *Eternal Sunshine*; she is a fully-formed character who interacts with Joel and with Patrick. However, the viewer sees much more of Clem in the internal diegesis, that is, within Joel's sleeping mind. This version of Clem (which I will refer to as *object-Clem*, as opposed to the *subject-Clem* of the external diegesis), is a construct of Joel's mind. The veracity of the characters in the internal diegesis is clearly defined in an exchange between Joel and Mierzwiak, as Joel beseeches the doctor to help him escape the Lacuna procedure:

JOEL: Mierzwiak! Wake me up!

MIERZWIAK: Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Barish. I thought you understood what was going on here.

JOEL: You're erasing her from me. You're erasing me from her. You've got this thing. I'm in my bed. I know it. I'm in my brain.

MIERZWIAK: I'm part of your imagination too, Joel. How can I help you from there? I'm inside your head too. I'm you.

It follows that object-Clem, like Mierzwiak, is a facet of Joel; she is Joel's subjective conception of Clem. As such, she exists in stark contrast to subject-Clem; object-Clem is entirely defined by Joel's gaze – the vested gaze of the man who loves/hates/desires her. Every action of the object-Clem is defined by Joel's subjectivity. It is therefore surprising, and problematic, when object-Clem becomes an active presence in Joel's memory; rather than the recollected love object, this Clem appears to develop a subjective agency, an awareness and apparent autonomy; she becomes cognizant of Joel's undertaking of the Lacuna procedure and proactive in schemes to halt it. One reading of this apparent acquisition of subjectivity would be to suggest that she is *invested* with an awareness; she remains an object *within* Joel and therefore remains barred from subjectivity. The apparent autonomy of the character is projected; to suggest that an object within dream may assume a subjectivity would be to suggest dream is not exclusive to the subject.



There are several further possible readings to this illusion of an active subjectivity bestowed upon an object, though the most salient interpretation posits object-Clem's reflexivity as misogynist. Object-Clem is present on screen much more often than subject-Clem and as such, the viewer comes to know the character (*whole-Clem*?<sup>398</sup>) primarily through the version within Joel, the object within his sleeping mind. Therefore the Clem the viewer comes to know is constructed by Joel's gaze – his visual desiring gaze, but moreover his psychic gaze. The viewer sees Clem as Joel sees her, with reference to Mierzwia's line cited above, as an aspect of himself. Hence, object-Clem's agency in trying to halt the procedure may be read as nothing more than Joel's projected wish. The events of the external diegesis would seem to contradict Clem's helpfulness here – she has already undergone the procedure herself; we do not know whether she experienced similar pangs of regret during, but regardless, she has moved on and is beginning a new relationship with Patrick.

This opens up a further line of enquiry in regard to the film's narrative tension, which charges Joel with outrunning the Lacuna technicians and preserving Clem within his memory. Ultimately he fails in this but tragedy is averted when the couple meets again the following day in Montauk (how this contrivance is brought about is discussed below). But what if Clem is wiped from Joel's mind and he never sees her again? This is presented as the potential tragedy of the narrative – if Clem no longer exists to Joel, then she no longer exists at all. Joel is the film's protagonist and as such the viewer is positioned to invest in his needs and desires. The viewer prioritises Joel's need to reunite with Clem above all else. If a reunion cannot be realised, Clem's existence in the external diegesis becomes arbitrary. Object-Clem, not simply the Clem of Joel's dream-space, but Clem as the object of Joel's desire, again takes precedence over subject-Clem.

There are however positive interpretations of object-Clem's illusion of subjectivity. This apparent presence of subjectivity within an other subject might be considered a coalescence of subjectivities, a meeting of two separate entities in a shared unconscious space, or indeed, a reinforcement of a feminine subjectivity within a male subject. It might be considered that the subjectivity of Clem in the external diegesis is so forceful that it leaves a trace within Joel. This is substantiated by the tropes of the romantic genre, which

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<sup>398</sup> I use this term to suggest the "whole-Clem" of the character's representation in the film, across both exterior and interior diegeses. This is indicative of Joel's subjectivity dominating the textual subjectivity; if we consider Clem's subjectivity beyond that of Joel, then whole-Clem becomes synonymous with subject-Clem, or the "real" Clem. Correspondingly, object-Clem is an aspect of "whole-Joel".

suggest that two people are “made for each other”<sup>399</sup>. This resonates with the conclusion of Kaufman’s screenplay (an aspect which Gondry chose not to film), in which Joel and Clem are shown as an elderly couple going through the Lacuna process again, having erased and re-met each other many times<sup>400</sup>. Clem’s apparently active subjectivity suggests a dialogue between Joel and Clem, if only within Joel, that indicates Joel, at the very least seeks, or has sought, such an engagement with subject-Clem.

Notions of intersubjectivity are further complicated by the denouement of the narrative, as Kaufman and Gondry contrive a reunion for Clem and Joel. Object-Clem, in her dying moment, whispers to Joel, “Meet me in Montauk,” and, in the external diegesis the following morning both Joel and Clem travel to Montauk and meet again, as if for the first time. This instruction, “Meet me in Montauk,” seemingly implants in Joel the unconscious need to travel to Montauk. But why does Clem travel to Montauk? The instruction, with its origins in Joel’s dream-space, is unavailable to subject-Clem; it does not intersect with her at any point. Yet she travels to Montauk to be re-met by Joel, and the potential tragedy of the narrative is averted. Is this the film relying upon its generic foundations? The romantic comedy-drama insists upon an either/or resolution; the protagonist and his or her love object must meet again to either be reconciled or separated for good. Such a reading offers weight to the argument that as a result of their mutual love, the thresholds of Clem and Joel’s subjectivities have become indistinct.

The notion of intersubjectivity is reasserted by an apparent telepathy between Joel and Clem as Joel undergoes the procedure. His attempts to hold on to Clem have an apparent effect upon wakeful-Clem, who, exterior to the events in Joel’s mind, begins to experience an uncanny change in herself. “I feel like I’m disappearing,” she says. She expresses a sudden urge to visit the frozen Charles River as she had done with Joel, though now Joel is absent from this image. Instead she suggests taking the trip with Patrick, but is immediately overcome with unease about the idea, and changes her mind. This occurs just as object-Clem gains an agency and begins to assist Joel in preserving her in his memory. Here, romantic love is invested with a supernatural agency, and telepathy intervenes to fulfil the role of an apparently impossible necessity. This underscores the supposedly

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<sup>399</sup> For an overview of how mainstream filmic narratives construct romance, see Shumway 1995: 381-401.

<sup>400</sup> The modified shooting script of *Eternal Sunshine* is published by Nick Hern Books (Kaufman 2004). Kaufman’s original script is available to view at the Internet Movie Script Database, at <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Eternal-Sunshine-of-the-Spotless-Mind.html>. Accessed 9 February 2010.

inherent need of love – of the subject to be with the love object, which, in the instance presented here, is apparently reciprocal.

This notion of thresholds of subjectivities becoming indistinct serves to effect a deterritorialisation of subjectivity and might also be mapped on to the model of becoming-other – for instance, in the idea of “Joel-becoming-Clem”. Through his interaction with Clem, Joel enters into a process of becoming-Clem, just as Clem enters into a becoming-Joel. This process is merely initiated and at no point progresses beyond the most tentative stages. The notion of *progress* suggests a linearity which is not necessarily appropriate. It remains within *process*, and might be considered a move towards a becoming, or an unconscious identification. If Joel’s emotional engagement with Clem is such that the boundary between them is breached, Clem’s own subjectivity would be permitted some operation within, or in conjunction with, that of Joel. This is perhaps an overly functional reading, a means of explaining how Clem achieves an agency in Joel’s sleeping mind – an agency which is more than just the illusion of. This Clem is not merely object-Clem but bears a trace of Clem’s subjectivity, suggesting a telepathy with the “real” Clem, the independent subjectivity active within the external diegesis.

Nicholas Royle writes of the telepathic dream in *Wuthering Heights*, in which Lockwood dreams of Catherine, pleading “Let me in – let me in!”. The telepathic nature of Lockwood’s dream is:

confirmed a few minutes afterwards when Heathcliff, believing Lockwood is out of hearing, ‘wrenched open the lattice, bursting, as he pulled at it, into an uncontrollable passion of tears. “Come in! come in!” he sobbed.’<sup>401</sup>

Here the recipient of the message is not the intended recipient; Lockwood stands in for Heathcliff, receiving the message on his behalf, as it were, and by the conduit of dream. This appears to be the inverse of *Eternal Sunshine*, in which, it seems, the wakeful Clem experiences a telepathic communication (though does not understand it as such) from within her ex-lover’s sleep. This suggests a perhaps more complex telepathy; at this point of the narrative Clem is unaware even of Joel’s existence, and yet it would seem that the reason she feels as if she is disappearing is that a part of her remains inside Joel. She becomes telepathically aware that this aspect of herself is being erased; her response indicates that her desire, supposedly already erased, is in fact ineradicable.

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<sup>401</sup> Brontë 1972: 30; Royle 1990: 49-50.

Such notions of intersubjectivity continue to be steadfastly refused in *The Science of Sleep* as its narrative proceeds toward a denouement. The final scene revisits the intersubjectivity of the cellophane water and down feather clouds, as from Stéphane's apartment window, Stéphane and Stéphanie see a man in the street below who appears to be on fire, the "flames" appearing, as the cellophane water before, as a stop-motion animation. They rush to the kitchen and fill a pot with water (cellophane), return to the window and throw it to the street below. A man cries out as he is hit by water – real water; the man does not appear to be on fire, nor to have been at any point. This moment offers a brief revitalisation of Stéphane and Stéphanie's friendship, and appears to be so placed, just prior to the narrative's conclusion, so as to juxtapose the potentiality of what was, with what has become. Stéphane is leaving Paris, frustrated that his relationship with Stéphanie has been thwarted by her rejection of his desire, or rather (as he does not see) his attempt to possess her. This mirrors the way in which Joel possesses Clem in *Eternal Sunshine*, and how eventually the object of Clem in Joel's dream-space comes to partially coincide with Clem's subjectivity in the external diegesis.

This final scene shows a moment of intersubjectivity, which engenders a subsequent moment of emotional intimacy. Stéphane and Stéphanie sit alongside each other and attempt to discuss the reasons why their potential relationship has failed. This intimacy is brought to an abrupt end as Stéphane becomes, in Stéphanie's words, "a pig."

STÉPHANE: Will you fix your teeth one day?

STÉPHANIE: You're mean.

STÉPHANE: No, I'm just saying because it's going to be forty years till we're married and I might as well take care of my goods now, you know? Or actually, you know, don't do anything. Maybe no teeth is good for a blowjob.

STÉPHANIE: Okay, I think you should leave now.

Stéphanie is quick to deflect Stéphane's sexually suggestive comments but he does not leave. He continues to make offensive comments, and then climbs into her bed, fully clothed, where he begins to cry, before falling into a sudden sleep. Gondry returns us to Stéphane's dream-space, where he and Stéphanie ride on a horse (Stéphanie's toy horse come to life) which jumps on to a boat (the toy boat that she has made) before the boat sails away on a sea of cellophane.

In contrast to *Eternal Sunshine* which concludes on a bittersweet note of Joel and Clem attempting to restart their relationship in the full knowledge that it will most likely fail, *The Science of Sleep* concludes with the acknowledgement that Stéphane and Stéphanie's relationship will never even begin. The apparent telepathy experienced by Joel and Clem is denied to Stéphane; he is unable to understand that the object-Stéphanie of his dream-space does not correspond to the subject-Stéphanie of the external diegesis.

Stéphanie refuses the objectification of Stéphane's gaze. Object-Stéphanie cannot exist beyond Stéphane's mind, and is obliterated in the external diegesis by the presence of the distinct and forceful subjectivity of the *real* Stéphanie. Stéphane however remains oblivious to this. She steadfastly rejects him; as she says, "I think you should go now," she breaks her gaze from his, and refuses any further participation in discourse, which would seem to indicate absolutely that there is no coincidence of the object in Stéphane's mind and the subject who sits alongside him. Furthermore, it shows that she appreciates a painful irony which Stéphane does not: that it is not her that he desires at all, but an imaginary version of her, of his own construct.

### **Liminal motifs**

In previous chapters discussion of liminal motifs has centred on hypnagogia, the night, the vertiginous, rites of passage, the nomad, and the extraterritorial. Several of these motifs correspond to the particular form of the text – for example, the travelogue or memoir of Sebald, or the bildungsroman aspects of *Kafka on the Shore*. *Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep* follow a generic romantic comedy/drama narrative, and do not so readily reflect these motifs. However, the diegetic economies of these films suggest opportunities for discussion of the construction of objects and space – of objects which become liminal through an existence across and between diegeses, and of liminal space translated through the boundaries of diegeses, in the notion of sleeping subjectivity effecting a translation of real-life space into a distorted dream-space.

Both films are extraordinarily rich with inventive imagery, and liminal consciousness is a key facet. Gondry explores a visual means of representing hypnagogic transitions; in *The Science of Sleep* this is specifically the hypnagogic; in *Eternal Sunshine* it is the transition of the Lacuna procedure, and implicitly of memory and consciousness. The aforementioned use of Spin Art in *The Science of Sleep* presents an imposing visual conceit.

The viewer is not privy to the construction of these sequences (as we see Stéphane concocting his recipes for dreams). Indeed, the composition remains a mystery until explained by Gondry in sources external to the text<sup>402</sup>. As such, rather than manifesting as an object in either diegesis, it is of neither – it is a separate device embedded in the text.

The corresponding image of transition in *Eternal Sunshine* is of snow and ice, which manifests as a peripheral, apparently arbitrary detail in various forms throughout the film. The film is set in the north east of the United States in February and as such the cold weather conditions would seem to be a given, yet Gondry's approach to the texture and potentiality of the locale's meteorological substances, as well as the persistence of this imagery, ties it inextricably to the film's themes of transition, of both the impermanence of the central relationship, and of the manner in which memory and consciousness operates, whether authentically, or through an artificial process such as the Lacuna procedure.

Snow is first apparent in the pre-title sequence, notably at the site of Joel and Clem's meeting and re-meeting – the beach at Montauk. The re-meeting, occurring on St. Valentine's Day, sees the beach awash with snow. Joel and Clem's first date after their serendipitous re-meeting is a night-time picnic on a frozen lake. Joel fears the ice will shatter beneath their weight, and there is in fact a large visible fracture in the ice beneath them as they lie back and gaze at the stars. This seems to suggest a perilous position in this particular romantic narrative; the ice will inevitably begin to melt, creating a progressively unstable surface. The title sequence itself invites the viewer to imagine melting ice; the credits appear in a sharp, white, sans-serif typeface, which melts away after a brief moment.

The choice of this landscape as the backdrop to the story cannot be discounted. As the characters negotiate unavoidable transitions, the frame again and again makes a feature of these substances which similarly cannot avoid instability. This "phase transition" from one state of matter to another is a perfect becoming-other; a substance changes form according to the conditions of its environment. Another term for liquefaction might be appropriate here; "fusion," with its double meaning of melting and fusing, suggests both the transition from one state to another, and a coming together.

Moving beyond the visual, *The Science of Sleep* presents a specific mode of dialogue which falls into the category of the liminal. Stéphane's native tongue is Spanish (his father of Mexican; he is of dual nationality) and Stéphanie's is French. Neither speaks the other's

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<sup>402</sup> Gondry 2003 [1997].

language so when together they speak in English.<sup>403</sup> Here, the English language is not merely a liminal space, but a system in itself. It engenders, to both characters, a somewhat magical space; it facilitates the beginnings of an intersubjectivity through which we see objects translated into fantastical substances. English becomes a mode like the animation, the shared imagination. However, the ultimate refusal of this intersubjectivity imposes boundaries on this space. We might say that it is a tentative intersubjective space, which does not fully absorb the subjectivity of either character. It allows their subjectivities to “touch” but not to converge. So while the shared use of this language engenders great imagination and creativity, it cannot bridge other, more vital spaces.

This recalls negotiations with language in other texts – Mari’s engagement with the Chinese language in *After Dark*, which corresponds to her position in the liminal night, and a move towards an adult subjectivity (she assumes a role of responsibility in translating for Guo Dongli<sup>404</sup>). It also resonates with the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*, on the beach at Scheveningen, listening to the Dutch language and mis-recognising it as his own<sup>405</sup>. In *The Science of Sleep*, the liminal space of the lingua franca engenders a fantastical space akin to hypnagogia, while in *The Rings of Saturn*, a liminal hypnagogia engenders an apparent unity of languages.

### **Liminal objects**

Both films feature sets of objects which are specifically related to the characters, and which function in two main ways. First, these objects exist between diegeses, and this duality lends an instability to the object; for instance, in some cases the translation from one diegesis to the other effects a fantastical translation, as in Stéphane’s typewriter, which in his dream becomes a giant spider/typewriter hybrid, its eight legs frantically punching at its own keys. In other cases, the dream object remains indistinguishable from its wakeful counterpart, or translated in much subtler ways. One such example is Stéphane’s telephone, distinctive in its retro style, which remains identical in his dream-space, but for its

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<sup>403</sup> It is worth noting that beyond the heteroglossia, this device makes the film eminently more marketable to an English speaking audience.

<sup>404</sup> AD: 38.

<sup>405</sup> TROS: 84-85.

exceptionally long cord, which allows Stéphane to continue his phone conversation as he walks through a meadow, or into a forest<sup>406</sup>.

As with the spider/typewriter, these translations often take the form of a hybridity. The first instance of this occurs when Stéphane is in an apparently wakeful state. He shaves with an electric razor; suddenly the razor cuts him; it cuts him a second time and, angered, he throws it to the floor. To his surprise, it sputters back to life, jerking on the bathroom floor. Later, he dreams of a razor-spider hybrid, which attacks the current object of his ire, Monsieur Pouchet. The razor exists in both reality and dream; in dream it is imbued with a violent agency, and furthermore it seems to retain an aspect of this agency in Stéphane's wakeful experience – following his dream, the violent potentiality of the dream-razor leads Stéphane to regard its wakeful counterpart with wariness and suspicion.

A second way in which these objects function comes to have greater significance for the theme of intersubjectivity, and comes to condition and be conditioned by the ways in which the characters relate to each other. These objects are often extensions of the characters, for example, in preparation for the Lacuna procedure in *Eternal Sunshine*, Joel is asked to assemble objects which remind him of Clem; these include a mug, letters, photographs, and drawings. As the Lacuna technicians prepare Joel for the procedure, he is asked to respond in turn to each to the objects he has assembled. Mierzwiak explains: “We'll use these items to create a map of Clementine in your brain.” Joel's response is recorded, and as this “map” of his brain is created, these objects become metonymic of Clem, as constructed by Joel's gaze, and are subsequently “removed” from his subjectivity, hence bringing an end to a potential intersubjectivity with Clem.

It is also of note that Joel, Clem, Stéphane, and Stéphanie are all constructed as creative individuals, and many of the objects the viewer comes to relate to each are creations of that character. For example, Joel draws and paints, Stéphane “invents” (he constructs a “one second time machine”), Clem makes “potato-head” characters, and Stéphanie constructs a model forest-within-a-boat. In every instance these objects originate from the constructed subjectivity of these characters, and exceed those initial bounds to become nodal objects which function in the space between characters. It is Stéphane who

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<sup>406</sup> The telephone itself suggests another form of translation which engenders a liminal space. It transmits sound telegraphically, connecting voices across space. It captures the frequencies and timbre of spoken sound waves and translates the aural into electrical current; it passes this current across the liminal space between voice and ear, and retranslates this current into sound. It is not the speaker's voice that is heard but a reproduction. It decodes and recodes.



makes the suggestion that St  phanie construct a forest in her model boat, and they plan to collaborate on a short film, which, if it did materialise within the diegesis, would become a shared object, originating from both of them. Similarly, most of Joel’s drawings are of Clem; they are his creation but they take her image. This might be read as an attempt at possession, as reflected in the key narrative trope of Joel’s attempt to fight the Lacuna procedure and maintain his psychic possession of Clem. In these drawings and paintings, her image becomes filtered through his gaze. This is highlighted in a scene following Clem’s undertaking of the Lacuna procedure, in which she sees anew a drawing representing her as a skeleton. “You made me look thin,” she says wryly.

The objects created by Clem and St  phanie are notable in that, despite each text’s assertion of the protagonists’ subjectivity above all other and the attempt to possess their respective love objects (and especially in Joel’s apparent success of this in *Eternal Sunshine*), the sheer fact of their creation necessitates an originating subjectivity. Both Clem and St  phanie need to exist beyond Joel and St  phane in order to create in their own right. This to some extent mitigates accusations of misogyny in *Eternal Sunshine*, though it must be noted that St  phanie’s creations are much more prominent than those of Clem, more esteemed by the protagonist, and also integral to the narrative.

The most prominent object in *The Science of Sleep* is St  phanie’s model horse. St  phane notices the horse on a visit to St  phanie’s apartment. She tells him its name is Golden the Pony Boy<sup>407</sup>, though later she confesses the horse had no name until he asked her:

ST  PHANIE: You know I named Golden the Pony Boy after you. I improvised his name when you saw him for the first time. He didn’t have a name.

Golden the Pony Boy is territorialised by St  phanie (she makes reference to having bought him) and she names him, and subsequently he is territorialised by St  phane in that he is named after him. Therefore he becomes shared territory; he cannot be territorialised

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<sup>407</sup> The horse was made by the film’s “Animals and Accessories Creator” Lauri Faggioni. After sending Gondry the finished horse, the director asked her what he was called; she replied that his name was “Heaven,” the name she gives to all her model horses, and signed off her note with a line from Coppola’s *The Outsiders*, “Stay golden, Ponyboy,” (modified from, “Stay gold,” in S.E. Hinton’s source novel) (Hinton 1967; Coppola 1983). Gondry misunderstood and thought the horse’s name was Golden Ponyboy (Buchanan 2006). Ponyboy refers here to Hinton and Coppola’s fictional character, and to Gondry himself, as Faggioni affectionately addressed him. So, Golden the Pony Boy is further deterritorialised in that beyond the filmic diegesis he is (accidentally) named after Gondry himself.

absolutely as more than one party has a territorial stake in him; he becomes deterritorialised at the moment he is named, when he becomes a shared object.

His deterritorialised status is tested when Stéphane breaks into Stéphanie's apartment and installs a series of motors within him which allow him to gallop. (Here, Golden the Pony Boy becomes-other, from a static object to a mimesis of life). Stéphane's intervention with the horse is an invasion; he breaches Stéphanie's territory and imposes his own upon this object, without her permission. Stéphanie is at first offended and upset – by Stéphane's intrusion and his "surgery" upon Golden the Pony Boy – but she later reveals she loves these changes to the horse, and admits to Stéphane that the horse was partly his already.

### **Extraterritorial space**

Alongside the instability of these objects, Gondry explores the stability of space through a range of techniques. *Eternal Sunshine* employs set design and editing techniques to reshape spaces from Joel's wakeful world into new configurations in his dream-space. Here spaces "bleed" together; Joel walks through the aisles of a bookshop into the house of his friends Rob and Carrie; in a single sequence he runs with Clem across the frozen lake, through a train station, under bedsheets, through a theatre. This fluidity of space is a key trope of the dream diegesis in *Eternal Sunshine*, and the disruption of spatial continuity becomes commonplace.

A more persistent disruption of space occurs in scenes at the beach, where the presence of the sea represents an oblivion which threatens the presence of the object-Clem within Joel. The image of the shoreline, utilised extensively as a liminal, extraterritorial space in *The Rings of Saturn*, becomes equally prominent here, in the setting of Montauk, at the eastern tip of Long Island – an extremity of land against a vast body of water. In the pre-title sequence, Joel walks the beach, the far point of the island, the furthest he can travel. The sea laps at the shore, the threshold between land and sea shifting constantly and elastically. The beach is awash with snow and there is a blurring in terms of texture – like sand, snow is powdery (Montauk's very light-coloured sand assists in creating a semblance) and like the sea, snow is a form of water (crystallised ice). In Gondry's winterscape of Montauk, the two-dimensionality of the screen obscures any essence of substance; the snow is water-becoming-sand-becoming-beach-becoming-sea. Snow is also present in the

air as it falls, and serves to make the line of the horizon indistinct, presenting an uncanny environment of no distinct lines where we would expect such distinctions to orientate ourselves. This lends an unformed, anticipatory air to these early scenes; we expect, or at least hope, that order will emerge. Here, sand might be snow and the sea might be the sky. With no perceptible difference between these things, each is impossible to pick out, to name, and place in a particular order.

This resonates with the pre-linguistic and the Lacanian order of the Imaginary. Dylan Evans' description of the Imaginary has clear ramifications with these early scenes: "the order of surface appearances which are deceptive [and] observable phenomena which hide underlying structure."<sup>408</sup> The viewer observes only what is presented on screen, within the *mise-en-scène* (temporally as well as spatially), and not beyond. This image of Montauk is first seen two and half minutes into the film's running time, when the viewer, like the infant prior to the acquisition of language, is still struggling to understand what is what. There is however a suggestion that a structure exists behind these deceptive surfaces, and that it will be uncovered. As aspects of character and narrative begin to coalesce and take form in the viewing mind, the viewer's anticipation of order is slowly rewarded.

Evans also asserts that the basis of the Imaginary is the formation of the ego in the mirror stage<sup>409</sup>, which again suggests that a formation is imminent. In place of ego, we might implant supplant the conjunction of Joel and Clem and the formation of their relationship, which is in a sense the ego, or central focus, of the film. This appears to reaffirm the Platonic ideal that the romantic genre insists and re-insists upon – that Joel and Clem actually are two halves of a single whole. They recognise each other and form an identification, much in the same way that the infant does as it identifies with its own image<sup>410</sup>. Here there is another kind of mirroring – a doubling, as Joel and Clem have met like this before – on the beach at Montauk, and as precipitating a romantic relationship.

The extraterritorial quality of the beach is stretched to an absolute threshold in Joel's final (and thus, very first) memory of Clem, in which they meet for the first time on the beach at Montauk at the party of a mutual friend. As dusk falls they break into an empty beach house; Clem is forthright, Joel somewhat more trepid. As he recalls their incursion into this house, his dream-space brings about a final spatial distortion as the sea

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<sup>408</sup> Evans 1996: 82.

<sup>409</sup> Evans 1996: 82.

<sup>410</sup> Evans 1996: 115.

begins to encroach upon the house while he and Clem are still inside. It is as if either the shoreline has advanced beyond its usual tidal limits, or the house itself has moved closer to the sea. As the scene progresses, waves break upon the edges of the house, and then begin to crash beneath it, shaking its foundations. The house begins to collapse, a section at a time, into the sea.

The viewer infers that the house itself is an embodiment of this memory of Clem, and that as it falls into the sea, the memory of Clem is obliterated, piece by piece, from Joel's mind. It also recalls the breaching of thresholds at Dunwich, as recounted by Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn*. At Dunwich the tidal surge destroys the town ("All night the waves clawed away one row of houses after another. Like mighty battering rams the roofing and supporting beams adrift in the water smashed against the walls that had not yet been levelled,"<sup>411</sup>) and while the beach house at Montauk does not suffer such violent destruction, it does, like the houses of Dunwich, pass through a phase of being partly of the land, partly of the sea. This house, the embodiment of what remains of Joel and Clem's relationship, balances upon a threshold between the certainty of land (existence) the oblivion of the ocean (non-existence), until ultimately it is claimed by oblivion.

The stakes do not seem so high in the spatial arena of *The Science of Sleep*. Here space becomes subject to territorialisation; in the internal diegesis this is in the dichotomy of dream-space and wakeful space, the dream-space an exaggerated version of reality, reterritorialised by dream, with its brighter colours, more acute angles, and apparently thicker air, and the threshold of this space represented by the Stéphane-TV studio. In the external diegesis territorialisation occurs in the space of other subjectivities – those of Stéphanie and Christine, Stéphane's mother, which either refuse entry to territorial space, or encompass and nullify Stéphane's own territorial space.

The space of both Stéphane's and Stéphanie's apartments, both owned by Christine, represents one such problematic space. The film opens as Stéphane moves back into the apartment, into his childhood room. It is cluttered with artefacts of his youth – toys, drawings, posters. His bed itself is a model racing car. He makes no move to reconvene his room to his adult needs (he does not put childish things away) and settles into this childhood space. This appears to be a mutual deterritorialisation. The room itself effects a deterritorialisation upon Stéphane; it deterritorialises his adult self by introducing into his consciousness a space from his past (alternatively, this might be considered a

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<sup>411</sup> TROS: 158.

reterritorialisation, a reclamation of Stéphane's subjectivity by his own childhood self). This resonates with Turner's descriptions of adolescent liminality, though in reverse. Stéphane appears to be regressing to a pre-adolescent state, an idea reflected in his attempts to communicate with Stéphanie, which certainly lack a sexual maturity; rather than attempting to seduce her, he wants to play games with her, and his gauche attempt to steal a kiss is indicative of an adolescent (or pre-adolescent) sexual naivety.

Yet Stéphane also effects a deterritorialisation upon this space. He is an adult, and his adult body imposes itself upon this space. The bed is too small for him but he sleeps in it nonetheless. His ambitions and desires have altered since childhood; in two telephone conversations he conducts from his bed, he complains to his mother how needs a creative job, and converses with Stéphanie, attempting to communicate his love and desire to her. He conducts his adult life in this space, deterritorialising it from the grasp of childhood.

While this was his family home, it is now his mother's apartment. She is temporarily absent, yet she owns the apartment, and the apartment next door into which Stéphanie moves (in Stéphanie's first meeting with Stéphane, Stéphanie refers to Christine as, "My asshole landlady," unaware that she is talking to her landlady's son). Stéphanie's moving in is another such deterritorialisation – a very formal one, which we would expect is constituted by a lease or rental agreement. The space of Stéphanie's apartment assumes a liminality with her presence – she is a temporary occupant and so has a stake in its territory, yet it remains the property of Christine. Stéphane violates this territory when he breaks into the apartment to modify the talismanic "Golden the Pony Boy". Upon discovering his intrusion, Stéphanie is upset; he has entered her apartment, a space which is hers, and his mother's, but not his. This is a more brutal deterritorialisation; he has entered without permission, his intrusion is unexpected and disrespectful.

This is a very literal application of the concept of territorialisation, concerning as it does the relationship between people and space, the command each has over that space, and how this shifts, is violated, or thwarted. To summarise the territorial progression of the space, it is at the outset the territory of Christine Miroux; it is deterritorialised by the arrival of a new tenant, Stéphanie, and further deterritorialised by Stéphane's intrusion. This sets up a complex territorial economy, which, to a degree, governs what may occur within it.

Ultimately it has disastrous consequences for Stéphane's desire for Stéphanie. Christine returns home and decides to move back in to her apartment alongside Stéphane.

The space is again reterritorialised; Stéphane is no longer alone in the apartment, and it is no longer his own unimpeachable space. He is uncomfortable with her presence; upon the announcement of her moving back in, he scowls and exits the apartment without a word, and soon after decides to leave. This coincides with the disintegration of his relationship with Stéphanie, and it is as if this maternal space begins to exceed and enclose his desire.

### **Summary**

Through the construction of interior and exterior worlds, *Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep* introduce the potential for remarkable evocations of the liminal in extended moments of hypnagogia, which, in *The Science of Sleep*, become prolonged and eventually all-consuming, a notion which carries forward to the following chapter, in which I discuss the construction of a narcoleptic protagonist. The liminal is also evoked in the spaces between each protagonist and the object of his desire. *The Science of Sleep* thus becomes the more radical text in its refusal to bow to tropes of genre, yet the conclusion of *Eternal Sunshine* perhaps offers a more open liminal space in its acknowledgement of uncertainty.

Sebald's liminal motif of the shoreline is revisited in *Eternal Sunshine* at the site of Montauk and in the space of the beach house. The sea is at first indistinct and then threatening, its otherness bearing a potential oblivion. The interplay of territory in *The Science of Sleep*, in particular the "home" space of the characters apartments, precipitates a discussion of home and the nomadic in *My Own Private Idaho*, which, as with the precarious beach house, takes as its focus the risk and potential of liminal space.

## **Four**

### **Gus Van Sant**

#### ***My Own Private Idaho***

my consciousness began to dissolve at the edges, so that at times I could hardly have said how I had got there or indeed where I was.

W. G. Sebald *The Rings of Saturn*<sup>412</sup>

Mike, the protagonist of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, suffers from narcolepsy, a condition which causes him to fall asleep with little or no warning. Narcolepsy also causes hallucinations during apparently wakeful states, leading the sufferer to confuse dream and reality. This confusion is reflected in the film's narrative, which is multifarious and fragmented, held together solely through its focus on the protagonist. As in the case of the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn*, Mike's consciousness is somewhat frayed; his narcolepsy manifests in dramatic seizures and is represented via hypnagogic reveries, which often take as their focus his lost mother, Sharon. These reveries disrupt the continuity of his wakeful experience and subjectivity, and as such he often has no idea of where he is or how he came to be there. He is always in the periphery of the hypnagogic; his subjectivity comes to be constructed across a continuum of consciousness – sleep, wakefulness and hallucination – which Van Sant refracts through multiple modes of filmic grammar – time-lapse photography, Super-8 film, posed stills, title cards, and cutaways to pastoral idylls. I will argue that the protagonist's fragmented subjectivity comes to be represented by these modes, which work in conjunction to produce an intrasubjective polyphony.

Mike lives on the streets of the Pacific Northwest, where he works as a prostitute and, at times, lives in a derelict hotel amongst a group of "street denizens" who speak (sometimes but not always) in a Shakespearean demotic, drawn from the *Henriad*. The Shakespearean comes to characterise one of several narrative threads, with the character of Scott, son of the city mayor, filling the role of Prince Hal. Scott, who often acts as Mike's

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<sup>412</sup> TROS: 210.

protector, is soon to inherit, and the Falstaffian Bob Pigeon expects wealth and privilege by association, but following a police raid on the hotel, the street denizens disband. Mike and Scott travel to Idaho where Mike declares his love for Scott, who does not reciprocate. They then visit Mike's brother, Richard, and it is revealed that Richard is also Mike's father from an incestuous union with their mother. Mike and Scott set off in search of her – first to an Idaho hotel, then to Italy. They fail to find her, but Scott meets and falls in love with an Italian woman, Carmella. He abandons Mike to return to the U. S. and marry Carmella, and to assume his now-deceased father's political identity. Bob Pigeon approaches the new Scott, but is disavowed. He dies soon after, and the narrative concludes with Mike, alone on the road in Idaho; having failed to find his mother, or have Scott reciprocate his love, he surmises that he will never break free from his circuitous fate.

This chapter first aims to address the question of liminal subjectivities through an account of narcolepsy. It will consider how narcolepsy functions in the film and serves to condition the text, in terms of the political, and of narrative and structure. I aim to explore how Van Sant establishes a haecceity in his protagonist, with discussion of precedents set in his previous work, and to outline how a particular polyphony is installed in the text, with an account of contributing visual and narrative modes. Within the text, I see these images reflected in motifs of home, rites of passage, the nomad, and the extraterritorial, and I note an emerging tension between the outcomes of these liminalities – “successful” reaggregation is set against perpetual liminality, and the political comes to the fore as the liminal exposes power structures which grant access to or debar particular outcomes.

The film revisits textual subjectivities and liminal motifs of previous chapters, notably the construction of interior space from Gondry, the nomad and extraterritorial from Sebald, and rites of passage and the carnivalesque from Murakami. Moreover, there are differences to be noted in how Van Sant deploys modes and motifs; in contrast to all the other texts discussed, *My Own Private Idaho* is a remarkably open text. This openness sustains both positive and negative readings. As embodied in its fragmented protagonist, openness may be a lack of definitive direction, which leads to nowhere in particular. On the other hand, it never compromises to the notion of the definitive; it remains open and fluid, and thus the liminal space between text and viewer may yield a much wider and more generative engagement.



### Critical work on Van Sant

Much attention has been paid to Van Sant's use of the *Henriad*, as documented in José Ramón Díaz Fernández's annotated bibliography of films in which Shakespeare and adolescence intersect<sup>413</sup>. Similarly there is a body of work which locates the film as a text of gender and queer studies, as in the papers I cite from James Morrison and Matthew Tinkcom, which respectively consider the film in light of New Queer Cinema<sup>414</sup> and its representation of masculinities<sup>415</sup>. More applicable to my project, is the work of Stuart Aitken and Christopher Lukinbeal<sup>416</sup>, who take an interdisciplinary approach, combining the discourse of film studies and geography, opening up discussions of space and transience.

I have found some of the most insightful work to be academic reviews of the film (and of Van Sant's other films). Harvey Greenberg's reading of the film<sup>417</sup> has been invaluable in shaping my approach and leading me towards other critical texts, and similarly, Steve Vineberg's review of *Drugstore Cowboy*<sup>418</sup>, Devin McKinney's of *Gerry*<sup>419</sup>, and Megan Ratner's of *Paranoid Park*<sup>420</sup>, provide some of the most interesting critical work on Van Sant. Two interviews with the director also prove especially fruitful; an interview with Graham Fuller from 1993, which is published alongside the film's screenplay<sup>421</sup>, and an audio conversation with fellow director Todd Haynes, which coincided with the film's release on DVD by the Criterion Collection<sup>422</sup>.

Most of all, I am very grateful to Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler for their paper on the theme of liminal rites in the film<sup>423</sup>, which I cite extensively. It offers a rich and rewarding appraisal of how both Mike and Scott negotiate the liminal, and it has been central in crystallising my thoughts on the matter, and providing points of departure for my own discussion.

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<sup>413</sup> Díaz-Fernández 2008.

<sup>414</sup> Morrison 2006.

<sup>415</sup> Tinkcom 2005.

<sup>416</sup> Aitken and Lukinbeal 1997; Aitken 1998.

<sup>417</sup> Greenberg 1992.

<sup>418</sup> Vineberg 1990.

<sup>419</sup> McKinney 2003.

<sup>420</sup> Ratner 2008.

<sup>421</sup> Van Sant 1993.

<sup>422</sup> Van Sant and Haynes 2005.

<sup>423</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998.

In addition to critical work on Van Sant, I draw on neuroscientific discourse in my preface on narcolepsy; especially of note is the work of J. Allan Hobson<sup>424</sup> and Andreas Mavromatis<sup>425</sup>, which provides excellent grounding for the discussion.

## Narcolepsy

I suggest that *My Own Private Idaho* makes no claim on a centred or stable textual subjectivity in that it has no singular narrative thread, politics, nor is it of any singular filmic genre. A nominal centre is provided by the protagonist (as represented by River Phoenix's performance) and by his narcolepsy, and these facets come to form the centripetal dynamic which holds the textual subjectivity in place against the centrifugal forces of an array of radically conflicting modes. The configuration of the protagonist and his narcolepsy comes to condition the entirety of the text; it could be said that narcolepsy presents a model for *no* definitive centre. Stuart Aitken suggests that Van Sant uses narcolepsy "to destabilize our sense of what constitutes a fundamental sense of identity,"<sup>426</sup> and it must also be stated that the device of narcolepsy radically destabilises the notion of a stable textual subjectivity.

The film opens with a static close-up of a dictionary definition of narcolepsy:

**nar·co·lep·sy** \`när-kə-`lep-sē\ *n* {ISV. fr. Gk *narkeē*}: a condition characterized by brief attacks of deep sleep.

This image might be read as a title in itself; its placement at the very front of the narrative conditions the viewer's reading of all that follows. Paul Arthur and Naomi Liebler compare this image to the following title card, which reads "Idaho," announcing the setting of the first scene, and suggest that narcolepsy might equally be read as a location<sup>427</sup>. The opening scene depicts Mike, alone on the road in Idaho, talking to himself and observing the landscape, before succumbing to a seizure and falling asleep; thus, the first few minutes of the narrative lead the viewer to conclude that this dictionary definition refers to Mike. Harvey Greenberg suggests that *My Own Private Idaho* is:

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<sup>424</sup> Hobson 1989.

<sup>425</sup> Mavromatis 1987.

<sup>426</sup> Aitken 1998: 172.

<sup>427</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 26.

essentially informed by Mike's soporific/stoner sensibility. His neurological disorder enables an eerie yet exhilarating sense of dislocation and narrative slipperiness.<sup>428</sup>

Mike's narcolepsy is represented within the diegesis via Phoenix's performance, manifesting in dramatic seizures as he twitches and falls to the ground; it conditions the jagged and expressionistic approach to storytelling, which jumps from one time or location to another, depending on when and where Mike falls asleep and wakes, and moreover it is reflected in the great breadth of filmic modes which Van Sant deploys to evoke Mike's very specific relationship with consciousness. These facets constitute the particular sensibility and narrative slipperiness Greenberg writes of; it might be said that this is narcolepsy rendered as textual effect.

Narcolepsy is a form of hypersomnia. It was identified by J. B. E. Gelineau in 1880, but the first accounts were reported three years earlier by Westphal – the physician cited by Foucault as instating the notion of the homosexual as a "species"<sup>429</sup>. I am unable to find the source of Van Sant's dictionary citation of narcolepsy, but the OED defines it as thus:

narcolepsy, *n.* *Med.*

A sleep disorder, often of genetic origin, characterized by frequent brief episodes of sleep during the day and disturbed nocturnal sleep, often with cataplexy, sleep paralysis, and hypnagogic hallucinations.<sup>430</sup>

This statement says both less and more than Van Sant's dictionary definition. It already carries within it some prescribed notions of sleep; it presupposes a normative sleep which adheres to a circadian structure. It positions "sleep during the day" as a "disorder" and nocturnal sleep as a site of stability which may be disturbed. Also, it does not specify that these episodes of sleep are necessarily beyond the subject's agency, nor does it address the manner in which this sleep approaches the subject (in *My Own Private Idaho*, sleep seems to approach Mike in the form of an ambush). The most interesting new details here are the related effects of the condition, such as cataplexy (a loss of muscle tone often prompted by strong or sudden emotion such as laughter or anxiety) and especially hypnagogic hallucinations, an aspect of narcolepsy Van Sant explores to a great extent.

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<sup>428</sup> Greenberg 1992: 23.

<sup>429</sup> Foucault 1984: 43. Correspondingly, early cases of narcolepsy were considered the result of repressed homosexuality or excessive masturbation (Tuller 2002).

<sup>430</sup> "narcolepsy, *n.* *Med.*" *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 16 Jun. 2000 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00321139>>

If untreated, narcolepsy renders the individual at a severe disadvantage for participating in waking life. It places the subject at odds to a circadian framework; sudden attacks of daytime sleep may cause problems for the individual not only in maintaining employment, but at a base level in maintaining a level of self-vigilance necessary for personal safety. It can lead to dependence upon others, as in the case of Mike, who comes to rely on Scott as a protector. In these instances, Mike's body is rendered prone and vulnerable; his subjectivity is displaced and, without agency, he becomes an object, open and defenceless to a gaze which may prove dangerous, especially given his circumstances of homelessness and prostitution. In this sense Mike is akin to Eri in Murakami's *After Dark*, in that his lack of wakefulness puts him at a disadvantage to the more nefarious elements of waking world, be this a hostile environment or a hostile gaze.

Within the diegesis, narcolepsy is not discussed in the context of neurological or medical discourses. The first time Mike suffers a narcoleptic attack witnessed by others, Scott offers an explanatory statement:

SCOTT: Narcolepsy, doctors are saying, is brought on by certain chemical reactions in the brain. Comes about in situations of stress.

Following this statement, Mike's narcolepsy is taken as given, and no attempt is made to address the practicalities of managing the condition. Such management is not beyond the realm of possibility – while the condition is undeniably debilitating, many people live with it and cope to a greater degree of success than Mike. However, such notions are neither explored nor acknowledged within the diegesis<sup>431</sup>.

While I would argue that the film takes no singular political stance, it might be said that the multiple stances it does take may be aggregated into a rhetorical position regarding questions of homelessness and exploitation at a particular moment in American history. The configuration of narcolepsy and homelessness (and prostitution) places Mike in a particular social context. The viewer bears witness to his interaction with other characters,

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<sup>431</sup> Some deleted scenes made available with the film's 2005 DVD release explore this to some degree. One scene shows Mike wake in a hospital; we don't know why he is there – for treatment of his narcolepsy, or as a first step away from the streets, perhaps both, perhaps neither. Most likely Mike doesn't know; as with other instances of waking, he appears not to know where he is, asking a nurse, "Do you live here?" As the scene concludes the viewer ascertains that Mike does not intend to stay and is eager to get back to the street. (Van Sant 1991[2005]).

and to the responses of friends and, more often, strangers to his narcoleptic attacks. The political tone of the film is coloured by these responses; almost all are cold; as soon as Mike is no longer conscious he is no longer of use and is to be disposed of. Early in the narrative we see him collapse in the company of a female client, Elena, whose reaction contains a hint of fear, of being somehow implicated in his collapse or culpable for his unconsciousness, and tainted by the illegality he represents. His lack of consciousness also offers opportunities for exploitation, as in the film's closing moments when his shoes and possessions are stolen by two passing men. Mike is aware of this danger; he asks Scott, "How much do you make off me when I'm asleep?" to which Scott replies, "No Mike, I'm on your side." These reactions to Mike's narcolepsy present a kind of social litmus test and articulate a rhetorical question, the answer to which Van Sant underscores with his choice of music. Eddy Arnold's song *Cattle Call*<sup>432</sup> plays over the opening credits, evoking and simultaneously undercutting nostalgia for the bygone west, with its denotation of literal cattle and connotations of the herd of street hustlers whose number includes Mike. The score also features a repeated refrain from *America The Beautiful*<sup>433</sup>, which similarly works to underscore both the evocatively photographed landscape<sup>434</sup> and, with searing irony, the problematic of Mike's position within that landscape (Amy Taubin comments that, "it functions ironically to connect the betrayal of familial love with the betrayal of the American dream"<sup>435</sup>).

The use of narcolepsy to highlight issues of exploitation is unapologetically pointed, though arguably oblivious to its own complicity. The sharp edge of this politics manifests in the closing moments of the film, which see Mike, alone and asleep on the open road, robbed of his shoes and possessions, and then lifted into a car and driven away by a person whose face the viewer never sees. In Van Sant's screenplay the person is Scott<sup>436</sup> and in an excised scene it is Mike's father/brother Richard<sup>437</sup>. In the diegesis of the original film, the identity of this person is not disclosed; it could be Scott, Richard or another benevolent figure, or it could be someone of great threat. The rhetoric is reiterated a final time as, prior to the closing credits – over which plays 'The Pogues' *The Old Main Drag*<sup>438</sup>, a ballad of homeless youth and abasement – the screen cuts first to black and then to a title card

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<sup>432</sup> The song was popularised by Eddy Arnold in the early 1950s; it was written by Tex Owens in 1934.

<sup>433</sup> First published 1910; lyrics Katharine Lee Bates, music Samuel A. Ward.

<sup>434</sup> Van Sant uses two cinematographers on *My Own Private Idaho*, John J. Campbell and Eric Alan Edwards.

<sup>435</sup> Taubin 1992: 13.

<sup>436</sup> Van Sant 1993: 187.

<sup>437</sup> Van Sant 1991[2005].

<sup>438</sup> Written by Shane MacGowan, 1985.

which reads: “Have a nice day,” employing a customer service demotic with cold irony. While open to criticisms of bluntness, lack of subtlety, and even crassness, this moment nevertheless conveys an anger which adds a further final layer to the textual subjectivity, beyond the subjectivity of the protagonist and seemingly at odds with the aesthetic of the preceding film. It might be read as Van Sant asserting an authorial voice; as a parting shot it seems resigned, an almost redundant afterthought, though it signifies an attempt to locate the film squarely in a social context.

While Van Sant attempts to manage this aspect of the film’s politics, he has been criticised for his complicity in the processes that construct these problems. Travis Mackenzie Hoover argues that Van Sant romanticises Mike’s narcolepsy and his homelessness:

One doesn’t look at the film and see the nightmare of an unprotected life: one sees young people enjoying themselves, being irresponsible and living without parental authority. It doesn’t seem like such a hard-knock life.<sup>439</sup>

There is weight to Hoover’s argument – the casting of two recognisable Hollywood stars in the lead roles lends the characters a glamour that would have been absent if Van Sant had cast his original choices of Mike Parker and Rodney Harvey in the roles of Mike and Scott<sup>440</sup>. Parker in particular would have given the film an altogether different air – he is one of the real street hustlers who relates his experiences to camera in a scene included, Van Sant argues, to add an air of authenticity to the social milieu depicted<sup>441</sup>. It may be argued that Parker as Mike would have lent the film a greater degree of authenticity; however, the casting of real street hustlers signals a problematic issue. For all the authenticity these actors bring to the film, their inclusion implicates Van Sant, a self-identified middle class man who insinuates himself into a very different milieu. The question of Van Sant’s background and its position in relation to the subject matter of his films is addressed in interview with Graham Fuller:

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<sup>439</sup> Hoover 2005, in *Reverse Shot* 21; <[http://www.reverseshot.com/article/my\\_own\\_private\\_idaho\\_0](http://www.reverseshot.com/article/my_own_private_idaho_0)> accessed 26 September 2010.

<sup>440</sup> Van Sant and Haynes 2005.

<sup>441</sup> See Van Sant and Haynes 2005.

GF: Where does your affinity for street kids and junkies and hustlers come from and why do you seek to tell their stories? Is that in any way a reaction to your own middle-class upbringing?

GVS: It's certainly very much apart from my own upbringing. I think it's that *Mala Noche*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, and *My Own Private Idaho* had settings that were unfamiliar enough to me that they seemed like fairytale land . . . All three of them are close to each other, but far away from the public, from the viewers, in the sense that *Star Wars* or pirate adventures are far away from them. It's a storyteller's technique to remove you from everyday life into a new area, so parables can be had.<sup>442</sup>

This suggests that Van Sant presupposes a viewer who is not of the world he films, a dangerous supposition which is not only myopic but of concern in the suggestion that this world is a site for “parables”. It would seem to suggest that social reality is not the subject of *My Own Private Idaho* (or *Mala Noche*<sup>443</sup> or *Drugstore Cowboy*), merely an exotic backdrop<sup>444</sup>. Regardless of its experimental aesthetic, *My Own Private Idaho* is a commercial film and its gaze, intentionally or not, objectifies those whose sexual objectification it takes as a narrative focus. Equally it could be argued that by allowing Parker and Green a voice to communicate their experiences – in a commercial film no less – Van Sant is overturning such notions of exploitation.

Beyond the political, the deployment of narcolepsy has ramifications for how the protagonist's subjectivity comes to be represented and positioned within the text, which brings me to a key component of my reading of the film. The representation of narcoleptic subjectivity seems to demand formal experimentation; one wonders whether Van Sant took this as a challenge to effectively represent a particular kind of consciousness, or whether his use of contrasting modes, already evident in his previous work, in turn suggested narcolepsy. This refers back to Greenberg's account of the film's “narrative slipperiness”<sup>445</sup>, a notion constituted by the correlation of the manner in which the textual subjectivity appears to approximate the subjectivity of the protagonist, a “drawing together” of text and protagonist, as occurs in Gondry, and Van Sant's multifarious approach to the task of storytelling and representing the world in which the story exists.

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<sup>442</sup> Van Sant 1993: xxviii.

<sup>443</sup> Van Sant 1985.

<sup>444</sup> Hoover considers Van Sant's position with reference to Fassbinder's *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (Fassbinder 1974): “I wonder what [Fassbinder] would have made with the relationship between Van Sant and the young hustlers at whom he gazes, with the director perhaps taking as much from his charges as Fassbinder's Eugen took from Fox.” Hoover 2005; Fassbinder 1975.

<sup>445</sup> Greenberg 1992: 23.

I suggest that that through the correlation of protagonist and modes, the film constructs a particular narcoleptic subjectivity, blurring the boundaries of reality and hallucination, and destabilising the categories of sleep and wakefulness. This is my foremost suggestion for why Van Sant designates narcolepsy to his protagonist; the condition provides an expedient model with which to explore notions of consciousness, transience, and nomadism. Stuart Aitken and Christopher Lukinbeal suggest that, “Mike’s neurological disorder enables Van Sant to muddle time, space and place,”<sup>446</sup> while Mariana Martin goes so far as to ask:

Could *Idaho* all be Mike’s dream? Perhaps, but if so, this might be the first film to utterly banish all psychoanalytic meaning from the realm of the sleeper, and instead allow the strange, involuntary, and half-remembered to reign supreme and unchallenged.<sup>447</sup>

In terms of narrative, narcolepsy is deployed as a device to both hinder and progress. Whenever Mike suffers a narcoleptic attack, he is cut short in whatever he might be doing or saying – his agency is hindered. However, his narcolepsy often serves to move him forward; Van Sant positions the viewer with Mike, and as such the narrative interface is determined by his consciousness, so that when he wakes in a new location a new narrative sequence is initiated. Greenberg notes that:

Whenever Mike falls out, Van Sant’s camera winks out of existence, too. Events unfold in jump cut. We recurrently awaken with Mike as if the world were newly invented, under clouded circumstance in obscure locales.<sup>448</sup>

A line from Van Sant’s screenplay further elucidates this idea; of his narcolepsy, Mike comments, “It’s kind of like time travel,”<sup>449</sup> suggesting a temporal and spatial transit, which in turn suggests that Mike’s positioning in the universe is entirely arbitrary – his movements are ultimately beyond his will. While narcolepsy becomes the primary means of narrative progression, it subverts the notion of a linear, progressive narrative. The narrative leaps effected by narcolepsy are apparently random: from collapsing alone on a road in Idaho to

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<sup>446</sup> Aitken and Lukinbeal 1997: 360.

<sup>447</sup> Martin 2005, in *Reverse Shot* 21; <[http://www.reverseshot.com/article/my\\_own\\_private\\_idaho](http://www.reverseshot.com/article/my_own_private_idaho)> accessed 26 September 2010.

<sup>448</sup> Greenberg 1992: 23.

<sup>449</sup> Van Sant 1993: 111.



waking in a hotel room in Seattle; from collapsing on a suburban street in Seattle to waking in Scott's arms in Portland; from collapsing in a hotel room in Rome to waking on a plane at Portland Airport. This device is akin to *deus ex machina*; it interjects, unanticipated, and affects a decisive narrative shift. Arthur and Liebler draw attention to this deployment as:

a formal device with which to bridge spatial and temporal transitions (when Mike wakes up he is invariably in a new location). It is, moreover, not just a marker but a complex bearer of meaning, a signifier of *transition* as thematic substance of the work.<sup>450</sup>

Crucially, the idea of narcoleptic subjectivity also extends beyond modes of storytelling, into modes of representation. One indicator of narcolepsy, as the OED definition testifies, is "hypnagogic hallucination". This is elucidated by J. Allan Hobson, who suggests that narcoleptic hallucinations depend on the REM sleep processes<sup>451</sup>. In non-sufferers, REM sleep does not occur until around ninety minutes after sleep onset; however Hobson suggests that in narcoleptics the REM process operates during sleep *and* wakefulness:

Since the REM sleep process is building during the wake state – causing the excessive daytime sleepiness – it is little wonder that a dream image may be generated and experienced as an hallucination before the narcoleptic loses awareness of his surroundings.<sup>452</sup>

This underlines the notion that a narcoleptic subjectivity may be radically at odds with an objective reality; hallucinations may be mistaken for reality as the projections of the narcoleptic's mind appear authentic and supplant experiences of the real world. The narcoleptic's ego will endeavour to integrate and rationalise these experiences, engendering a dislocated and precarious subjectivity in which ego boundaries are loosened and the reality principle is overthrown. Here, subjectivity becomes mutable, defined as much by hallucination as by experiences of objective reality, which connects it to the hypnagogic, suggesting that the narcoleptic experience is in many ways akin to a perpetual hypnagogic state – a potentially unending liminality with no obvious exit or hope of reaggregation.

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<sup>450</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 28.

<sup>451</sup> Hobson 1989: 176.

<sup>452</sup> Hobson 1989: 177.

This idea is carried forward into Van Sant's treatment of narcolepsy as an irritant to the notion of wakefulness as the home of subjectivity. Not one of the states of consciousness in which Mike is depicted could be classified as "home"; neither sleep nor wakefulness nor any manifestation of hypnagogic hallucination offers the stability that the term suggests. As the film moves across and between modes and narrative threads, it becomes impossible to designate any particular moment to sleep, wakefulness or hallucination. Greenberg points out that even the most apparently naturalistic or wakeful scene "may well be another of Mike's stupefied reveries."<sup>453</sup> This strategy appears to assert that no state of consciousness is privileged and that each and every state is valid; each makes its own claim upon being a reality, and thus a sense develops that these states must be understood as co-existing micro-realities, no one less valid than the next.

This idea is especially applicable when the states in which Mike is depicted appear to be radically disconnected, for example, in the two very distinct worlds denoted by the contrasting registers of contemporary and Shakespearean speech. These worlds co-exist within the diegesis of the film, but appear to represent two opposing realities; we might consider it improbable that such modes of speech could coexist within a single paradigm defined by character, location and epoch, but a pluralistic approach to the representation of realities allows each to exist discretely, and as contrasting facets of a meta-reality. To borrow a device from the previous chapter, it might be said that the sum of these distinct realities comes to constitute the "whole-Mike".

### **Textual subjectivities**

Van Sant, like Gondry, deploys a wide range of filmic modes in constructing the protagonist and his world. However, whereas Gondry uses modes to construct two self-signifying spaces of wakefulness and dream, Van Sant's use of modes adheres to no binary structure, and instead opts for a more diffuse economy of multifarious indistinct states. Aitken and Lukinbeal suggest that:

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<sup>453</sup> Greenberg 1992: 24.

through the depiction of Mike's narcolepsy, Van Sant subverts the distinction between internal and external space. This distinction permits space and scale to appear "natural." Time and space circulate, collapse, and are turned inside-out.<sup>454</sup>

Whereas both *Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep* appear to achieve a stability at surface level, there is a radically – and compellingly – unstable textual surface to *My Own Private Idaho*. In terms of filmic modes and narrative devices, *My Own Private Idaho* appears more heterogeneous; it features a raucousness of filmic modes, which unlike the comparatively smooth transitions of Gondry's films, achieves a textually jagged surface. These modes can be designated into three main categories, dialogue, visual, and structural, though some may be categorised as two or even all three of these. Taking my lead from the previous chapter, I will discuss these modes in relation to the construction of the protagonist, exploring how the subjectivities of protagonist and text become drawn together, the narcoleptic fragmentation of the former corresponding to the jagged surface of the latter.

The modes Van Sant employs include time-lapse photography, Super-8 film, posed shots which mimic still photography, title cards, and cutaways to pastoral idylls. The film's dialogue functions in a similar multifarious manner; contemporary dialogue cuts to Shakespearean and scripted dialogue to improvised, and a breaking of form to documentary interviews with Mike Parker and another street hustler, Scott Patrick Green<sup>455</sup>. The switch between these modes may be said to "jar" the viewing experience, though to differing degrees. For instance, the interjection of time-lapse shots are brief and do not interrupt the narrative, whereas the Shakespearean and documentary aspects represent a much greater rupture. The collision of these modes with the fictional and naturalistic sections draws attention to the device of polyphony, which in turn brings to light the less prominent modes, such as the time-lapse, which must too be considered an aspect of the text's polyphonic subjectivity.

As in literary texts, the polyphony may manifest as a clamour of disruptive, destabilising force, apparent in both content and form, or it may manifest as a performance of polyphony, a self-signifying flirtation with multiple voices which ultimately does not destabilise the text and reasserts a unified centre, assimilating that dissenting otherness into a singular, monological whole. While Gondry's films may fall into the latter category, *My*

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<sup>454</sup> Aitken and Lukinbeal 1997: 359.

<sup>455</sup> The veracity of these interviews is documented in Van Sant and Haynes 2005; see page 159.

*Own Private Idaho* is, in a textual sense at the very least, of the former category, in that its text consists of a polyphony of voices with no definitive narrative ploy or tenet.

Todd Haynes argues that the shift between modes in *My Own Private Idaho* does not result in a lack of cohesion:

There's something that's so cohesive about it . . . The visual style that predominates, and also the sense of being in [Mike's] head, suspended in some dream state where daydreams keep slipping into real life. There's no solid reality that the film establishes. There's no sense of pure naturalistic reality.<sup>456</sup>

I strongly agree that the film creates no solid reality, though I would argue a “pure naturalistic reality” is in fact one of the modes that Van Sant deploys, for example in intimate scenes between Mike and Richard, and Mike and Scott. I would not however argue that this naturalism represents an objective reality but rather one of Mike's subjective realities – the naturalism hinting that it is perhaps one he experiences as more authentic than others (conditioned as it is by these particular relationships). I would also disagree with the thrust of Haynes' argument that the film achieves a sense of cohesion. Haynes uses this term to defend the film from criticism that it is too dispersed; however I do not believe that such a comment constitutes negative criticism – the textual subjectivity is radically dispersed and this produces a difficult and uneven text, which is thus compelling and visceral. Its polyphony is in some senses its greatest success – it succeeds in the seemingly impossible task of representing a fragmented narcoleptic subjectivity.

### **The text and the protagonist**

My assertion that Van Sant's polyphony of modes represents a narcoleptic subjectivity rests upon the construction of the protagonist. As I argued in the previous chapter, Gondry constructs his protagonists through the evocation of their inner worlds. Here I argue that Van Sant achieves a similar, though deeper effect through denying a clear inner/outer dynamic for his protagonist and instead representing him across a continuum of consciousness. Again, I suggest that this occurs through an embedding of the protagonist, a drawing together of the subjectivity of the protagonist and that of the text.

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<sup>456</sup> Haynes & Van Sant 2005.

It is perhaps useful to begin by discussing the construction of protagonists in Van Sant's previous films. Walt, the protagonist of *Mala Noche*, is constructed through voiceover – most of the film's dialogue is a voiceover narration from Walt's point-of-view, which skews the textual subjectivity to his perspective. Here the division of narrator and narrated is relevant, as discussed in relation to Sebald. Walt appears as an object within the diegesis, portrayed by the actor Tim Streeter. The voiceover, again by Streeter, is in the first person, and refers in the past tense to an I, thus, as in Sebald, the I that refers is other to the I that is referred to.

Similarly, in the opening scene of *Drugstore Cowboy* the protagonist Bob delivers a first person monologue in voiceover, which refers to a previous self. Here the dynamic is complicated as we see Bob in the present – a close-up of his face, as he recalls a moment in the past, which we also see as the film cuts between the close-up of Bob and Super-8 footage of Bob with three other people, who we ascertain are his “crew” – the friends with whom he robs drugstores. Here the I that speaks is also the I that is represented in the close-up; we infer that the voiceover is an internal monologue occurring in the protagonist's mind as we are watching him in the close-up of his face. Yet there is another I, the object in the Super-8 film, a doubling which mirrors that of Joel's body at the intersection of diegeses in *Eternal Sunshine*. The conjunction of these two modes with the voiceover positions the Super-8 footage as internal to Bob, as being the focus of an internal gaze, accessible only to Bob and the viewer.

*My Own Private Idaho*, at first glance, presents a much simpler dynamic. The opening scene similarly exploits notions of the gaze to establish the subjectivity of its protagonist. Mike, alone on an empty highway in Idaho, looks into the landscape and sees a face looking back at him – “a fucked-up face,” as he describes it – constructed by distant foliage and the shape of the highway itself. Greenberg sums it up: “He curls his fingers before his eye, the camera obligingly irises in.”<sup>457</sup> Here Van Sant takes the camera directly to Mike's point of view and bringing the gaze of both the viewer and Mike into direct alignment – we are placed not just in close quarters but directly behind his eyes. What marks this from the use of point-of-view shots in Gondry is the correspondence of Mike curling his fingers before his eye and the subsequent shot which irises in. Van Sant draws attention to the device, as if to let the viewer know how this particular pair of eyes works – that through a process of re-framing, it sees things that are not necessarily of an objective reality, and

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<sup>457</sup> Greenberg 1992: 24.

given the positioning in this very first scene, that the viewer will be placed behind these eyes again and again as the narrative moves forward. This would seem to represent a step on from *Drugstore Cowboy* in the drawing together of textual and personal subjectivities. Here Van Sant aligns the viewer's gaze with Mike's gaze unequivocally, clearly denoting him as the protagonist and imposing an identification with Mike upon the viewer (correspondingly, the fucked-up face gazes back not just at Mike, but at the viewer too).

This apparently straightforward construction is soon complicated. While Van Sant's screenplay features sequences in which Mike speaks in voiceover, referring to himself both in the present and the past<sup>458</sup>, this device was excised from the text of the film itself. When Mike speaks, it is always within the diegesis. He is often heard speaking aloud when alone, or to himself. This speech is not directed to another character, it is an articulation of his internal monologue, akin more to Joel's voiceover in the opening sequence of *Eternal Sunshine* than to the voiceovers of Walt or Bob. It is privy to Mike and the viewer alone, and yet he never addresses the viewer, and his dialogue in no way anticipates an audience. This would seem to position Mike in closer proximity to the viewer than either Walt or Bob. Whereas Walt and Bob talk to, or at, the viewer, Mike, like Joel, does not institute the dichotomy of speaker and listener and avoids the boundary between protagonist and viewer that such a device creates.

However, unlike Joel, we see Mike's lips move when he speaks. His voice remains diegetic; it never enters the fabric of the text by means of voiceover. There is no division of the narrating subject and narrated object as in *Mala Noche*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, or in Sebald's novels. Mike's speech exists within the diegesis, therefore he is both the narrator and the narrated, and from the perspective of the viewer, he is both the I that speaks and the I that is referred to. Mike only becomes truly analogous when the camera takes his point of view, in the iris-in shot, which lasts for only a very brief moment before Mike appears in frame again and the viewer is placed back in opposition, and we are able to identify ourselves *against* Mike, rather than with him, or *as* him.

Further divisions add to this problematic, notably in the instances in which we see Mike succumb to sleep. Despite Greenberg's assertion that "[w]hen Mike falls out, Van Sant's camera winks out of existence too,"<sup>459</sup> the camera *does* document Mike succumbing to sleep, and from a definitively exterior viewpoint. Here the viewer is not inside Mike's

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<sup>458</sup> See citation from the screenplay below.

<sup>459</sup> Greenberg 1992: 23.

head but at a distance, observing the displacement of wakeful subjectivity from a body which becomes a passive object. The transition is objectified, and the moment is repeated every time Mike succumbs to sleep. It is also of note that Phoenix's performance in these moments is somewhat fetishised – we are invited to watch as he twitches and jerks until finally he lays dormant, and we look on, compelled, and implicated through looking<sup>460</sup>.

The documentary sections affect a similar distance from the protagonist (and, with regard to the politics highlighted by Hoover, similarly implicate the viewer). Here, a Barthesian reality effect disrupts the viewer's suspension of disbelief, as it asks the viewer to "believe" to an even greater degree. It wrenches the viewer from the notion of being inside the mind of a fictional character, and confronts us with documentary. Furthermore the content of this documentary is shocking and disturbing – sexual violence and exploitation. The subsequent return to a fictional diegesis thus presents another wrench which, depending on viewpoint, reaffirms or undermines the film's politics. In such moments, the textual subjectivity comes to be marked against the protagonist. It steps away from and exceeds the protagonist, achieving a further fragmentation.

### **Polyphony**

The manner in which the film's multiple modes function alongside each other in the singular entity of the text presents a polyphony akin to that which Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky<sup>461</sup>. It is impossible to cite the film itself to demonstrate the polyphonic effect, so I offer an excerpt from an unfilmed expositional sequence of Van Sant's original screenplay, which shows how the director intended to plant particular modes alongside each other.

MIKE

This is nowhere. I'll bet that nobody is ever going to drive down this road. I'll be stuck here forever.

Mike looks at the road stressfully. The road looks back. He looks at the road his eyes growing heavy. The road looks back...

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<sup>460</sup> Arthur and Liebler comment that Phoenix "brings a remarkably graceful vertigo to the depiction of these seizures," (Arthur and Liebler 1998: 28-29), resonating with that particular symptom of one of Sebald's narrators.

<sup>461</sup> "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices," Bakhtin 1984a: 6.

Mikes yawns.

MIKE'S VOICE OVER

I don't know when it was I recognized I had this disease.

Mike looks like a backwoods character who fits into the terrain. Mike makes strange movements, like he is having a sort of epileptic fit, then yawns like he is very tired, again.

MIKE'S VOICE OVER

Sometimes I'll be in one place, and I'll close my eyes...

MIKE CLOSES HIS EYES. THEN A WHOLE RITUAL OF EVENTS HAPPENS, HIS EYES TURN BACK IN HIS HEAD AND HE BEGINS TO SHAKE ALL OVER. THEN ALL GOES BLACK.

MIKE'S VOICE OVER

When I open them again, I'll be in a completely different surrounding.

When Mike opens his eyes, he is in downtown PORTLAND, OREGON.

A LOUD BUS drives by Mike's view in the city. He is asleep, then wakes enough to see other UNKNOWN KIDS rifling his pockets in a doorway, as Mike sleepily looks on.

SUBTITLES

It's kind of like time travel. It's kind of good.

MIKE CLOSES HIS EYES AGAIN, AND WHEN HE OPENS THEM HE IS BACK IN THE COUNTRY. BUT THIS TIME A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TERRAIN. LIKE A LONG TIME HAS PASSED. HE IS ALSO WEARING DIFFERENT CLOTHES.

MIKE CHECKS HIS WATCH AGAIN. He looks happy at the passage of time.<sup>462</sup>

This sequence follows Mike very quickly through states of consciousness as he comments upon each transition reflexively and via various modes: diegetic dialogue, non-diegetic dialogue (voiceover), and subtitles. Mike communicates to the viewer at many different textual levels in quick succession, serving to definitively embed his subjectivity within the text. We hear his voice when he speaks, we hear his voice when he doesn't speak (as if the soundtrack of film has become a conduit for telepathy), and lastly we see his words on the screen as text. It is as if his subjectivity has mastered the text; he is in control of all channels, yet he remains a visible presence on screen via the signifier of his body, at once object *and* subject. This reflects Taubin's assertion that:

Mike is the film's "governing consciousness" . . . The filtering of narrative through Mike's snoozing subjectivity gives coherence to the film's remarkable heterogeneity.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>462</sup>Van Sant 1993: 110-111.



The sharp contrast of modes in such a brief, economical sequence also denotes a Bakhtinian polyphony (equally, a Bakhtinian analysis can be applied to the play of modes throughout the film itself). Here these modes do not appear to be in conflict; there is no dialogue as such between modes, each mode conveys an aspect of a singular expositional statement. There is however a divergence in form.

I suggest an alternative reading to the idea of a mastery of form, that these multiple modes represent a fragmentation and dispersal; that while these modes may emerge from the same source, they soon become irreconcilable. In this sequence Mike uses three different modes of address, each mode representing a particular moment of consciousness, perhaps the only means of communication available to him at that moment. In this reading, these modes do not function as a coalesced omnipresence but as individual missives from disparate states of consciousness. The polyphony here suggests not so much an ease of communication but of the necessity to communicate, through whatever form may be possible, and in turn the generative possibilities of these modes of communication.

Two resonant comparisons are Haynes' film, *I'm Not There*<sup>464</sup> and Todd Solondz's *Palindromes*<sup>465</sup>, both of which feature a singular protagonist represented through the performances of multiple actors, who take on the role in sequence, so as to represent different facets of the protagonist and/or to destabilise the viewer's perception of that protagonist. Van Sant's film achieves a not altogether different textual effect to Haynes' and Solondz's films, in that it features a protagonist portrayed by a single actor and fragmented through a polyphony of filmic modes.

This polyphony is comparable to the similar deployment of modes in Gondry, and to the "stage-managed" polyphony of Sebald. The Sebaldian narrator draws external voices into the textual subjectivity; its other voices take command of the narrative, often, as I have noted, with no grammatical indication, so that the transition between voices is rarely signposted, even deliberately obfuscated. The otherness these voices represents is then "absorbed" by the textual subjectivity, which renders it akin to the voice of the narrator, effecting a homogenisation, a flattening of the surface of the text.

In contrast, the textual subjectivity of *My Own Private Idaho* engages with an otherness which is predominantly generated *within* the protagonist. The textual subjectivity

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<sup>463</sup>Taubin 1992: 12.

<sup>464</sup> Haynes 2007.

<sup>465</sup> Solondz 2004.

does not absorb – it sets out from a starting point of irrevocable fragmentation. Although approaching polyphony from a counterpoint, this may at times appear to mirror the textual mastery of Sebald’s novels, but in light of Haynes’ comment that the film depicts “no solid reality,” as the viewer experiences the persistent clash of modes, it becomes clear that there is no centre from which such mastery may emerge. While Mike is represented by a singular actor in a sustained performance (a recognisable and stable presence on screen), there is no definitive centre to the character’s subjectivity. Rather than drawing otherness in, his fragmented otherness is refracted outwards via a polyphony of intrasubjectivities. To revisit the centripetal/centrifugal dynamic, we might say that in contrast to the centripetal Sebaldian subject, Van Sant constructs a centrifugal subject – a polyphony of representative modes which radiates outward from a nominal, illusory centre.

### Visual modes

This refraction of subjectivity plays out in modes which come to stand for particular aspects of the protagonist, such as memory, home, alienation. As in *Drugstore Cowboy*, Super-8 film is used to represent the space of the protagonist’s memory. The use of Super-8 within otherwise 35mm (or digital) cinema has come to be a commonly used trope to signify memory and nostalgia, and to denote home movies. Wim Wenders made notable use of this device in *Paris Texas*<sup>466</sup> in which the protagonist Travis is shown a home movie which features his missing wife, Jane. In *My Own Private Idaho*, Van Sant uses Super-8 film to similar effect though more extensively, to depict moments from Mike’s childhood, in particular those featuring his missing mother, Sharon. He cuts brief clips into scenes in which Mike recalls or is reminded of his childhood; for instance, when his gaze falls upon a line of rooftops, the film cuts to a Super-8 shot of his childhood home, then back to a shot of Mike as he reacts to the memory. On another occasion with Scott, Mike’s dialogue explicitly references home as he tries to recall whether his mother’s house was blue or green; the film again cuts to Super-8 footage, which appears to answer his question, as Mike says in voiceover, “No, it was green. It was green. How could I forget that?” Thus, these shots come to be constructed as Mike’s memories of his childhood, and of his prior family unit of himself, Sharon, and Richard. The scene with Scott aside, these are deployed

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<sup>466</sup> Wenders 1984. Aitken and Lukinbeal compare *My Own Private Idaho* to Wenders’ film, noting that both revolve “around the hopelessness of an American nomad’s search for self and family in a landscape of unreflexive icons,” (Aitken and Lukinbeal 1997: 361).

adjacent to narcoleptic episodes, always prior to, as if to suggest that these memories are a trigger for the character's narcolepsy.

Here, as in *Drugstore Cowboy* and *Paris Texas*, the visual construction of memory connotes a loss. The footage, watched or experienced from the present, holds within it something that is no longer present; in *Paris Texas* it is Travis's wife Jane, in *Drugstore Cowboy* it is Bob's crew, and in *My Own Private Idaho* it is Mike's mother. In *Drugstore Cowboy* Bob's accompanying voiceover recalls his time with these former friends – he has chosen to move on from that lifestyle, though in the close-up we see a smile on his face, as if in response to these memories. In all three films the Super-8 footage comes to represent a happy, bygone time, and consolidates the position of the protagonist as the psychic link between the two contrasting film stocks.

In each instance the footage connotes a record of presence. However, whereas Wenders cuts his Super-8 footage with 35mm footage of his characters watching their home movies, Van Sant uses Super-8 to effect an alienation. The apparatus is concealed; the viewer never sees the Super-8 camera or projector, and thus the footage comes to stand directly for the protagonist's memory. The images play out for the viewer and for Mike, but for no-one else; all other characters are excluded from this; the objective document of this film comes to signify the subjective memory of the protagonist. This constitutes a conflation of textual and personal subjectivity; it serves to bond the protagonist to the very texture of the film – with no apparatus, and no third party, the protagonist himself comes to be the screen of this projection. To a degree this footage also effects an identification of the viewer with Mike. As much as it comes to stand for Mike's memory, the viewer is nonetheless aware that it remains an article of film within the diegesis, and infers that this footage was filmed by the characters; Sharon in particular looks directly into camera and performs for an anticipated audience. While her gaze can never reach beyond the camera, it is nevertheless directed outward – towards Mike, and towards the viewer. As with the iris-in on the face in the landscape, this brings together the viewing positions of Mike and the viewer – the viewer's gaze, and Mike's psychic gaze, fall upon the same images.

Another device which allows access to Mike's inner world is represented by a paradigm of visual modes which I read as corresponding to Mike's narcolepsy. These include shots of open fields and farmhouses, often bathed in golden light, and which are positioned in the text often seemingly as non-sequiturs, or adjacent to sequences which show Mike succumbing to sleep. In such instances these shots may be read as hypnagogic

hallucination – a comforting dream image corresponding to the title of the film – interior to the protagonist, and embodied with an essence of “home”. Similarly, Van Sant twice uses slow motion shots of salmon jumping upstream – in the opening title sequence, and immediately prior to the final scene. This would seem to refer directly to the notion of returning home (to procreate and die in the case of salmon; for uncertain reasons in the case of Mike).

Also within this paradigm are time-lapse shots of fast-moving clouds over a rural landscape. These shots are placed adjacently to scenes of Mike falling asleep or waking, and as such are directly suggestive of hypnagogia, though also carry the notion of time-passing, and of the “time travel” referred to above. In conversation with Van Sant, Todd Haynes uses the term “narcoleptic subject” in reference to these time-lapse shots, which he cites as fundamental to the filmic construction of that particular subjectivity<sup>467</sup>. Van Sant responds with an explanation of how these shots came to function in the film, describing first how he’d intended to represent Mike’s narcoleptic episodes:

We thought it was going to go black. We thought that something was going to happen [but] during the edit we were realising it doesn’t mean that. And then the time-lapse really helped to explain his inner mind . . . We kind of shoved them into the middle of scenes, right into his head.<sup>468</sup>

Van Sant introduces another intriguing visual mode in *My Own Private Idaho* through the use of title cards which designate location and also serve to divide the film into discrete “acts” (I will discuss below how these acts correspond to a Shakespearean structure). A notable feature of these cards is their colour; each features the name of the location (Idaho, Seattle, Portland or Roma) in white text on a coloured background (blue, green, red, or mauve). Each location presents a shift in focus and tone, for instance, the Portland sections are notable for the large number of characters (other sections are limited to six characters at most), and this sudden throng invokes a carnivalesque air, which coincides with the use of Shakespearean dialogue and structure, and which might be read as representing a particular kind of consciousness in the protagonist. The central Idaho and Rome sections contain the narrative threads of Mike’s unrequited love for Scott, and the search for his mother, while the two other Idaho sections which bookend the narrative, and which perhaps might be

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<sup>467</sup> Van Sant & Haynes 2005.

<sup>468</sup> Van Sant & Haynes 2005.

read as a prologue and epilogue, feature Mike alone, speaking to himself. All of these sections are different in terms of narrative style and content; each has a particular essence, be it the Shakespearean and carnivalesque, the monologue and dream images of Mike's interior world, or of particular narrative threads. As such the different colours of the title cards might be read as signifying not just a change in location, but a tonal shift, or gradations of Mike's consciousness, or a shift in reality.

The film features two scenes depicting sex, both constructed via a series of staged "stills", that is, shots of held poses filmed in real time (less than one second each) and placed in succession. The artificiality of this is highlighted by slight movements in the actors as they try to remain completely motionless, and a decisive movement in the final shot of the latter scene, as Scott closes his eyes – a self-signifying moment of artifice. This technique adds nothing further to our understanding of Mike's consciousness but it does effect another destabilisation of textual subjectivity – it jars the viewing experience and provokes questions of its purpose. This purpose may serve to effect an alienation which reflects that of Mike and Scott in their role as prostitutes, or it may have no purpose but to achieve that destabilisation, to refuse a standardised filmic representation and to unsettle the viewing experience.

### **Dialogue, narrative, and structural modes**

The subsequent modes I discuss are primarily related to the use of dialogue, and to the narrative structure and textual surface of the film. The dialogue is drawn from four sources – there is dialogue scripted by Van Sant, dialogue improvised by the actors<sup>469</sup>, candid documentary monologues, and Shakespearean text appropriated (and approximated<sup>470</sup>) from *Henry IV Parts One* and *Two*, and *Henry V*<sup>471</sup>. Much critical work has been dedicated to the Shakespearean aspect of the film<sup>472</sup>, however I find the documentary section to be a much more radical intervention in form. In this section, filmed in a Portland Chinese

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<sup>469</sup> The viewer may not be able to differentiate between dialogue that is scripted and that which is improvised. We can only know this through accounts of Van Sant's filmmaking process (Van Sant 1993; Van Sant and Haynes 2005).

<sup>470</sup> It is important to note that in these sections, the dialogue spoken is not always from Shakespeare; it is sometimes an edited, contemporised version, and often it is a stylised approximation, with no direct antecedent.

<sup>471</sup> Shakespeare 2002; 1981; 1995.

<sup>472</sup> José Ramón Díaz-Fernández provides an (at the time) exhaustive bibliography of critical texts dedicated to the Shakespearean aspect of the film, numbering forty-three in total, several I which I draw from (Greenberg, Arthur and Liebler, Tinkcom). Díaz-Fernández 2008: 102-106.

restaurant, Van Sant constructs a scene of his street-kid characters talking, joking, fighting, and laughing. He intercuts these staged moments with two “talking head” pieces from “actors” Mike Parker and Scott Patrick Green, who describe their experiences of street hustling. These monologues are presented as interviews; Parker and Green’s gaze falls somewhere behind or alongside the camera, as if responding to an off-screen interviewer, and we infer from the content, tone, and manner of address that the incidents they describe are not of the fictional world of the film, but of their own lives.

This break of form recalls the reality effect of the photographs and documents of Sebald’s novels – artefacts from an ostensibly real world placed within a fiction to unsettle a boundary of facticity and fictionality. Here the device is all the more startling for the fact that, unlike Sebald’s novels, the film does not masquerade as memoir or documentary, at least not beyond this scene. Whereas Sebald constructs his narrator as close to interchangeable with the author, the viewer of *My Own Private Idaho* knows that Phoenix and other recognisable co-stars are not street hustlers. In this scene, the viewer becomes aware that Parker and Green, who share the screen with Phoenix, *are* street hustlers. This is further complicated by the fact that Parker’s character is given a fictional name – Digger – and appears in several other scenes, all of which are scripted (some by Van Sant, some by Shakespeare) and all of which elicit a very different kind of performance from him, in line with that of the other actors with whom he shares the screen. As prefaced, Van Sant states that the Chinese restaurant scene was included to inject an authenticity into the film:

Mike Parker and Scott Green [were] sort of our street advisors. They were being interviewed in this scene because I was so paranoid and I felt really bad that we didn’t have the right extras in the room. Our extras department just got friends of their... kids out of regular school. So they didn’t look like what they were supposed to. But I knew that Scott and Mike had histories that, you’d be able to just cut to the chase, if you just interviewed them. And to get this verisimilitude from the street within the film.<sup>473</sup>

It seems naive to assume that the presence of this scene would achieve an authenticity, the “verisimilitude from the street,” which in turn might condition the rest of the film. I read this scene as highlighting the fictionality and the lack of authenticity of all else in the film through its (very troubling) disruption to the textual surface, though I find the formal intervention to be hugely compelling. It corresponds to Bakhtin’s ideal of a genuine

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<sup>473</sup> Van Sant and Haynes 2005.

polyphony which allows other voices an autonomy; of all the texts, this instance presents the most forthright example of an autonomous otherness. That Van Sant states its inclusion is in the pursuit of authenticity somewhat undermines this, but it remains a bold gesture.

The most commented upon shift in modes is the film's appropriation of narrative threads and dialogue from *Henry IV Parts One* and *Two*, and *Henry V*. In this schematic, the Prince Hal role is fulfilled by Scott, son of the Mayor of Portland, who has cast off his privilege and responsibility to live with "street denizens". A Falstaffian figure, Bob Pigeon, is introduced, and Mike is temporarily cast as a Poins-like sidekick<sup>474</sup>. The appropriation of *Henry IV Part One* does not progress beyond the tavern scenes and Gads Hill robbery; the film features no cipher for Hotspur (other than a brief reference to a cousin of Scott's who appears to be a pretender to the crown) and rather than heading to war, Mike and Scott take off in search of Mike's mother, initiating a new narrative thread. The film only returns to Shakespeare late in the narrative as Scott disavows Bob Pigeon, in a mirror of *Henry IV Part Two*, Act V, Scene V, and then as Jane Lightwork (the recast Mistress Quickly/Hostess) gives an account of Bob's death, a mirror of *Henry V*, Act II, Scene III.

These sequences constitute yet another layer of "reality" to the text; they are incongruous, which leads the viewer to ponder to what degree they are a facet of Mike's subjectivity. Mike is not a central player in these scenes, yet he remains the primary focus of the camera, as we observe him observing the relationship that plays out between Scott and Bob. On two occasions, Mike is excluded completely – in a duologue between Scott and Bob, and another between Scott and his father. One wonders if these scenes might be read as a dream sequence, with Mike promoting the object of his affection to centre stage, and latterly playing out the heartbreak of Scott's rejection vicariously through Scott/Hal's rejection of Bob/Falstaff. This reading is somewhat substantiated by Marianna Martin's suggestion that Keanu Reeves' performance of Scott achieves "a blankness into which almost anything can be projected." She suggests that, "Van Sant makes use of [this blankness] to terrifying effect in *Idaho*. Scott is an empty canvas . . . Scott is *all* surface . . . and no more"<sup>475</sup>. Such a reading would certainly substantiate the notion of Mike's dream states elevated to realities by virtue of a narcoleptic subjectivity. Yet equally, this reading

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<sup>474</sup> In one sequence, which corresponds to the preparation and execution of the Gads Hill robbery, these roles appeared to be switched, with Scott becoming Poins and Mike becoming Hal.

<sup>475</sup> Martin 2005, in *Reverse Shot* 21; <[http://www.reverseshot.com/article/my\\_own\\_private\\_idaho](http://www.reverseshot.com/article/my_own_private_idaho)> accessed 26 September 2010. This also ramifies with the description in *After Dark* of Eri as being like a blank screen (AD: 128-129).

suggests itself in order to “smooth” the textual surface, to attempt a definitive explanation of sequences which would otherwise constitute a sharp incongruity and jagged textual surface.

Shakespeare is also present in the film’s structure, which takes the form of five acts, along with an opening prologue and closing soliloquy, which are announced by the aforementioned title cards. Only two of these acts, what would be Act II and Act V, feature Shakespearean narrative and dialogue, yet the structure imposes itself nonetheless, with the Italian Act IV in particular resembling the brief and intense surge of narrative often a feature of the corresponding act of Shakespeare’s plays. Within this structure, other narrative tropes operate to subvert expectations of genre. Mike’s unrequited love for Scott subverts aspects of the romance genre in that Mike’s love is rejected as soon as it is stated, yet remains an unresolved narrative thread, and also in that rather than being purely of the romantic, it approaches a liminal space between friendship and romantic love. It may also be considered a subversion of heterosexual norms in that at the time of the film’s release, a gay love story, albeit thwarted, featuring two headlining actors was uncommon in American cinema<sup>476</sup>.

A second subversion of generic tropes takes place in the search for Mike’s mother; he follows her trail from location to location, finding always that she has moved on to the next – a pattern which the conclusion of the narrative brings to a nominal end but which in theory could go on in perpetuity. Other resolutions seem similarly nominal, especially those appropriated from Shakespeare – Scott’s rejection of Bob (Hal’s of Falstaff) and the deaths of both Bob and Scott’s father (the King). The reliance on an extra-textual source lends these moments an air of inauthenticity or arbitrariness, as if staged – given the viewer’s potential familiarity with these moments in Shakespeare, the restaging here does not invigorate in the manner of unforeseeable narrative progressions. Notably, Mike only observes these resolutions – none of them centre on him, suggesting again that these moments might be narcoleptic projections.

A single moment which may be read as resolute for Mike occurs in the parallel funeral scenes of Bob and Scott’s father, which take place simultaneously at the same cemetery. Mike, attending Bob’s funeral meets the gaze of Scott, attending that of his

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<sup>476</sup> Prior to *My Own Private Idaho*, perhaps only *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet 1975), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Babenco 1985), and *Torch Song Trilogy* (Bogart 1988) match it in terms of the prominence of both the film and its stars.



father. Scott's father's funeral takes place on higher ground so Scott is positioned as looking down on Mike, over the brow of a hill. Yet Scott's gaze is marked by an almost blank passivity which seems to acknowledge a threat. This threat is posed by Mike's gaze, which dares to meet Scott's eye, looking up at him defiantly and accompanied with a wry, purposeful smile. This is the parting moment of these two characters; it proves somewhat resolute in that it marks a decisive shift in the relationship from the film's early scenes. Yet it remains a moment rife with ambiguity – is Mike's gaze a claim of authenticity over what might be seen as the fraud of Scott's esteemed new identity? Or is it a sheer unquenchable anger at betrayal? It could be either, or neither, or both, or more.

### Intersubjectivities

I present a final note on subjectivity, to redirect the refracted textual subjectivity away from Mike alone and toward a space between Mike and Scott. As noted, the film contains some sequences in which Mike is not the most prominent player, notably the Shakespearean sections. Ostensibly he remains the protagonist – as noted, we observe him observing – but the main catalyst of these scenes is Scott. I have argued that this may be a projection of Mike, a promotion of his love object centre stage, to be gazed upon. However, an early scene offers an intriguing counterpoint to this reading.

As Scott carries Mike's sleeping body from Elena's house (a notable first detour from Mike's subjectivity; he is asleep and the viewer follows the events surrounding his sleeping body), Scott's dialogue slips away from a naturalistic register; he does not quote from *Henry IV* so much as construct a pastiche of a Hal soliloquy, in a register that is a hybrid of the contemporary and the antiquated:

SCOTT: I grew up in a neighbourhood like this. And my dad. He has more fucking righteous gall than all the property and people he lords over, and those he also created. Like me, his son. I almost get sick thinking I am a son to him. You know you have to be as good as him to keep up. You have to be able to lift as big a weight. You have to be able to throw that weight as far, or make as much money, or be as heartless.

It is not so much the shift in register that is of note – this is not the Shakespearean dialogue that characterises the Portland sections, more of a gesture towards it. It is the shift in

Reeves' delivery from an airy naturalism to assertive and purposeful, approximating a self-conscious "ham" performance of Shakespearean soliloquy.

This is the first moment of a jarring between modes, and the viewer must wonder what precipitates this shift. A possible explanation is offered by Van Sant's close-up of Mike's sleeping face as Scott speaks, followed by a shot of rural Idaho – a mode already established as representing Mike's hypnagogia – at which time Scott's voice becomes extradiegetic, and modulated by an echo, as if to signify that we are now within Mike and as such Scott's voice is heard through the filter of Mike's subjectivity. This is a nodal moment of intersubjectivity. It offers a visual image of the private Idaho of the title – with the emphasis on private, internal to Mike – while on the soundtrack we hear Scott, or rather, Scott-becoming-Hal.

This intersubjectivity is further explored as Scott mentions his own neighbourhood, bringing to the fore the notion of home, which resonates with the images of Mike's imagined ideal of home in the dream image. Scott is rebelling against a home he has access to, while Mike is seeking a home he is prohibited from. Intriguingly, later in the narrative, Mike takes Scott to Idaho and Scott becomes an object in the landscape we so closely associate with Mike and his internal world. This corresponds to the question of whether Mike "casts" Scott as Hal; by bringing him to Idaho, is Mike drawing Scott further into the layers of his subjectivity? Greenberg suggests that Mike and Scott are alternately "embedded" in each other's stories<sup>477</sup>, recalling a term I use to describe how the subjectivities of text and protagonist are drawn together. I dispute that Scott has enough of his own "story" for Mike to become embedded in, but the terminology resonates – two subjectivities are drawn together, momentarily.

### **Liminal motifs**

*My Own Private Idaho* presents a set of liminal motifs related to the tensions between "home" and what lies outside of that designation, and the liminal rites of passage, through which the main characters do or do not pass. Both of these concepts are structured along binaries – of whether one is within or excluded from home, or whether one is successful or unsuccessful in negotiating the rites of passage. Both lead towards a secondary binary of stability or instability, that is to say, whether one is designated a stable subjectivity through

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<sup>477</sup> Greenberg 1992: 23.

the space of home or “maturity”, or whether one is designated an instable subjectivity through nomadism, perpetual liminality, and the extraterritorial.

## Home

The theme of home is brought to the fore early in the narrative, at first obliquely in the opening sequence through the idyllic images of Mike’s hypnagogia, which feature the Idaho landscape, his mother, and a wooden house, and then moments later in the image of the same wooden house falling from the sky and crashing into the road. Arthur and Liebler suggest this image is a reference to *The Wizard of Oz*<sup>478</sup>, “recast[ing] Dorothy’s grateful homecoming line, ‘There’s no place like home,’ in demonstrating that for Mike there’s no home, any place.”<sup>479</sup> The reference aside, this image, in its demonstrative destruction of an image of home, appears to set the precedent that home is, for Mike, always out of bounds.

Home is discussed more overtly in the scene in which Scott talks of the neighbourhood in which he grew up, as the viewer again sees images of rural Idaho from Mike’s dream-space – his imagined and always elusive ideal of home. Mike and Scott’s relationships to the concept of home come to function as a binary rhetoric which underscores the film’s politics – as stated, Scott is rebelling against a home he has access to; Mike is seeking a home he is prohibited from. This is explored more explicitly and at greater length in an exchange between Mike and Scott as they camp out in the Idaho wilderness. Scott recounts what he said to the family’s maid on the day he ran away from home (“You had a maid?” Mike asks in disbelief) and in bitter contrast Mike laments that he had no normal family to abandon:

MIKE: If I had a normal family and a good upbringing then I would have been a well-adjusted person.

SCOTT: Depends on what you call normal.

MIKE: Yeah, it does. Well, you know, normal, like... like a mom and a dad, and a dog and shit like that. Normal. Normal.

SCOTT: So you didn't have a normal dog?

MIKE: No, I didn't have a dog.

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<sup>478</sup> Fleming 1939.

<sup>479</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 29.

SCOTT: You didn't have a normal dad?

MIKE: Didn't have a dog or... or... or a normal dad anyway. That's all right. I don't feel sorry for myself. I mean, I feel like I'm... I feel like I'm, you know, well-adjusted.

SCOTT: What's a normal dad?

MIKE: I don't know.

Mike's lack of home or stable origins is compounded by the search for his mother, and his palpable yearning for familial comfort. As mentioned, the opening and closing scenes are separated from the body of the film by a repeated image of salmon jumping upstream, returning to the site of their birth. Mike is explicitly linked to these fish through the salmon-coloured jacket he is seen wearing in the Idaho and Italy sections of the film, as he searches for his mother<sup>480</sup>. This desire for origins, family, and specifically his mother appears to be inextricable from his narcolepsy; indeed the first fifteen minutes of the film feature three instances in which his narcolepsy is directly linked to his mother. First, in the opening sequence on the road in Idaho; his seizure is not precipitated by an image of his mother, but she appears as an aspect of his hypnagogia, his head resting in her lap as she tells him, "Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right. I know. It's okay. I know you're sorry. I know." So strong is this desire for what he is prohibited that it is as if the mere reminder of his mother causes him to enter hypnagogia so that he may achieve that reunion; in Seattle he sees a woman in the street who resembles his mother and appears to enter a trance. Van Sant cuts to the vision of his mother as before, and then back to Mike who remains standing though appears semi-conscious and disorientated as pedestrians jostle past him. Next he is picked up by Elena, a wealthy middle-aged woman who also bears a resemblance to his mother; as she begins to undress him the film cuts to Super-8 footage of his mother, and then back to Mike as he suffers another seizure.

It is clear that these correlations of Mike's sleep and his mother are not coincidence. Matthew Tinkcom observes that, "Mike faints when he looks at the landscape of the prairie (richly associated with his mother) and when he finds himself in a sexualised interaction with an (older) female client,"<sup>481</sup> and Christopher Morris suggests more directly that Mike's narcoleptic episodes are incited by, "Mike's longing for his mother . . . or for

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<sup>480</sup> Van Sant states explicitly that this was his intention: "He's the salmon, swimming against the current that is his life, trying to reach his roots," (Van Sant 1993: xliii).

<sup>481</sup> Tinkcom 2002: 241.

the womb.”<sup>482</sup> I would argue that Mike’s longing is not for the womb so much as the “home” that the space of the mother represents; in psychoanalytic terms this could be the breast, the womb, or simply the proximity of the mother’s body. Greenberg comments that Mike is “a festival of oral-stage pathology, ego-devastated by a childhood whose vastly traumatic dimensions Van Sant keeps sketchy,”<sup>483</sup> and it is of note that in the scene at Richard’s trailer, Mike looks at a photograph of his mother and then places it in his mouth, an act which appears to lull him to sleep in a much gentler manner than we have witnessed up to this point. Beyond this particular instance, the image of his mother proves both soothing and stressful to Mike in the simple fact that each instance is a manifestation of the lost object, and a revisiting of the loss – the most traumatic loss – of the primary object. It serves as an emotive device, bonding the viewer to Mike in a straightforward identification: the viewer shares the common denominator of the primary object, and identifies with pain of losing that object, as well as the fleeting promise of a reunion, soon dashed.

Beyond the specificity of Mike’s longing for Sharon, it is clear that he searches for a more general sense of “home”. The OED defines home as:

A dwelling-place, house, abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests; one’s own house; the dwelling in which one habitually lives, or which one regards as one’s proper abode. Sometimes including the members of a family collectively; the home-circle or household.<sup>484</sup>

Particular phrases stand out here; “the *fixed* residence,” “habitually,” “one’s *proper* abode,” “one’s *own* house.” There is an emphasis on stability (“fixed”), singularity (this is one’s home because one does not live elsewhere) and on belonging (one owns the site of home). Home may be left behind, but it can always be returned to. If it exists in the first instance, it will always exist; even if destroyed, the concept or essence of the particular home lives on. In Mike’s case, there is no stable first instance. We understand from dialogue between Mike and Richard that Sharon was placed in an “institution” when Mike was an infant and that he resided there with her. Richard claims this was because she murdered her lover, though his story is undermined by cliché and melodrama (prompting Scott to comment,

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<sup>482</sup> Morris 2003: 38.

<sup>483</sup> Greenberg 1992: 23.

<sup>484</sup> “home, *n.*” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 16 Jun. 2000 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50107348>>

“Come on man, how corny,”) and a little later we arrive at a more likely reason – Mike is the product of an incestuous union between Sharon and the adolescent Richard. The incest secret – never confirmed in the diegesis, as Richard refuses to acknowledge Mike’s accusation – forever destabilises the notion of home for Mike. It seems to render that stability impossible. Yet he continues to search for Sharon, for the mother figure of his dream, to offer some semblance of home, though this conclusion is not reached within the bounds of the narrative.

One wonders if his near-liaison with Elena in the film’s opening minutes is what precipitates his search; as she approaches him in the bedroom – the image of his mother no less – the incest secret is revisited, problematising the idyllic dream-union he achieves in hypnagogia, instead placing him in Richard’s position. In panic, he exits the moment by the only means available to him – by falling asleep. Thus, Mike’s narcolepsy may be seen as reflecting an uncanny tension in his relationship to home. Narcolepsy is uncanny – it is of the body yet beyond the agency of the subject. The recurrence of Mike’s narcoleptic episodes makes it a familiar and sometimes welcome experience, in that it effects a hallucinatory reunion with his mother. Yet it is beyond mastery; it is always alien, always other.

The tension between home and transience is central to another text set in Idaho – Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping*<sup>485</sup>, in which the narrator, Ruth, observes in her Aunt Sylvie a tension between the desire for a perpetual transience and the duty she has to provide a home for her two young nieces – to “keep house”. Ruth observes that Sylvie’s desire to escape the burden of housekeeping is seen by others – her sister Lucille, and the townspeople in general – as close to mental illness. However, Sylvie’s wanderlust becomes contagious to Ruth, who ultimately comes to experience the same tension of home and not-home, the ties – both positive and negative – of a stable, fixed, and certain point, and the potentiality of motion, of nomadism, of perpetual becoming. *Housekeeping* and *My Own Private Idaho* are inextricably bound by location and theme<sup>486</sup>, though each text approaches that tension from opposite directions. Ruth and Sylvie first “keep house” and then abandon it for transience, whereas Mike is transient and yearns for the stability of home.

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<sup>485</sup> Robinson 1980.

<sup>486</sup> The link is also noted by Maggie Galehouse, who titles her paper on the theme of transience in Robinson’s novel, *Their Own Private Idaho* (Galehouse 2000).

Megan Ratner notes that questions of home continue to be of great interest to Van Sant. Of Van Sant's 2007 film *Paranoid Park*, she writes:

Van Sant poses questions about the place of home in America . . . For all these young men, the only comfort is being on the move, including, in many ways, leaving home.<sup>487</sup>

This would seem to suggest that “not-home” may be a necessity (as it comes to be for Ruth and Sylvie in *Housekeeping*). It also suggests a potential threat to the supposed safety of home – the idea that comfort is to be had only in transience unsettles the stability of home, implying perhaps that this central tenet to the concept of home is in fact illusory. In discussion of *Gerry* (2002), Devin McKinney notes that this tension is:

the largest theme of Van Sant's career so far – the desperate wayfaring of handsome boys at the fringes, searching out the terms of manhood.<sup>488</sup>

This suggests also the necessity of leaving home, to enter into the liminal rites of passage, as modelled by Victor Turner. McKinney's claim rings true – this model is equally applicable to *Good Will Hunting*, *Gerry*, and *Paranoid Park*, and in a looser sense to *Drugstore Cowboy*, *Elephant* and *Last Days*<sup>489</sup> also.

### Rites of passage

What would be Act IV in a Shakespearean structure sees Mike and Scott travel to Italy in search of Mike's mother. This is notable as the only part of the film located away from the Pacific Northwest, and it is geographically and tonally very distant from the rest of the film. Something of this distance, and difference, engenders a particular liminal space for both characters, and acts as a catalyst for change in their relationship.

Mike follows his mother's trail first to an Idaho hotel, and then on to a rural Italian smallholding. Here Scott meets a young woman, the farmer's niece Carmella, who informs him Sharon left the farm long ago. Mike is distraught and keen to leave as soon as possible; Scott, however, begins a relationship with Carmella, and they return to Portland together,

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<sup>487</sup> Ratner 2008: 30.

<sup>488</sup> McKinney 2003: 44.

<sup>489</sup> Van Sant 1997; Van Sant 2002; Van Sant 2007; Van Sant 1989; Van Sant 2003; Van Sant 2005.

while Mike returns to Rome and works the streets as a prostitute, returning to Portland some time later.

The text constructs Italy as a transitional space for both characters. For Scott the trip marks the culmination of the rite of passage of his time on the street, and constitutes a particular rite in itself: he departs for Italy as Hal and returns to Portland as Henry. Mike's transition is marked by an increment of absence: when he returns he is homeless, as before, though now he is also without Scott, his protector and love object. Moreover, his quest to find his mother has reached an inconclusive end: he is rootless and will remain so, achieving a perpetual, unhappy, liminality.

Language is key to the liminality that both characters experience, and to the change it effects, again in the polyphony of filmic modes in these scenes, and in the linguistic space between English and Italian. As an English speaker with no Italian, my way into this section of the film is through identification with English speakers Mike and Scott, two characters confronted with a language initially unintelligible to them. Here Scott demonstrates an aptitude for effortless transition; he approaches Italian with much greater ease than Mike, who appears reluctant to engage with the language – to the point of stubbornness. The English print of the film contains no subtitles for the Italian dialogue, which leaves an English-speaking viewer somewhat alienated from the Italian characters. The language is rendered an external object and I, like Mike and Scott, struggle to enter into a negotiation with it. The title card carries the first hint that immersion in the language will be total. The viewer is by now familiar with the cards that preface previous sections of the film. Rather than reading, 'Rome,' as might be expected of an American, English-language film, the title card reads, 'Roma.' This choice suggests two readings. The first places it as a refusal to capitulate to the English language, prefacing the alienation the characters and viewer will face. The second suggests a self-conscious exoticism, a fetishised Europeaness, which invites a reductive reading of Carmella as a cipher of exotic otherness. It is also of note that the Italian 'Roma' provides an anagram of 'roam' in English, intersecting the translation with a pun, and underscoring the transient nature of the characters and filmic grammar.

The film's first view of Rome is a close-up of Mike waking, followed by shots of Roman street hustlers who, it emerges, Scott has asked to look after Mike while he finds a taxi. We see these men from Mike's point of view; they closely resemble his acquaintances in Portland – one even wears a salmon coloured jacket much like Mike's own. They speak



in what is to Mike an entirely indecipherable language. A reverse shot of Mike shows his panic and confusion, and as he stumbles across the Piazza del Popolo he pulls his jacket up around his throat, like an animal out of its natural environment seeking to protect itself. The scene recalls the incident in *Vertigo* when Sebald's narrator is overcome in the cathedral in Milan by a strange sense of disorientation ("I was unable even to determine whether I was in the land of the living or already in another place."<sup>490</sup>) While Sebald's narrator eventually recognises the language being spoken around him and is able to locate himself, Mike is unable to recognise let alone comprehend the Italian language.

Given Mike's mutable subjectivity and particular relationship to consciousness, it follows that he is likely to be adept at familiarising himself with new environments quickly: usually he is able to glean his location by finding something familiar in his surroundings. Thus it seems contradictory that in Italy he remains disengaged from his surroundings and makes no attempt to decipher the language. He shirks the attention of the hustlers and stumbles away across the piazza; Van Sant shoots his point of view directly into harsh sunlight, which creates a lens flare. As in *Eternal Sunshine* and *The Science of Sleep*, this affects an obfuscation; Mike stares into something which blinds him; any reference point he might grasp for is obliterated. This device, which manifests itself as scattered light in rings and circles across the lens, draws attention to the lens itself, to the subjectivity of the camera and consequently the protagonist.

Mike's subjectivity is confounded in a field of alien objects: the spires of Santa Maria in Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli, the Italian language and unfamiliar faces. He is unable to comprehend or interact with any of these things and they remain external objects. His subjectivity is not encroached upon but is rendered redundant; it requires discernable objects to interpret and interact with but finds instead a vacuum. This scenario is reminiscent of dream: a tableau of images which may correspond abstractly to each other yet to the subject remains cryptographic. It seems that Mike is unable to access systems of meaning that seem effortless to others. As prefaced, he does not speak Italian, his love for Scott is not reciprocated, and he fails to find his mother, a family, or home. While some discourses remain unavailable, he stubbornly refuses to negotiate with available systems, such as the Italian language, which, were it not for his passivity, he could engage with. Since this displacement is Mike's primary state of being, he has no fixed status to be displaced from. In contrast, Scott has actively sought a displacement in forsaking his life of

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<sup>490</sup> V: 115.

privilege and taking to the streets; it may be this deliberate displacement that lends him the agency to negotiate with otherness.

With this section of the film, Van Sant sets up a juxtaposition which illustrates clearly the different trajectories taken by Mike and Scott. On arriving at the farm, Scott is approached by Carmella. Their conversation is hesitant; each has only a shaky grasp of the other's language. Scott's negotiation with the Italian language is a necessity if he is to communicate with Carmella, and his attempt to understand this new language comes to facilitate the development of a relationship. Simultaneously, Mike scours the property for his mother: Scott and Carmella's dialogue is inter-cut with two shots of Mike entering a dark room as he looks for his mother. In both shots the camera is positioned deep in the room looking out, an external doorway centre-frame the only source of light. In the first shot Mike is seen entering the room, silhouetted against the doorway. In the second shot he is deep in the room, passing the camera and moving further into darkness as he calls out to his mother.

The juxtaposition of Scott's conversation with Carmella, as he speaks hesitantly in a new language, with Mike's desperate, impatient search for his mother leading him into a dark, womb-like room, presents a binary of progression and regression. Mike's regression has a limited distance to run: on discovering his mother is no longer in Italy, he breaks down and recalls his childhood memories to Scott, before expressing a desire to return to American immediately. Van Sant once more deploys Super-8 footage of Mike's childhood, which reaffirms the complicity between Mike and the viewer. Here however, it finds an opposition in the complicity that develops in the exchange of English and Italian between Scott and Carmella, a device which serves to exclude Mike. After his initial search of the farm building fails to find his mother, Carmella attempts to tell him that Sharon has left, but her words are misconstrued. In this instance Scott is aware of the misunderstanding but complicit with Carmella. This inhibits him from correcting Mike immediately, and Mike heads off in search of his mother again, leaving Scott once again alone with Carmella.

Whereas Mike's exclusion from the street hustlers' conversation in Rome is through his incomprehension of Italian, his exclusion here is more pointed. At the dinner table Carmella teaches Scott Italian words as lovers' play; Mike is present but excluded. Prior to Carmella's appearance, Mike and Scott are somewhat bound together by Mike's narcolepsy and consequent dependence; they are presented as a unit through a string of consecutive sequences – we see them double-cross Bob, steal a motorcycle, and travel first

to Idaho, then to Italy. In addition to his dependency, Mike's motivation in the partnership is made clear in the scene in which he declares his love for Scott. Scott's motivation however is less clear; he accompanies Mike on this long trip, and acts as protector on many occasions, yet abandons Mike readily. His attachment shifts with ease to Carmella. As he learns a new language, Scott transforms from Hal into Henry, and abandons Mike as Hal abandons Falstaff, suggesting that his acquisition of this new language facilitates access to a new discourse of privilege, responsibility, and stability.

Mike remains outside of this discourse. There is only one instance in which he learns an Italian word, and rather than allowing him access to this new discourse, it serves as an acknowledgement that he is excluded. He finds Carmella crying; she holds a chestnut, and teaches him the Italian word for it: *la castagna*.

CARMELLA: If it was bigger, you could eat.

MIKE: I understand.

She then confesses she has fallen in love with Scott. The chestnut, not yet ready to be eaten, might be read as representing Scott, still in his liminal phase, not quite yet a man, not yet ready for the relationship Carmella represents. However, the inevitability that the chestnut will ripen implies that he will complete his transition and reciprocate Carmella's love, in turn forever excluding Mike.

For Scott, the Italian trip is a successful rite of passage: in Italy his identity is in flux, and his return to America signifies a new stability and fixed identity. He has left behind the slums of Portland, having already declared that when he turns twenty-one, he 'wants no more of this.' It is only when he leaves the liminal space of Italy that his transformation becomes complete. En route he learns of the death of his father – the Prince becomes King – and in every subsequent scene he wears an immaculate suit and is accompanied by Carmella, who from this point on is reduced to a cipher, a public symbol of Scott's heterosexuality and rejection of his previous life. The catalyst for this shift in Scott remains invisible, and presents a kind of narrative aporia. He falls for Carmella, acquiring a love object which displaces his identity away from the queer street-culture he previously inhabited, yet this does not explain, in terms of pure character motivation, why he so quickly abandons Mike. It could be read as a necessary outcome of the liminal

excursion to Italy: once the liminal state is entered into, it must be exited – it insists upon a transition.

The outcomes of this liminal phase appear to be dependent on an economy of inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion (Scott) leads to a successful negotiation and exit of the liminal space, while exclusion (Mike) results in a failure to achieve a fixed position, and permanent displacement. Arthur and Liebler suggest that:

[Mike is] counterposed with Scott's calculating, self-confident appropriation of the liminal as a holding zone for re-entry into the dominant order. Lacking both the desire and material props for reintegration, Mike is consigned to society's structural margins. Scott, on the other hand, manipulates his outcast status toward the refinement of a ruthless corporate acumen.<sup>491</sup>

### **The nomad**

For Mike, the Italian section does not constitute a rites of passage. He does not find his mother; he does not move forward to a new or stable subjectivity. He returns to Portland and re-enters the milieu of homeless youth, and, as the film closes, he is alone on the road in Idaho, as in the opening scene. He turns on the spot; a tracking shot circles him and is intercut with a corresponding reverse shot which pans across his point-of-view of the landscape. The contrast from the handheld camera movement of the opening scene at first suggests an apparent stability – the camera moves, but smoothly, and to a recognisable reverse-shot trope. Yet the way in which the camera circles comes to enclose Mike; this circularity emphasises the ongoing repetitions of his existence, especially when taken in conjunction with his speech:

MIKE: I am a connoisseur of roads. I've been tasting roads all my life. This road will never end. It probably goes all... around... the world.

As stated by Arthur and Liebler, "Mike . . . remains 'stuck' in an ambivalent, degraded but sanctified, Imaginary."<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 29-30.

<sup>492</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 29.

The Deleuzoguattarian nomad offers a model for considering Mike beyond Turner's rites of passage. Mike is nomadic in that he is never reterritorialised, he remains "stuck" in an economy that "[acknowledges] the difficulties of remaining in a perpetual liminality,"<sup>493</sup> while also offering an alternative to the strictures of reterritorialisation. This is reflected in his narcolepsy, which constitutes a perpetual series of becomings through states of consciousness, with the promise that no new state will offer any stability. Morris suggests that:

"successful" assimilation into the social order – as is the fate of Scott, at the end – should be seen for what it is, just another performance.<sup>494</sup>

This resonates with the Deleuzoguattarian model, which would view Scott's assuming of his new identity as, at best, arbitrary, or at worst, inauthentic and fraudulent, though with the disclaimer that his previous identity, the rich boy slumming with streetkids, is equally fraudulent. The contradictions and performativities of Scott's new identity are well illustrated in his disavowal of Bob Pigeon:

SCOTT: I don't know you, old man. Please leave me alone. When I was young and you were my street tutor, an instigator for my bad behaviour, I was planning a change. There was a time when I had the need to learn from you, my former and psychedelic teacher. And although I love you more dearly than my dead father, I have to turn away. Now that I have, and until I change back, don't come near me.

The opening statement here is quickly repudiated as Scott acknowledges Bob as his former teacher, yet his claim that Bob was an instigator of his bad behaviour attempts to sidestep culpability, and his claim of, "I was planning a change," plants the seeds of his metamorphosis in his previous identity – his reterritorialisation began long before the trip to Italy, before he met Carmella, before his father's death or Mike's declaration of love. This recalls Martin's notion of Scott as a blank screen upon which identities are projected. At all of these previous narrative points, Scott's manifest identity has been arbitrary, possibly fraudulent.

How does this compare to Mike's nomadism, which appears authentic, if undesired? Scott is a cipher passing through arbitrary positions; each position appears

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<sup>493</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 29.

<sup>494</sup> Morris 2003: 38.

stable yet conceals the fact that it is illusory. Is it possible to trust that any one of Scott's guises is real, or should we suspect that he would continue to metamorphose? In contrast, we might say that Mike's external nomadism conceals an unexpected stability, in his role of "searcher" – can the inertia of the road itself (and of the unending narcoleptic transitions) offer a stability through familiarity? Arthur and Liebler suggest that by:

splitting the figure of ritual subject, [Van Sant] sends one authorial proxy into the corporate domain of "grown-up" power while suspending his troubled yet free-wheeling other half in a state of permanent liminality, an unsafe haven of anti-structure and fluid identity set against the rewards of fixed status.<sup>495</sup>

Thus Scott and Mike present two kinds of nomad, one characterised by inauthenticity, the other by authenticity, and moreover, one characterised by power and choice, and the other by the lack of it. Scott is perhaps closer to the Sebaldian nomad, fascinated by the extraterritorial yet always a tourist passing through, the stability of a fixed home lurking somewhere beyond the diegesis. In contrast, Mike is a true inhabitant of these margins, and is bound within them.

### **The non-place and the extraterritorial**

We might consider the milieu to which Mike ultimately returns to be more genuinely nomadic than the elite, if illusory, position that Scott assumes, in that it represents a *communitas* defined against social hierarchy – a differentiation that Arthur and Liebler note is most clearly expressed in the funeral scene, in "the chasm between structure and anti-structure"<sup>496</sup>:

Within view of this assembly, captured in a smooth tracking shots and balanced compositions, a ragtag band of miscreants dance and chant their "leader" into the ground in an accelerating frenzy of grief and anger, their univocal chance of Bob-Bob-bob counterpointing the traditional Christian funeral service. Van Sant cuts back and forth between the measured interment and the almost pagan ceremony whose formal motifs consist of jerky handheld movements and disorienting camera angles.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 35.

<sup>496</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 31.

<sup>497</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 31.

In contrast to that of Scott, Van Sant locates Mike's world as a site of carnivalesque. Arthur and Liebler describe this as, "an instinctive democratic community of outlaws,"<sup>498</sup> and argue that this liminal status allows Mike "to enact sexual, moral and legal infractions prohibited in persons of fixed status."<sup>499</sup>

Against the protocols of the state funeral, the counter-cultural (in both senses) hijinks of Bob's motley crew instate an irrepressible, carnivalesque corruption of "subjugated knowledge."<sup>500</sup>

The notion of this "subjugated knowledge" being controlled and channelled into specific sanctioned rituals, versus the carnivalesque freeing of that same knowledge into a raucous cacophony, presents a distinction akin to that between marshalled and clamorous polyphonies.

This carnivalesque milieu brings into conflict two contrasting notions of space – Augé's non-place<sup>501</sup>, that which lies beyond anthropological categorisation, and the extraterritorial, that which lies beyond territorialisation. On first glance, these concepts would seem to have much in common, yet the non-place tends to close down the possibilities of space, its focus on transitional space denying that which remains in perpetual liminality, whereas the extraterritorial comes to be a generative space of such perpetual liminality, in that it disallows reterritorialisation.

The spaces in which we see Mike frequently fall into the category of the non-place: the highway in Idaho, the Chinese restaurant, and on the street in Seattle and Portland. Often we see him in spaces akin to the non-place, such as the temporary space of hotel rooms and flophouses, which like the non-place, exist beyond fixed or stable notions of place. Mike's makeshift tent on the roof of a building in Portland offers a subversion of these notions of place – the tent is akin to the hotel room, a temporary anthropological space, yet it is parasitic to the building upon which it sits; it is supplemental, a structure upon a structure, subverting the territory of the building. Similarly, the space of the derelict hotel which serves as a liminal home to Bob and his followers is subverted in its moniker of "Jane Lightwork's house". We might speculate as to whether or not Jane owns the deeds

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<sup>498</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 29.

<sup>499</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 30.

<sup>500</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 32

<sup>501</sup> Augé 1995.

to the building, but the diegesis tells us it is hers – it is referred to as her house. However, the police are able to raid it without a warrant, and we suspect that others not of this milieu would not be welcome. Perhaps Jane’s house is somewhere between non-place and reterritorialised space.

These ideas are revisited in *Paranoid Park*. The film takes its name from a derelict space which has been reterritorialised by skaters and homeless youth. It is depicted as being far from a non-place – it is always busy and loud, characterised by the voices of those that inhabit it. It is a carnivalesque space, reminiscent of that depicted in *My Own Private Idaho*, though here it is definitively designated by that which eludes Mike – home:

ALEX: So where do you guys live?

SCRATCH: Right here, man.

ALEX: At the skatepark?

JOLT: This is our fucking home.<sup>502</sup>

This scene from *Paranoid Park* is also of note for the character of Scratch, who is portrayed by Scott Patrick Green, one of the real hustlers from *My Own Private Idaho*, and for the activity of skating, which Ratner suggests demonstrates a “quest for perpetual motion a corollary to the Lost Boys feeling of *Paranoid Park*,”<sup>503</sup> an idea which resonates with nomadism (and the corollary Lost Boys feeling of *My Own Private Idaho*).

*My Own Private Idaho* and *Paranoid Park* appear to challenge the notion of the non-place by positioning their characters in these spaces and claiming it as a new anthropological space – reterritorialising it as “outsider space”. This seems to demonstrate that such categorisations are subjective. The social order to which Scott aligns himself may choose to designate these spaces as non-places to disavow the existence of what is contained within. When Jane Lightwork’s hotel is raided as the police search for Bob, one policeman is heard to say, “If we’re looking for a fat man why don’t we just get one under the bridge?” which seems to highlight the interchangeability of those within Bob’s milieu to those of an external social order. Equally, as attested by Bob Pigeon’s ejection from the

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<sup>502</sup> Van Sant 2007.

<sup>503</sup> Ratner 2008: 27.



upmarket restaurant in which he accosts Scott, the non-place exists for this milieu also, in the designation of a space from which they are debarred.

Perhaps the non-place finds its clearest expression in *My Own Private Idaho* in the site of hypnagogia. As I have asserted throughout, this is a primary site of liminality – a site which is passed through, which necessitates deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations. With its narcoleptic protagonist, *My Own Private Idaho* problematises what I have until now taken as an *inherent* liminality, in that it is a transitional site – it is always temporary, always passed through. Hypnagogia is not such a non-place for Mike; he can never escape it. It is an extraterritorial site, in that although it is Mike's, it is uncannily beyond him, and can never be claimed.

### **Summary**

*My Own Private Idaho* converges with and departs from Sebald, Murakami, and Gondry, consolidating approaches to the liminal, and further opening up discussion of textual subjectivities. As stated, it is very much an open text; it relies upon the viewer's investment in Mike and resists any singular narrative thread, mode of filmmaking, or representation of reality, which makes for an invigorating and disconcerting viewing position. Though it pre-dates Gondry's films, *My Own Private Idaho* offers a more radical and diffuse economy of diegeses. Van Sant's influence can be seen clearly in *The Science of Sleep*, as Stéphane's subjectivity comes to resemble that of Mike, in its dazed and disoriented lack of stability. One wonders if *Eternal Sunshine* too owes a debt to Van Sant in its appropriation of such states; it appears to redeploy Van Sant's economy of fragmentation into a more discrete and hierarchical system of sleep and wakefulness, while remaining aware of the potentiality of the liminal space in between.

The film appears to offer a more democratic representation of states of consciousness than seen in Murakami's novels, in which characters often vanish from the diegesis when they cross to the other side. In contrast Mike is represented across a continuum of consciousness. It is difficult to clearly define each state and thus impossible to privilege one state above another to place in a hierarchy of consciousness. *After Dark* is closest to this in its representation of Eri. Like Mike she is depicted across a continuum; at the opening and close of the novel she is depicted as asleep, but in between her state of consciousness is neither awake nor asleep but other to both. *After Dark* and *My Own Private*

*Idaho* also share a particular appraisal of sleep in depicting the sharp disparity of the sleeping subject and the sleeping body as object. Murakami's device of approximating a film camera creates a gaze which falls upon Eri's sleeping body, and the description it gives is of her body alone; her wakeful subjectivity is displaced. Similarly in *My Own Private Idaho*, sleep renders Mike's body a vulnerable object, prone to the gaze of others. Unlike Sumire in *Sputnik Sweetheart*, when Mike's subjectivity departs the physical plane, he leaves behind the artefact of his physical body, and the viewer must witness the consequences of this rupture between subject and object.

Like *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn*, *My Own Private Idaho* is conditioned by a deliberate instability. It sets out with an apparently centred and singular narrative voice (a first person narrator in the case of Sebald, a singular protagonist in the case of *My Own Private Idaho*) but in each case the subjectivity becomes unstable as the narrative voice is interrupted and subverted. This instability engenders a polyphony; Sebald draws multiple subjectivities into the voice of the narrator, while Van Sant fragments the subjectivity of the narrator into multiple voices. It may be said that this device is what lends *My Own Private Idaho* its compelling instability; it asks us to invest in its protagonist then insists upon constructing him as so fragmented as to be beyond knowing. Bakhtin's notion of a plurality of consciousnesses comes to be embodied in a single character.

On a final note, I refer to Arthur and Liebler's summary of the film, which draws clear parallels from the experience of viewing *My Own Private Idaho*, to the "threshold experiences" that Turner identifies in his rites of passage:

There is no legible dramatic or ideological hierarchy to Idaho's mash of discursive codes. Nonetheless, recalling the oneiric condensations prevalent in liminal rites, it is possible to address the film's categorical collisions as themselves redolent of a liminal order meant to induce in the consciousness of film viewers a tolerance for unresolved contradictions and receptivity to unconventional role-playing. It is just this quality of mental activity that is deemed essential to the threshold experiences of ritual-centred societies.<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Arthur and Liebler 1998: 36.

## **Conclusion**

For a thesis so set upon uncertainties, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the preceding chapters. At this juncture, I am reluctant to direct the reader to any particular conclusion, especially as the reader may have made observations that have passed me by, or drawn conclusions of their own which exceed mine, or even reconfigure my arguments.

However, there is value in drawing my own conclusions, and indeed I think it necessary to assess the patterns I have identified for what I might consider to be the “substance” of the discussion. It is also very much worthwhile to summarise the shape of my arguments, to look again at my critical orientation in light of the discussion, to consider what are the most urgent concerns and observations, and to ask what is the dominant poetics of the thesis. I hope that this reconsideration serves to reassert rather than merely repeat, and that in bringing these critical concerns together a final time, I can direct new light on to the discussion.

### **Betwixt and between**

The first observation I have drawn from these texts, and which has been my starting point for most subsequent discussions, is that each text features a series of oppositions of haecceity and otherness. These oppositions are sometimes tangible and sometimes oblique, but form repeated patterns across the texts. In Sebald, there are oppositions between the German and English languages, between word and image, author and narrator, narrator and narrated, and facticity and fictionality. In Murakami, the most prominent opposition is between this side and the other side. In Gondry, there are oppositions between the protagonists and their love objects, and the protagonists’ internal and external worlds. In Van Sant, I begin to see a greater selection of pluralities as well as oppositions, between different registers of speech and filmic modes, and as in Sebald, facticity and fictionality. Between each opposition lies a space of liminality; these are temporal spaces, ontological spaces, textual spaces, spaces of knowledge and meaning, of consciousness, and of subjectivities. Each space represents an uncertainty, an instability, a disruption, or fragmentation.

All four sets of texts thrust their narrators and protagonists into these spaces of liminality. These characters pass through the liminal, become temporarily entangled, enter and then retreat, or become permanently bound within. There are many such instances in Sebald, often reflecting the theme of consciousness; to take a memorable example from each text, *The Rings of Saturn* offers its narrator's reflexive account of his shift in consciousness<sup>505</sup> while viewing Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*<sup>506</sup> and van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem and Bleaching Fields*<sup>507</sup>, and the narrator of *Vertigo* sudden experiences a sudden loss of knowledge of where he is, or *if he is*<sup>508</sup>. In *My Own Private Idaho*, Mike is bound within a hypnagogic liminal, and Stéphane has a similarly slippery relationship with consciousness in *The Science of Sleep*, which develops progressively and disorients the viewer along with its protagonist. Sumire in *Sputnik Sweetheart* is perhaps the exception. Her progression from one point of intensity to another is not so negatively marked; she is transitory but happy, the agent of her own destiny. Indeed, her transit to the "other side" is mark of her will to attain the object of her desire. That she seemingly returns at the close of the novel suggests even a mastery of the liminal.

I note further differences in the representation of liminal engagement, which seek to either open up or close down the potentiality of liminal space. In the case of Sumire, passing along a continuum of liminal points is valorised, and restabilisation perhaps considered failure; elsewhere, a straightforward transition through the liminal (culminating in a restabilisation) is considered successful (Kafka in *Kafka on the Shore*, or Scott in *My Own Private Idaho*). These discrepancies reveal a politics of the liminal, and instigate a discussion of the power structures of the liminal. Such structures are further exposed in consideration of a third kind of text, in which becoming bound within the liminal is beyond categorisations of success and failure, but rather is controlled by agencies far removed from the subject. For all of these characters, even Sumire, a particular relationship with the liminal makes the world – the objective world of certainties – a very precarious place. They are not of this world yet they must exist within it. This vulnerability plays out in anxieties, panic attacks, narcoleptic seizures, which in turn jeopardise romantic relationships, physical safety, and indeed, sanity.

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<sup>505</sup> TROS 82-3.

<sup>506</sup> Rembrandt 1632.

<sup>507</sup> van Ruisdael 1665.

<sup>508</sup> V: 115.

### The focalising lens

In the preceding discussion I delineate sites of instability that characters pass through and sites of instability that the narrative voice itself passes through. This latter issue intersects with questions of how a textual subjectivity is produced, that is, how particular modes are used to construct a narrator or protagonist and to position that narrator or protagonist as a point of engagement for the reader or viewer. This privileged subjectivity is not equal to, but simulates a synonymy with, the textual subjectivity. There are particular ruptures in this simulated synonymy; these are more notable in the filmic texts through the on-screen presence of the protagonist *within* the world of the film in the performance of an actor (correspondingly, the films also achieve a closer synonymy when constructing shots from the protagonist's point of view). In the literary texts, this notion of rupture is highlighted in Sebald's account of Beyle, presenting himself in a scene from an apparently paradoxical viewpoint<sup>509</sup>, and through the reflexive manner in which the narrators of both *Vertigo* and *The Rings of Saturn* contend with their own representation within the recollected memory of the narrative voice.

The idea of narrators and protagonists as a point of engagement for the reader and a lens on to the worlds they exist in also suggests another point made by McHale in his delineation of epistemological and ontological poetics. In his reading of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>510</sup>, he identifies a modernist (epistemological) device in "the focalization of all the evidence through a single 'center of consciousness'."<sup>511</sup> That McHale designates such a focalisation as epistemological is of interest; it suggests again the idea of characters negotiating with the world in which they must exist, attempting to "know" this world through the focalisation of subjectivity. I see this in the simulated first person narratives of all three films, the "I" of the narrative voice, the observing "we" of *After Dark* (which presents itself as a lens quite literally), and the focalisation of, respectively, Nakata and Mari in the third person sections of *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark*. In these texts the notion of a centre of consciousness is itself unstable – always present in the narrator or protagonist, but always illusory. Likewise, such a focalisation is likely to be distorted, fragmented, or indeed, kaleidoscopic.

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<sup>509</sup> V: 6.

<sup>510</sup> Faulkner 1936.

<sup>511</sup> McHale 1987: 9.

With this focalising lens in mind, it is possible to consider how this privileged subjectivity is placed in opposition to, or among, other voices operating in the text. Polyphonies and intersubjectivities begin to appear. The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* draws other voices into the text, which intermingle with his own, undifferentiated, until the point at which he is unsure whether he *is* in fact his friend, Michael Hamburger<sup>512</sup>. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* we see the protagonist's sleeping subjectivity interact with his lost love, only for her wakeful subjectivity to respond. In contrast, we also see subjectivities in isolation. In *The Science of Sleep*, Stéphane's apparent intersubjectivity with Stéphanie is illusory, and in *My Own Private Idaho*, the brief moment of intersubjectivity with Scott notwithstanding, Mike's narcolepsy renders his subjectivity insular, though refracted into an internal, intrapsychic polyphony. Mike provides a fascinating counterpoint to the Sebaldian narrator; while the two share so many similarities, there is a great contrast in the manner in which their subjectivities are constructed, Mike via a polyphony of filmic modes radiating outward, and Sebald's narrators drawing other voices inwards. This recalls Gondry's repeated use of Spin Art in *The Science of Sleep*, first centrifugally, then centripetally, and its suggestion of subjectivities mapped on to processes of both divergence and convergence.

## Homecomings

The delineation of the centrifugal and centripetal in Van Sant and Sebald offers a further viewpoint, which ramifies with the power structures of the liminal. It presents a dichotomy of engagement and disengagement, best illustrated in the passage in which the narrator of *Vertigo* "loses himself" in Milan Cathedral, and the scene in which Mike wakes at the Piazza del Popolo. The narrator of *Vertigo* is able to orient himself through his comprehension of the Italian language, whereas Mike's incomprehension of the same language serves to disorient him. This discrepancy in the facility to engage presents implicit questions of why the liminal is more perilous for some than for others, and of the contributing factors in this dichotomy. These questions hint too at the realignment of my own critical orientation, towards questions McHale would posit as epistemological rather than ontological: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?"<sup>513</sup> This in turn

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<sup>512</sup> TROS: 185.

<sup>513</sup> McHale 1987: 9.

reiterates the question: How much are these liminal subjects a part of the world, and how does the world recognise these subjects?

Perhaps this question can be answered by considering the survival of these characters with such complex or problematic relationships to the liminal. How does each text close, and in what circumstances does each leave its protagonist? Sebald's novels conclude with the narrator journeying toward home, a home that is referred to within the text, but not often discussed at length. *Kafka on the Shore* concludes with Kafka returning home to assume an adult responsibility, and in *After Dark* Mari returns home (though will soon depart for China) and Eri returns to the "home" of wakefulness from her prolonged sleep. *Sputnik Sweetheart* concludes with Sumire's return from the other side, with the reality or permanence of this open to debate. *Eternal Sunshine* ends with an uncertain homecoming – a new beginning and within it the acknowledgement of another, inevitable, ending. *The Science of Sleep* concludes with Stéphane about to leave home once more, yet confoundingly falling into a panicked and chaotic sleep. This hints at the conclusion of *My Own Private Idaho*, which sees Mike, alone on the road in Idaho, addressing himself once again: "This road will never end. It probably goes all around the world." On the last four words he collapses into sleep, as if understanding the reality his words represent.

While *Sputnik Sweetheart* and *Eternal Sunshine* tease with an uncertainty, these latter two films frustrate in a refusal to offer the protagonist any kind of homecoming. These conclusions do not suspend the protagonist in a transience rich with potentiality. Both are stranded; Stéphane still has hopes for a relationship with Stephanie, hopes which are once again dashed, and Mike has lost everything, except perhaps the meagre prize of a moral superiority over Scott. The conclusions of these films posit the perpetually liminal as a negative space, yet the protagonist continues to survive within this space. There is a shift in emphasis from conclusion to process. There is also a question of how far the process can sustain itself, and if this is not to be in perpetuity, how it will finally conclude. I have mentioned Van Sant's later film *Paranoid Park* as an example of when "not-home" becomes a necessity and Megan Ratner's suggestion that for Van Sant's characters, "the only comfort is being on the move."<sup>514</sup> Here, stability is found in movement rather than stasis, proposing a solution for the liminal subject; rather than surviving in a world of which it cannot be part, it institutes a new world. Such a "solution" is paradoxical; it poses immediate questions of whether such stability mimics the same modes of territorialisation

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<sup>514</sup> Ratner 2008: 30.

as stasis, or risks the same inhospitalities which have rendered the previous world impossible.

There remains a tension between the home we have and the home we desire. Mike's fraught collapse at the close of *My Own Private Idaho* suggests he has not accepted his perpetual transience, and he retains a desire, or rather, a need, for something else. An intervention is required, which perhaps occurs in the very final moments of the film as his sleeping body is scooped up from the road and driven away by a stranger – a final uncertainty, of whether he is being transported to safety or further peril. This necessity of some kind of intervention, some exit from the liminal, some homecoming recalls the fisherman on the beach in *The Rings of Saturn*, who the narrator describes as “the last stragglers of some nomadic people [having] settled there, at the outermost limit of the earth, in expectation of the miracle longed for since time immemorial, the miracle which would justify all their erstwhile privations and wanderings.”<sup>515</sup> The dry tone of the narrator's observation suggests that we will be left waiting.

### **In dreams begins responsibility**

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Oshima cites Yeats' *Responsibilities*<sup>516</sup>, a citation I failed to heed when I began this project. Where other academic disciplines are bound by ethics, my research in literature, film, and critical theory did not seem to require to such guidance. On the contrary, I relished the idea of a research without ethics, in which I could pursue a utopia of hypnagogic reverie unbound. I hesitate to suggest that I have found such an ethics, but owing to the intervention of Sebald, my research has intersected with a critical strategy which I came to realise was astringent, erudite, searing, chilling, mournful, and equal to all of these, responsible.

*The Rings of Saturn* concludes with the notion of the soul leaving the body, an acknowledgement of mortality but also of an afterlife.<sup>517</sup> Sebald's collection of writers, writings, histories, and catastrophes acknowledges the fact of death, the fact that these events have passed, yet in bearing witness, he bestows an afterlife. He reiterates, and creates meaning and significance anew by placing his finds in new constellations. There is a

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<sup>515</sup> TROS: 51-2.

<sup>516</sup> KOTS: 141; Yeats 1916.

<sup>517</sup> TROS: 296.



politics to this critical strategy, a bearing witness to injustice. This is present too in *My Own Private Idaho*, in the interviews with street hustlers, the foregrounding of marginal space, and the film's parting shot, after witnessing poverty, homelessness, and misery, of "Have a nice day." This anger is palpable, and there is a sense that it is not superficial but deeply felt. Sebald's anger similarly profound, and even more sharply deployed. Two chapters of *The Rings of Saturn* conclude with the narrator at boiling point, yet still somehow unwaveringly erudite. After offering an account of how Roger Casement was destroyed by the British Government (a systematic destruction reminiscent of Kafka) he recounts how Casement's body was in 1965 exhumed for repatriation to Ireland, "presumably scarcely identifiable any more, from the lime pit in the courtyard of Pentonville prison into which his body had been thrown."<sup>518</sup> Even more blisteringly, he ends the previous chapter by reminding us that Kurt Waldheim's voice was recorded and sent into space aboard Voyager II, "for the benefit of any extra-terrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting..."<sup>519</sup> Here Sebald's lightness of touch is coruscating; that a man so closely associated with genocide becomes an ambassador for humanity is to Sebald both an atrocity and also terribly appropriate.

My conclusions offer nothing so bold, but I take from Sebald (and Van Sant) a hint of the patterns I should look for. It is this observation which opened up a new dimension in my critical approach. I discovered that to make this project worthwhile to myself required a new mode of questioning, a search for networks of meaning, which like many of the quests undertaken by the protagonists of these texts, would ultimately resist definitive resolution. Not that this matters; the impetus remains regardless, and though it seems almost facile to suggest that the substance here lies in process rather than resolution, it is appropriate nonetheless. Also, it is disingenuous to say there have been no resolutions; in a sense I have passed through a similar liminal passage to the protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore*, who emerges from his own quest with a new sense of responsibility. In another sense I am more Mike in *My Own Private Idaho* – bewildered and frustrated, but hopefully not so lost. I place a certain amount of faith in my Sebaldian aspirations to guide me out of the chaos, or at least allow me a clearer view.

I stated in the Introduction that I take from Sebald the maxim that even when we cannot have faith in humanity, we can have faith in literature; it allows us to identify patterns in the chaos, and to see the possibility of connection. This is something I see at

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<sup>518</sup> TROS: 134.

<sup>519</sup> TROS: 99.

work within the texts: Kafka's progression through the liminal is accompanied by literature – he hides out in a library and spends his days reading. In *After Dark*, Mari reads an unidentified book whenever she has a moment to herself, and in *Sputnik Sweetheart* the narrator and Sumire forge a friendship through their shared love of literature. Similarly, *My Own Private Idaho* engages at length with *Henry IV*, and in Gondry's films the characters find faith not in literature but in the art they create. In a text I discarded from the thesis, Jonathan Coe's *The House of Sleep*<sup>520</sup>, the characters find faith in cinema as well as literature.

### Oscillations

This faith in film, literature, and art is reflected in my search for meaning, for substance to my discussion. As I identified this shift in my critical orientation, I sought to make sense of it by locating it within critical discourse, by examining both my initial critical strategies and the aspects of Sebald that I have co-opted. I considered this alongside accounts of shifts in critical discourse, notably McHale's assessment of the emergence of a postmodernist poetics from modernism, and latterly, the re-emergence of aspects of modernism within postmodernism. In recognising that my critical strategies are not defined by a postmodernist poetics, I must also recognise that postmodernism *is* a substantial influence to my research. I see this tension reflected in examinations of this re-emergence of modernist poetics, and current attempts to find a new critical language to account for this. Efforts to define this modernist-postmodernist tension under banners of post-postmodernism or metamodernism are perhaps unwieldy, yet this critical discussion is necessary. In their paper *Notes on metamodernism*, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker identify "trends and tendencies [which] can no longer be explained in terms of the postmodern . . . characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment."<sup>521</sup> They continue:

by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern . . . this oscillation [is not] a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles.<sup>522</sup>

This would seem to ramify with my observation of pluralities rather than binaries in Van Sant, and perhaps not coincidentally, Vermeulen and van den Akker cite Gondry as the

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<sup>520</sup> Coe 1997.

<sup>521</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 2.

<sup>522</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 6.

filmmaker whose work most clearly expresses what they consider to be a metamodernist poetics<sup>523</sup>. I have identified this particular poetics (phrased as a lacuna or open question, in texts of the last twenty years), which is not to say that such a poetics did not exist beforehand, rather that the contemporary moment brings particular instabilities to the fore, and that writers, filmmakers and theorists are finding new ways to explore and articulate these, and are doing so more often. It would of course be remiss not to note how these tensions between particular poetics offer a very appropriate final example of a liminal destabilisation of subjectivity.

In closing, and in lieu of a final analysis, I offer the suggestion that perhaps the success of the Sebaldian mode of questioning is that, despite all, it does not flounder in liminal uncertainty. It seeks out stability, and indeed, each narrative closes as its narrator journeys towards home. These narrators may be rife with a perpetual uncertain anxiety which will not be assuaged by such a return, but attempting to find the metaphorical shelter of home offers a gesture towards stability. It is of course absolutely appropriate that these returns occur just out of frame, after the conclusion of the narrative; and the Sebaldian narrator remains forever suspended just short of home. This ramifies with the the previously discussed scene from *The Science of Sleep*, in which Stéphane and Stéphanie converse on the telephone, Stéphane in bed and on the edge of sleep. He asks Stéphanie to continue talking as he falls asleep, as he believes it is possible to communicate from within sleep.

STÉPHANE: I feel that I'm falling down into a black hole.

STÉPHANIE: You know that you could never see someone fall in a black hole. Because the image of the traveller who passes the horizon would slow down till it would remain stuck in the same position, the state he was when he crossed the line.

As Stéphanie speaks, Stéphane falls asleep.

STÉPHANIE: Stéphane? Are you here?

STÉPHANE: No, I'm there! I'm there...

STÉPHANIE: Tell me, tell me. Describe all you can see.

This scene sums up, as well as any, the paradox at the heart of the thesis – of subjectivity entering into the liminal, and of attempting to bear witness to this impossible space.

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<sup>523</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 1.

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