



Prometheus Abandoned

Figural eddies as an alternative method of reading *Out 1: Noli me tangere*

Prometheus övergiven

Figurala virvlar som en alternativ metod till att läsa *Out 1: Noli me tangere*

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Abstract

The thesis combines D.N. Rodowick's concept of *the figural*, denoting the complex nature of filmic signification; Roland Barthes' distinctions between the *readerly* and the *writerly*, which are different methods of engaging with a text; and Thierry Kuntzel's concept of *semiotic constellations*, the reading of recurring yet fragmented motifs that occur throughout the film. Here reintroduced through the concept of *eddies*—discursive fields within the film which displace the connection between the signifier and signified (the flow of signification), instead distinguished by signifiers engendering new signifiers (the swirl of signification)—to unlock a new method of reading a film. This method focuses on interpreting the latent meanings of the *plural* of the text; the residual signs in the film which hold little to no bearing on its narrative, but through their deconstruction and later reassembly they may guide to viewer to new meanings. By first delineating the method proposed for this type of reading, the thesis then applies this method to the reading of one such *eddy* in the art-film *Out 1: Noli me tangere* from 1970, which is connected to the discursive field of *Prometheus Bound*, a play rehearsed within the film by a group of six actors who engage in various exercises, which at first glance seem to be entirely unconnected to the play. In this case, the method reveals through the figural activity of the film that the exercises of the group are engaged in dialogue with themes touched upon in the play.

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1 Introduction

Acknowledgements

[L]et us not undervalue small signs; perhaps by means of them we will succeed in getting on the track of greater things.

—Sigmund Freud, “The Psychology of Errors”, p. 14

First a confession: this work began with what could be called my gradual ‘falling out of love with watching films’. This can be traced in my method of viewing, which takes place far more ‘outside’ of the films, than ‘in’ them, and also in that my readings of films are, invariably, conditioned largely by other texts. As such, the essay stems from an attempt to create a method for reading a film which conjoins the act of remembering the film, ‘outside of viewing’, with the discursive field opened up when these memories clash with other texts, thereby engendering new meanings which are latent in the film itself.

And it is here that I must pay tribute to the copulation of several inter-mixed readings and encounters, without which this work could never have been done and which I fear will not receive the prevalence in the forthcoming text which they deserve.

First, in having provided aid in my understanding of the viewer's relationship to the image: Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 1977) and Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (*La vie d'Ádele*, 2013); secondly, in setting the course for my own journey: James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-27), Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (*Divina Commedia* 1308-21) and Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et Glaneuse*, 2000), all suffused with a love for knowledge of which I can but hope that I've been impressioned; and lastly, conjoint readings of *The Iliad* (Homer), *Prometheus Bound* (Aeschylus), *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Goethe, 1774), *S/Z* (Roland Barthes, 1970), *From Up on Poppy Hill* (Goro Miyazaki, 2011), *The Old- and The New Testament, Ulysses* (James Joyce, 1922), and *Speak, Memory* (Vladimir Nabokov, 1966), whose impressions upon me can be found throughout the text, and which have proved to be ample sources of inspiration.

The Problem of Plurality: Beyond the Scope of Narrative

In viewing a film, its narrative generally appears through successive fragments of signification which are then ordered and combined as to create a whole; which is the story. David Bordwell's theory on viewer engagement by inferring meaning through "schemata," which is described as a "formal" process where the viewer "constructs" a film's story from "cues," the signifiers which make up the "plot" (what the viewer can physically see and hear in the film), can be thought of as a theory seeking to explain this process.¹ More often than not, this act of recombining the pieces proves engaging for viewers, who are thus able to make sense of the film's story and feel contented—pleased, by their viewing.

But in a film, there are also other signifiers which are not necessarily connected to a film's story, in the dramatical sense, but stretching outside the films themselves; different paths by which the viewer can stroll, so as to hear and view *other things*. These *other things* are what Roland Barthes has called *the plural* of the text; signifiers that open up to several paths of reading, rather than going straight to a singularly determined signified, thus granting the viewer/reader some leisure and control in reading/viewing. Yet this plurality of the text, its "third meaning"², if seen solely for its contribution to narrative progress, tends to take on a residual quality, as displayed by what Kristin Thompson has come to call it: an "excess" of the text.³

The Purpose of the Essay

Thus the main purpose of this essay is to acknowledge the possibilities of a method of reading the film *Out 1: Noli me tangere* (Jacques Rivette, 1970) that is mindful of the latent plurality of filmic signification, and not narrative outcome, so as to open up a new way of stimulating readings. This method of reading follows the logic of an eddy: a swirl of signification, which, even though it has momentum and force, doesn't lead forward (to a signified), but only back to itself. As such, the method is *not* one which focuses on the viewer's construction of a story through various hypotheses sublimated to the comprehension of a film's story.⁴ Rather, what can be thought to be opened up through

¹ D. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 1985, p. 49

² R. Barthes, "The Third Meaning", 1970. From *Image Music Text*, 1977, p. 52-68

³ K. Thompson, *Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, 1981, p. 287-295. Cited from D. Bordwell, *ibid.*, p. 53

⁴ D. Bordwell, *ibid.*, p. 29-47

the method of figural eddies is *another plane of discourse*. Discourse here is *not* thought of as Bruce Kawin presents it when he says that it is “the narrative line, the vehicle and manner in which the story is told or presented to the audience,”⁵ but *discourse as a plane of dialogue with sources anterior to Out 1*, which the “figural,” or “figural activity”⁶ opens up; a *discourse that is associated with the film, but not ‘contained’ by it*. This discourse doesn’t exist in the film, so to speak, but is constructed by the viewer/reader in the reading of the film, often connecting the discourse with the discourse of other texts, thereby engaging in a kind of dialogue with them. The essay, in this respect, owes a lot to Roland Barthes’ concepts of the “work” and the “text,” as he put them forth in his essay “From Work to Text” (1970), denoting a change from a material text that exists on paper and which is consumed by the reader, to a text which is constructed by the reader, *in reading*; but more on this further on.

Out 1 and Prometheus Bound: a problematic reading

This method of reading is then applied to several fragmented sequences in *Out 1: Noli me tangere*, a film of nefarious reputation for its length (over twelve hours) and difficulty in reading, in the hopes of displaying that the experience of viewing this film may be enriching and pleasurable if viewed in a way that is adapted to the film, and that this method of viewing may prove to reveal some of the complexity of the film. And whilst this method of viewing may invigorate the viewing of other films, it is still largely modeled on some problems of viewing connected specifically to *Out 1*, due to its fragmented and coded nature, and its reliance on intertext, bearing little heed to narrative concerns.

The sequences chosen are those connected to the rehearsal of a play by Aeschylus (525-426 BC), a famed Greek dramatist who “made Athenian tragedy one of the world’s great art forms,”⁷ by the title of *Prometheus Bound*. In the play, the character Prometheus, one of the Titans (the old gods cast out of Olympus by Zeus as he seized control from his father, Cronus), has been bound to a rock at the ends of the earth by Zeus because he gave mankind fire; thus granting them knowledge, which was before

⁵ B. Kawin, *How Movies Work*, 1992, p. 59

⁶ D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or Philosophy After the New Media*, 2001. Two terms that will be explained later on, but which can be thought of as a combination of movement, image, sound, and text as a replacement for *the sign* in the process of signification.

⁷ Introduction to *The Persians and Other Plays*, 2009.

only available to the gods. As a god, he is associated with granting mankind the gifts of intellect (writing, mathematics, etc.) and for standing up for humanity when Zeus wished to annihilate the human race. For this, he was punished: abandoned by both gods and men. Some myths also regard Prometheus as the creator of mankind, where he is to have molded them from clay or fashioned them from rocks.⁸

The play is one of the more popular that has been left behind by Aeschylus, and it has influenced writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe⁹, writers alluded to in passing during *Out 1* when some members of the group rehearsing *Prometheus Bound* are reciting poetry. Shelley has written an expansion of the play in the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), and the influence of Prometheus upon Goethe can be found in, for instance, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), where the title character in the latter part of the novel comes to identify himself with the suffering of Christ as he was nailed to the cross, a similar situation to what Prometheus found himself in, where all three characters are forced to grapple with the abandonment of a higher power. He has also written a poem by the title of *Prometheus* (1773).

The reasons why these sequences connected to the play have been chosen are because they heavily rely on active decoding, up to the point where without the guidance of *Prometheus Bound* in the reading of the sequences they appear to be entirely unconnected to it and simply absurd deviations from the narrative of the film, without any logic. But it is also because of this that they amply suit the method here proposed, as they offer next to nothing in terms of narrative, but open up a rich field of what has been previously labeled the discourse of the film; connecting with the themes of the play, in particular on the salient theme of abandonment and the relationship between father and son, which is why these two themes have found themselves as pillars in the later analysis.

Questions to be answered

Therefore the questions posed at the outset of this thesis are: how is a film read through the logic and method of these figural eddies, and what discourse is opened up through this method when applied to the sequences in *Out 1: Noli me tangere* that are connected to the play *Prometheus Bound*?

⁸ March, Jenny. *The Penguin Book of Classical Myths*, p. 127-133

⁹ Preface to *Prometheus Bound*, in *Persians and Other Plays*, p. 159

The order of the essay

To answer these questions the essay will begin by providing some background on the film *Out 1*, so as to explain why it is a problematic film, its historical context, and a brief synopsis of it, to provide at least a sketch of the film and how it operates.

Following this a theoretical framework in the construction of the method will be established. The three most salient influences upon this method are Roland Barthes, supplying a relationship between reader and text which makes possible the type of engagement proposed throughout the essay; D.N. Rodowick, for problematizing the filmic signifier through the concept of “the figural”; and Thierry Kuntzel, for providing the outline for a method of reading that deconstructs the engagement in viewing, and breaks with an order of reading which grants a precedent to narrative, instead focusing on metaphor and symbols.

Following this are some explanations on how the method is applied in practice, first through the case of a passage from Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time*, to explain the concept of how a figural eddy appears, and secondly through the film *From Up on Poppy Hill* (Goro Miyazaki, 2011), to expound on the concept of cinematic rewriting through memory, to situate the method as a “writerly” kind of engagement, as opposed to a “readerly”.¹⁰

After this comes the textual analysis, or deconstruction and rewriting, of some sequences in *Out 1* which have been read according to the fragmentary logic of an “eddy” in the “figural activity” of the film, here connected to the discursive field of abandonment, the relationship between father and son, and *Prometheus Bound*.

¹⁰ Two concepts by Barthes, their implications introduced later on. R. Barthes, *S/Z*, 1970.

2 Background

dicit ei Iesus noli me tangere...

Jesus saith to her, Touch me not...

—John, 20:17, King James Version

The Problems of Viewing *Out 1: Noli me tangere* According to Common Practice

Out 1: Noli me tangere is a film which has been bypassed and neglected by audiences for over forty years. Made in 1970 during the course of six spring weeks by director Jacques Rivette and a troupe of over a dozen actors following a vague outline of a script grafted onto Balzac's *History of the Thirteen*, with a material that is largely improvised (and it is large).¹¹ The resulting footage defies the description of 'film' in the regular sense, being divided into eight episodes and boasting a runtime of over twelve hours. Rather than the earlier denomination, it belongs to that motley crew known as 'film-serials': the audiovisual dinosaurs of film history, now virtually extinct.¹² Other notable productions in this largely abandoned form are serials such as Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* (1913-14) and *Les Vampires* (1915-1916).

Some of the reasons why it has been problematic for viewing and thus not enjoyed widespread circulation is that, first of all, it is directed by one of the most esoteric and neglected *auteurs* of the French new wave, Jacques Rivette, thus situating it within a context of highly personal and artistically oriented films. (Explicitly linked by Jonathan Rosenbaum to films such as *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) and *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) for its disregard for narrative clarity).¹³ Yet this mark of personality is subverted by the fact that much of the material gathered for editing was improvised by the actors themselves, and not scripted or controlled in a general sense by Rivette, thereby situating the film uncomfortably right between two camps of viewers; not quite fitting in with either those who watch films

¹¹It is also reported that "each actor was invited to invent his or her own character and dialogue," one of the reasons why this study generally abstains from the *auteurist* model. J. Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics*, 1991, in *On the Nonreception of Two French Serials*. p. 307

¹² *Out 1*, having enjoyed only one public screening in Le Havre in 1971, was also intended to be shown in a serial form, akin to how TV-series are now aired, on a state-owned TV-channel, yet this never happened. J. Rosenbaum, *ibid.*, p. 303

¹³ J. Rosenbaum. *Placing Movies*, 1995, in *Work and Play in the House of Fiction*. p. 142

unbeknownst of who has directed it, nor those who could be said to subscribe to *auterism*.

What marks the film the most, however, is its length; twelve hours and sixteen minutes (Rivette's productions generally being nefariously lengthy) coupled with the lack of an easy-to-follow plotline (it begins with four plotlines which are unconnected, and which dissipate into a myriad of somehow-connected plotlines during the course of the serial), and its obscurantism when it comes to intertextual practice, which ranges from Aeschylus to Renoir to Balzac to Lewis Carroll, among others. All these things combined sets it apart from most other films, which is why, if adopted to a more general type of viewing, the film might seem obtuse, abrasive and generally unstimulating if compared and measures with other films, which is precisely why another manner of engagement in viewing may be considered more suitable for this particular film. As the film also reveals by its subtitle, *Noli me tangere*, it quite markedly knows that it is abrasive.

Synopsis

A vague synopsis of the serial would yield something of the following: Paris in the 1970's. Colin (Jean-Pierre L aud), a twenty-something faux deaf-mute who frequents caf es in order to solicit money by disturbing the customers with his harmonica (once they pay him, he leaves them alone), is one day handed a letter from an unknown person. The letter contains two texts which Colin frantically attempts to identify. Meanwhile, a woman of similar age by the name of Fr d rique (Juliet Berto) spends her days luring men she encounters at bars or caf es to hotels, where she steals their money. At a later date, she stumbles upon some 'incriminating' letters hidden in the cupboard of a man she happens upon in his home, whence she tries to blackmail every person who seems to have been in contact with these (at first, with little success). Meanwhile, a rehearsal of the play *Seven Against Thebes* (written by Aeschylus) by a collective of five young actors is taking place. Meanwhile, a rehearsal of the play *Prometheus Bound* (also by Aeschylus) by a group of five different actors under the tutelage of director Thomas (Michael Lonsdale), is taking place in another part of Paris. None of these four narrative strands seem connected to each other.

The Thirteen

Colin's and Frédérique's separate efforts to unearth the secrets of the letters they've come into possession of reveals the possible existence of a collective of thirteen members, whose purposes are obscured (in Balzac's novel their purpose is to further their positions in society; one of the excerpts Colin receives comes from this very novel, which leads him down the path of interpretation that the activities of these modern day thirteens' are similar). Gradually the identities of these thirteen are revealed, unearthing a grand web of connections between characters, but little more than that, as this group is no longer active, but dormant, and several of its 'members' have not spoken for years (some have also gone missing).

Each episode is named under the principle of a correspondence: e.g. "From [A] to [B]", where the subsequent episode will be "From [B] to [C]", and continuing in this fashion for all eight episodes (each episode will generally end with these two people meeting up, although this communication by the film is literally arrested in one of the episodes where the sender and receiver are the same, although under different names).

The members of both aforementioned theater groups are revealed to be connected through the characters of Lili (Michèle Moretti, belonging to the first group) and Thomas (From Lili to Thomas is the title of the first episode), both of them being members of the thirteen. But not much more happens, because nothing comes to fruition from either staging (both groups give up due to various reasons, and instead join up and perform exercises in improvisation: as a staple of Rivette, the staging's in his films never move beyond the realm of the rehearsal); Colin, whilst finally being able to decode the messages he has received, ends up none the wiser and love-sick, giving up his quest; and Frédérique encroaches upon the thirteen, but at the cost of her own life. The serial ends in suspension, where the relatively static image of the character Marie—(Hermine Karagheuz, part of the first collective rehearsing *Seven Against Thebes*, and also the one who is revealed to have handed Colin the letters) an image previously seen during the course of the serial, with her standing on the streets of Paris with a Greek statue situated in the background—simply recurs. For a film that is over twelve hours long, very little happens in terms of its 'story', but it engages through other means, which is why a method of viewing which fastens on to possible 'outcomes', in the dramatic sense, is bound to be unstimulating.

The plays

The serial is decidedly marked by a sense of languor: several scenes carry on without halt for over thirty minutes¹⁴, wherein little of narrative import seems to happen. There's a general tendency that these scenes are connected to either theater group, and it is the activities of the second of these, the one rehearsing *Prometheus Bound* which has the least connection to an over-arching narrative. The sequences are heavily coded (as Thomas himself says of the play: "it's a fairly coded work") and lacking in stimulation unless the exercises carried out are read as so many metaphors dispersed throughout the serial connected to themes of the play itself. Because rather than focusing on dramatic development, the gamut of the serial seeks simply to expand the possible connections between characters, or display various exercises carried out by either theater group, and these serve rather to confound than elucidate anything which has any bearing on narrative momentum.

Earlier writings on the film and its structure

Rosenbaum likens this structure of the film to "The successive building and shattering of utopian dreams," thus charting a course which brings it into context of the time it was shot, as being "the idealistic legacy of May '68".¹⁵ Notably, the last time the thirteen of the serial seem to have gathered was around this time. In this manner, *Out 1* quite markedly sets out to subvert classical narration, deploying extreme logical gaps to confound the viewer, where a majority of the sequences are, at first, either unconnected, or simply functioning as ploys to divert attention away from what is, in a sense, an illogical narration. Instead, it follows more closely to the logic of metaphor and symbolism, and quite often supplies allegories of its own existence, and how it is read.

Mary W. Wiles, in her study of Rivette¹⁶ also brings up the suggestion, originally made by Jean-André Fieschi, that Rivette in the structuring of the film was influenced

¹⁴ This aesthetic is referred to by Rosenbaum as being "Bazinian", in that the serials general strategy includes the deployment of long takes and deep staging. Yet, as he also mentions, the serial then subverts this ontological realism by dipping into fantasy at several junctures, thereby "undermining" the realist notion of the use of long takes, much as in the aforementioned *Les Vampires. Movies as Politics*. p. 306. This is another example of how the serial consistently subverts general models, or "schemata," bordering closer to deliberate nonsense than a logical narrative, in support of the somewhat aleatory reading I set forth upon in this thesis.

¹⁵ J. Rosenbaum. *ibid.*, p. 307

¹⁶ Mary M. Wiles, *Contemporary Film Directors: Jacques Rivette*, 2011. Edited by James Naremore.

not only by Jean Renoir¹⁷, but also Pierre Boulez's then concurrent thoughts on serial music, requesting works marked by a 'maze-like' quality, thus opposing the "classical conception of the work" of art within Western thought as a single wholeness, instead privileging such works that were fragmented, "aleatory" and in request of an active listener.¹⁸ Interesting to note is that an American expatriate, Noël Burch, living in France at the time and writing on film, was also influenced by serial music in his writings, most notably in the chapter "Chance and its functions" in his *Theory of Film Practice (Praxis du cinema, 1969, translated into English in 1981)* similarly interested in the effects of chance upon the work of art, and of the artist to "let go of the reins".¹⁹

It is because of these affinities of *Out 1*, and especially its sequences with the group rehearsing *Prometheus Bound*, that it has been chosen for this study, as a reading focused on the narrative implications of these sequences would unlock very little of its potential, whereas a method paying heed to pluralities, fragmentation, intertextual references and metaphorical practice may provide a better understanding of it, and a better understanding of the processes underlying such a reading.

¹⁷ When Rivette helped Labarthes shoot a documentary on Renoir for the series *Cinéastes de notre temps* in 1966, he embraced a new aesthetic, marked by a sense of openness and improvisation. M. Wiles, *ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁸ M. Wiles, *ibid.*, p. 54

¹⁹ N. Burch. *Theory of Film Practice*, p. 106

3 The Theoretical Framework

The Order of Viewing: Eddies and Flows

For Thierry Kuntzel, the purpose of textual analysis of film was to “demonstrate that the fiction film produces an ideological reading forged ultimately by its technological conditions of presentation,”²⁰ that is to say, a reading following precisely a predetermined *order of reading* which a film imposes upon the viewer; a habit of reading which favors certain processes of signification over others. In film, this type of habitual reading engages the viewer by a process where filmic signifiers are read in sequence and in such a way as to construct a story-line: a method of reading which leaves behind the “excess” of the text as residue, because it neglects to focus on what has here been called discourse in favor of the construction of narrative.

But what if a film consists, not of narrative progression, but of exactly this “excess”; thus subverting the habits and the order of viewing itself? Without the guide, or even pleasure, of an apparent narrative by which to follow, how can a film be stimulatingly viewed, and viewed in such a way as to open up these different pathways which the film holds? Barthes, in relation to the order of how we read, says that “what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface,”²¹ when speaking upon some of the grand narratives of the 20th century, such as Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, an admittedly long novel (or series of novels), at somewhere around 3000 pages long. He then proposes the following: that narratives are not read in their entirety (which would be, if not impossible, at least an *unpleasurable activity*), but rather piecemeal and not with a consistent intensity or focus.²² Assuming there are such intensities latent in the text, which are made of the text’s “plural,” these could be described as locations within the narrative where there are to be found certain *eddies*: breaks in the flow of narrative progression where the signifiers, rather than leading to a signified, swirl around one another, engendering their own momentum and dragging in external material (signs),

²⁰ T. Kuntzel, *Film-Work*, p. 41-42, cited from D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, p. 80

²¹ R. Barthes. *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1975, p. 11-12

²² This also adds the possibility of a *pleasurable re-reading*, going against the notion that a text, or in this case a film, is made to be merely an object to be consumed once, leaving no traces after its consumption: “Proust’s good fortune: from one reading to the next, we never skip the same passages.” R. Barthes, *ibid.*, p.11

whatever just so happens to pass by, fixed around a certain point, which is what will later be termed the *reverberation of the text*.

Posited to reading this metaphor entails a halt of narrative succession, where the viewer instead finds him/herself focused on the reading of a connective motif, a figure, which 'spins' around because it doesn't lead forward to anything but itself, and which quite forcibly distances itself from narrative signification, even though it quite literally exists within the narrative. To read according to the logic of such 'eddies' subverts the nuclear force of narrative signification in reading, and makes possible an activity which refuses to follow these priorities.

But, as Barthes also says, a writer "cannot choose to write *what will not be read*,"²³ that is, to force upon all readers the experience of this eddy, and the same would go for the director of a film: therefore it must befall on the reader, or viewer, to decide whether to follow the flow of narrative, or swirl in its eddies. It is up to the viewer to construct the order, and even duration, of reading. But applying this form of reading to the watching of a film poses one fundamental difficulty, which Rodowick has pointed out: that film has a built in rhythm (24 frames per second)²⁴, unlike the novel, which depends solely on the internal reading of the subject. This is because its 'object' is an entirely static material and one which the reader literally holds, thus enabling the reader to skip the reading of certain passages; which means, in short, that the reader of a novel is theoretically capable of controlling the order of reading, whereas the viewer of a film is not in control of viewing. Since the days of Kuntzel, however, there has been a shift in how films are seen, where a new arena of viewing has opened up: home-viewing. In the home, it is now possible for viewers to pause, fast-forward, track back the movements of the film and rewatch sequences, scenes, single images *out of order*. To latch on to, in the moment of viewing, these eddies. It is now possible through technology to fragment the experience and abstain from following the controlled flow of reading; to open up new pathways of signification by which to follow: in short, to deconstruct the machinations of the film at one's own leisure and to step from what Roland Barthes has called the "readerly," to the "writerly," introduced shortly, but which can be said to denote a difference in activity on the behalf of the reader, where the former is passive (a consumer), the latter active (a producer).

²³ R. Barthes. *ibid.*, p. 11

²⁴ D.N. Rodowick, *ibid.*, p. 80

Viewing and Reading

The concepts of *viewing* and *reading* are in this essay used to denote this difference in activity, where the former speaks of an engagement that is focused on ‘following the story’ of a film, taking place during the actual viewing of the film, whereas the latter is marked by an engagement through decoding and deconstructing the “figural” of the film, which carries on after one has finished watching the film. Another reason for why the concept of ‘reading’ a film is still pervasive in the context of this essay is because Barthes’ concepts of the “readerly” and the “writerly,” are used (there existing no manageable concepts when transposed to viewing that correspond to these), even though the way in which the reader of a novel makes sense of signs in a text is invariably dissimilar from how the viewer makes sense of the signs of a film.

The sign in film

As Barthes himself said on this subject: “of a man walking in the snow, even before he signifies, everything is given to me; in writing, on the contrary, I am not obliged to see how the hero wears his nails — but if it wants to, the Text describes, and with what force, Hölderlin’s filthy talons.”²⁵ As such, the difference between these two modes of signification can be regarded, if they are seen as languages and thus problems of a linguistic nature, as a difference between the “unmotivated” and the “motivated” in the “contract” that exists between the signifier and the signified, where the signifier in a text is “unmotivated” because the written line is *not* analogical to what it signifies, whereas the signifier in film is “motivated” because it figuratively is analogical to what it signifies.²⁶ For instance: the word “lemon” in the English language is less contractually bound to the physical manifestation of a lemon than is the representation of a lemon on film.

However, as Hollis Frampton has aptly displayed in his film *Lemon* (1969), a virtually static seven minute shot of a lemon that is lighted from different angles to make it assume the form of other things (among them: breasts and the sun; in short, it is transformed into a mutable sign in constant flux), “lemon” as a signifier in film can signify a whole lot more than just “lemon”, thus problematizing the notion of filmic signification as being purely analogical. And it is for this reason that the essay uses

²⁵ R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 1977. Cited from J. Rosenbaum, *Barthes & Film in Placing Movies*, 1995. p. 46

²⁶ R. Barthes, “Signifier and Signified” in *Elements of Semiology*, 1964, p. 50-54

semiotic theory; because even though the filmic sign is not the sign found in a written text, it is still a sign, not wholly analogical to what it signifies.

Reading a film

The essay stems from the notion that a film is ‘read’ as a ‘text’, in the sense that the viewer is asked to make sense of the impressions (signs) left upon the screen, and that this process is akin to connotation, rather than free association, thus the reading depends also on the object that is read rather than solely on the subject responsible for reading. But the concept of reading a film, in itself, also poses some problems, which is why, instead of the linguistic sign, I’ve adopted D.N. Rodowick’s “heuristic and mobile,”²⁷ concept of the figural, introduced shortly.

But even though the way a film is ‘read’ differs from the reading of a book (a literal text), I propose that it can still involve a deconstruction of order, to break with the controlled reading which Kuntzel said that all films imposed, and to be ‘re-written’ by the viewer, and rather than to focus on the reading of narrative signifiers, engage through the reading of its “plural” through the logic of *reverberations* and *eddies*.

A new method of reading

The concepts of *reverberations and eddies* are constructed from readings of Barthes and Proust, modeled on Thierry Kuntzel’s concept of “constellations”; recurring motifs of signification that occur out of order, and which are fragmented throughout the narrative, but later reconstituted by the viewer.

What the thesis proposes is a method of reading which focuses on remaining attentive to an openness in the relation between a signifier and a signified, “the figural activity,” of film, along with the possibilities in dis-remembering a film as a form of rewriting. All this adds up to a different understanding of the film by reading it in conjunction with other texts, so as to see what the combination of texts may bring to the understanding of the discursive field opened by this process of reading.

An important thing about this method is that it remains mindful to the power held by external texts in relation to how a text is read, and admits the *impossibilities* of ‘virginal readings,’ that is, readings of a text which are ‘unsullied,’ by the influence of other texts.

²⁷ D.N. Rodowick, *ibid.*, p. xi, Preface

Rather, each reading is to be thought of as another addition to a complex of readings, all of them connected. Thus the text is not thought of as a singularity, but a plurality.

From Work to Text

But what is it that is being read, or viewed? The foundation for how this essay regards the properties of a text, or a film, comes mainly from three essays by Roland Barthes (but also insistent, clashing and commingling readings of his other works): *S/Z*, "From Work to Text" and *The Pleasures of the Text*, where he charts the transformation of what he calls the "readerly" and the "writerly"; attributes connected to how a text is read, and thus what a text is.²⁸ Transposed to this study, the "readerly" is to be seen as the method underlying an habitual reading, which focuses on the construction of a story and following the flow of the narrative, whereas the "writerly" method rather focuses on breaking this habit; getting caught up in the eddies of the film, later re-writing the film through disremembrance. This difference is used to mark a variation in the activity of the subject who watches the film.

The shift from *work to text* was described by Barthes as being connected to several currents during the late sixties and early seventies, among them the increased awareness and methodological use of "linguistics, anthropology, Marxism and psychoanalysis," in particular the "interdisciplinarity" that arose from the commingling of these when used in literary theory.²⁹ In linguistic and semiotic studies of texts (novels, etc.) the rise of "Marxism, Freudianism and structuralism" issued forth a "relativisation of the relations of writer, reader and observer", which then came to demand "a new object," in place of the "work" (now deemed a thing of the past)—namely the "Text,"³⁰ not to be confused with a written line of language. His seven "propositions"³¹ for what a "Text" is can be summed up as a "displacement"³² of the material singularity of a given work (film, novel, etc.), into an immaterial plurality. If one were to be asked the question of, "where *is* the text" in relation to film, the answer would not point toward either the

²⁸ The differing neologisms used in all three texts pursue the same line of thought. Put very simply, the work is something that is consumed in reading, the Text something which is produced by the reader. Barthes pursues this line of thought in, among others: *A Lover's Discourse*, "The Death of the Author", and is perhaps epitomized in *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text*.

²⁹ R. Barthes, "From Work to Text", 1971. In *Image Music Text*, 1977, p. 155

³⁰ R. Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 156-157

³¹ "The word 'proposition' is to be understood more in a grammatical than logical sense: the following are not argumentations, but enunciations, 'touches', approaches that consent to remain metaphorical." R. Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 156

³² D.N. Rodowick. *ibid.*, p. 76

screen, where it has been or is being projected, nor to the strip of celluloid; the text is not a mass of impressions or signs: images, sound, noise, movement, etc., but the connections, meanings and connotations which those impressions take the form of when they encounter a viewer: that is, the text only exists as an internal object made manifest by its viewer or reader, whom thereby is its creator.³³

In short, the shift from “work” to “text” can be seen as a political change, where the power-relations between author, text, and reader have shifted to be in favor of the reader. But it is also a change which challenges the independence, or even identity of *single texts*, where a text can be seen as a mutable existence in the reader made up of several “works”, rather than a single material object.

It is because of these properties that the shift is important in relation to this essay, thus enabling a view of a film as something which exists outside of its own celluloid, or digital housing; rather something within the viewer, something created in the engagement with the film.

Reading the Figural: Signifiers in a Film

But what is it in a film that is being ‘read’? In *Reading the Figural, or Philosophy After the New Media* (2001), D.N. Rodowick proposes a new concept related to how we make sense of, among other things, films; this concept being that of “*the figural*”. Summarized, “the figural”, “a new logic of sense,” can be thought of as that which we read in new media; films, television, etc.; and denotes a break with the thought that the semiotic regimes of these new media’s belong either to text or image, which the figural can be seen as a combination of.³⁴

This concept he sends off to commingle with seven earlier philosophers, of which I’ve chosen to focus on how the figural can be read in relation to Thierry Kuntzel, notable for having written semiotically inflected studies of films, highly indebted to the work of Barthes³⁵, on films such as *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931) and *The Most Dangerous Game* (Irving Pichel & Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1932)³⁶, studies that can be “understood as

³³ The seven propositions can be found through pages 156 to 164. *ibid.*

³⁴ D.N. Rodowick, *ibid.*, p. x, Preface.

³⁵ D.N. Rodowick, *ibid.*, p. 80

³⁶ These analyses are made in the “The Film Work” (1978), and “The Film-Work, 2” (1980), respectively.

revealing the force of metaphor in the figural activity of the film,” and that are “attentive to... the *plural* of the text.”³⁷

The figural as used in this thesis will therefore be used in the sense of “a semiotic theory,” where it stands for the signs which are read in a film, and the activity of reading them, rather than a “social theory,” or a “deconstruction of the aesthetic,” which are the other two areas where Rodowick proposes that the concept of the figural is of use.³⁸

When the figural encounters Kuntzel, it takes the form of “*constellations*”: recurring motifs, metaphors, which are interconnected. Each occurrence of the figural is to be thought of as a star in relation to others, which final meaning is only revealed in relation to the whole of the constellation. Each star in a constellation is a fragment of a whole, but the whole of a constellation does not correspond to the whole of the film, which is thus made divisible. This division favors a fragmentary reading, a reading out of order, which also requires to be re-constructed by the viewer through “writing,” in Barthes sense of the word. Therefore, this activity in reading which the concept of “constellations” supposes is to be thought of as similar to the method of the *writerly*. But, where does this figural activity begin? And how does it appear in the film?

“...(me faire casser)...”: The Reverberating Appearance of the Figural

The essay argues that the reading of an eddy, i.e. its appearance, begins from a ‘reverberation’ of figural activity; impressions that make such a dint in the viewer that it takes hold of the viewing, and diminishes the precedent which Bordwell has said to be the construction of the story, ‘the story’ in this case being thought of as the narrational plot-line, in the face of which these eddies are ‘dead-ends’.³⁹ The following is an example of both the appearance of an eddy through a reverberation and the viewer’s engagement in the reading of the reverberation.

“*me faire casser...*”: the words spoken by Albertine—the captive lover of the narrator of *In Search For Lost Time*—an unfinished sentence, is an incomplete message which comes as an absolute shock to the narrator, who can be thought of as trying to read the figural activity of his beloved. He tries to forget about the words but instead they swirl about his mind, tossing and turning, and he is unable to break free from their pull. They exert such traction that whatever he attempts to think of only manages to bring back the

³⁷ D.N. Rodowick, *ibid.*, p. 83

³⁸ D.N. Rodowick, *ibid.*, p. x, Preface.

³⁹ D. Bordwell, *ibid.* p. 48

impression of those words. He reads all the signs around him according to these in his futile attempts to bring clarity to them. The message is broken by that *initial shock*, that *reverberation* in his body, and he hopes for a state of equilibrium, a return of order by managing to identify and decode the message.

But what was the message? “‘me faire casser le pot’, an obscene slang expression meaning to have anal intercourse.”⁴⁰ Albertine had, by way of a *Freudian slip*, expressed what she had rather done with the money which the narrator offers her as recompensation for not having invited her to a party that he himself had went to during the evening. He only manages to decode this *incomplete message* (because the signifier doesn’t lead to a signified) through reading several signs: the possible variations on the sentence itself (its possible outcomes); the gestures of Albertine at the moment when she spoke; and his looming suspicions as to her own sexual proclivities (for a long time he has suspected her to favor women).

These ‘acts’ which he goes through can be converted to three processes in reading when transposed to the process of how a film is read: at first, a hypotheses for a possible signified; second, an interpretation of the signifiers that seeks to explain what they signify; third, to read these through intertext. These very processes are the ones at work in the reading of the figural, as proposed in this thesis.

First comes the rupture which is the reverberation, the “message,” which is proving difficult to understand, often in passing, a kind of *unconscious slip* by the film, but which nonetheless sticks. Then comes the process of decoding this message by the reading of signs (the figural); an attempt to *reconstitute the moment of the rupture* (it is here that the role of memory in the process of *rewriting* begins), and when that fails, launching further inquiries, attempting to pick up new signs in the surrounding area (getting caught in the eddy); and last, when all else fails, the reading subject brings in *other texts* which the figure of reverberation, implicitly or explicitly, refers to (seeking to understanding the signifier through intertext, engaging in dialogue with the discursive field of the figural). This method of reading is therefore best suited to incomplete, or incomprehensible messages; signifiers whose signified is displaced, and which must be recovered through these processes; signifiers that must be remembered.

⁴⁰ Notes to *The Captive*, the fifth volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, where this scene takes place. p. 883.

Rewriting the Spectacle through Memory

But this brings us back to that initial problem posed by Kuntzel, which he tried to reveal through textual analysis: that film orders our viewing, and thus makes impossible these forms of divagations, which are subsumed by the lashing onslaught of narrative signification (there are no moments of respite from the forward momentum, even if only to be anxious for a moment).

This would presuppose that the reading of the film takes place *solely during viewing*, which is to say, when the film is playing (in order). But after having seen a film, is the viewer not free to mull it over in his/her mind, to make it resurface at a later date, to fragment it, deconstruct it and later reconstitute it, through memory, and not only technology—which would limit the possibilities of such a method and make it possible only for viewings which the viewer has literal control over. In viewing, and after, is the viewer not—rather than one of the dead who have been forced to drink from Lethe—as the narrators of *In Search of Lost Time* or *Speak, Memory*, able to dip into his or her memories of the film and the viewing of it; to make it recur, and then re-write the film according to these memories, thereby constructing a personal order of reading? But how would a viewer go about to re-write the film? This act would not have to involve the literal act of writing, but to rather be this process of (dis)remembrance, which invariably will create its own logic of order and succession, and displace the process of signification which the film has assumed; instead favoring a reading which is fastened onto these reverberations, taking the shape of eddies.

An Example of Rewriting Through the Case of *From Up on Poppy Hill*

This process underlying the rewriting of a film is largely indebted to Kuntzel's propositions for an ideal viewing, where one would "hear-view the film the way no cinema-goer can, and... re-write the spectacle in the form of a text to scrape away layers of referential opacity masking the work of signification,"⁴¹ taking effect *after the fact* of viewing, through memory, where one picks up *the scraps* of signification, its "excesses" which are later to be *rewritten*, breaking with the *order of reading*.

But to provide a brief example on what I propose when I call this form of disremembrance as cinematic rewriting is the following: upon re-watching *From Up on Poppy Hill* (*Kokuriko-zaka kara*, Miyazaki Goro, 2011) in a theatre, I had a clear idea of

⁴¹ Thierry Kuntzel, "The Film Work", p. 41-42. Cited by D.N. Rodowick. *ibid*, p. 80

the order and outcome of its narrative; but it just so proved that this was only one half of the truth, because *I had forgotten* the narrative, and *rewritten* it according to the logic of an eddy, fastened on an *excessive figural activity* in the film

The story I had constructed went as follows: The 1960's, Japan. A young girl who has lost her father, X, falls in love with a young boy. Gradually they spend more time with each other, and they become enamored. One day she invites him home and shows him a picture of X, whom the boy bears a distinct resemblance to. After this, the boy starts avoiding her. The girl is saddened, and one day asks the boy why he has been acting cold: doesn't he like her anymore? He tells her that he has the same picture at home, and that X was his father too, but that he was adopted as a child by a friend of this man. Despite all this, he says that he still loves her. She replies: "I love you too". They decide that they will have to remain friends and ignore their desires. When the girl dreams at night, she sees her father, and not the boy.

Obvious for anyone who has seen the film, this is not the *whole* of the film, but the form which it has taken for me; *the story that I've created*. Later on, it is revealed that the two aren't siblings at all, and that it was just a misunderstanding on their behalf, and they can consummate their union in good conscience. But by forgetting this part of the story I had *re-written the film according to the appearance of figures* which I had, after the actual viewing of the film, reconnected to one another, thus creating my own line of signification: out of order with the logical succession of the film, but nonetheless one that is dependent on signifiers in the film.

Because in the scene, the boy, upon seeing the picture, reveals more through his non-expression for the situation, coupled with a bombastic score with a melancholy tinge that seems redolent and entirely out of keeping with the rest of the scene (because it should be a happy one: the fulfillment of desire), than at any other point of the film. The scene is *excessive*; there are too many *contradictory signifiers* for them to be connected to *one logical and unitary signified*. The scene *reverberates* because of its *intensity*, its *plurality of reading*: why is he sad when he should be happy?

Yet my reading of the film depends on *more than just the integrity*, the wholeness, of the film itself. Just as important is the activity of an intertextual reading, which also enters the fray of cinematic re-writing, and is one of its main components.

During the interval between both viewings (roughly a year), I gradually forgot the film, until, when reading some lines of Barthes, it came rushing back to me; "a host of

recollections,” as for Nabokov writing his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, (1966) (which is little more than a rewriting of one’s life, similarly distortive, if compared to *truths*). The lines were the following:

if it is true that every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden or hypostatized) father—which would explain the solidarity of narrative forms, of family structures, and of prohibitions of nudity, all collected in our culture in the myth of Noah’s sons covering his nakedness.⁴²

These lines, in conjuncture with my memories of the film, *reverberated*, and so I set out, in my mind, to *rewrite* the film. And still today, my reading of the film continues to change; *it’s in a state* of constantly being rewritten; not a fixed object, a “work,” but a “text,” because it is conditioned by how it reverberates with other texts; it is made up by the connections to things anterior to the viewing of the film itself.

And so, the *actual act of viewing of the film makes up but a fraction of its reading*; a kind of trauma of reading, which may then be forgotten until an external object makes it appear once more. Similarly, it is this sensation of shock which is what has been referred to as *the reverberations of the figural*, which is the logic by which the message is read.

⁴² R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 10

4 Textual Analysis: “Prometheus Abandoned”

Introduction

How does this method then appear when transposed to the reading of *Out 1*? The following method of analysis can be thought of as a kind of transposition of Barthes' *S/Z*, which at one at the same time is an analysis of the text, but also the simultaneous reading of it, as the text itself can only be produced in reading (it is not a fixed object), thereby “joining them [reader and text] in a single signifying practice.”⁴³

Yet this simultaneity is not to be regarded as taking place *during viewing*, which would be impossible. Rather, it is a mediated form of reading, attempting to take hold of the very process of signification as it occurs during the *rewriting* of the film, in its remembrance, abstaining from the logical order of narrative succession. Therefore, this analysis can be thought of as a transcription; a mediation to bridge the gap between the internal and external expressions of cinematic rewriting. It is fragmented because these figures appear without order, and must be reconstituted after the fact to be brought in relation to each other. Their positions and relations must be *rewritten to become legible*.

The eddy appears, that is, its reverberation stems from the figure of a mannequin lying on the floor. The appearance of this figure *rewrites* the meaning of what has transpired before its entry, but it also shifts the locus of future signification to itself; it changes the signifiers so that they all lead back to this single figure; therefore a *swirl*, not a *flow*, of signification. The eddy opens up the discursive field of “Abandonment,” where the figural activity of the film engages in dialogue with other texts. These are not fixed, and they constitute more than just the play *Prometheus Bound*, which is why the notion of a text as a *single* work becomes unfulfilling. Instead all the “works” mentioned in the analysis should be thought of as belonging to the same “text”, that is, as a discourse existing within the reader, created in reading, reconstituted through the rewriting.

Yet there is another problem; just as with the film, this process can never be said to ‘end’; rather, it *settles*, or becomes *dormant*. It ‘leaves’ the discourse in a state of suspension; it “practices the infinite deferment of the signified,” and it is “without closure.”⁴⁴ Its process of signification leads back only onto itself.

⁴³ R. Barthes, “From Work to Text”, p. 162

⁴⁴ As for one of the ‘propositions’ for “the Text”. R. Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 158-159

Abandonment

father / son

my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

—Matthew, 27:46, King James Version

I. Moment of reverberation

A mannequin lies supine on the floor, abandoned after a theatrical exercise. Jesus as he was nailed to the cross felt abandoned by his father, God.

Prometheus, when bound to the rock, was abandoned by both gods and men. All three figures are abandoned by the Father: the director of a play; God; and Zeus. The figural reading of abandonment is exposed, but what is it to be abandoned, and who abandons?



II. Impressions of abandonment

The image is taken from what could be called the aftermath of an exercise by the group in *Out 1* who plan to put on the play *Prometheus Bound*, possibly written by the famed Athenian dramatist Aeschylus.⁴⁵ The exercise—endured for over thirty minutes, in which the actors have effaced themselves, improvised new forms of being by responding to each other’s whims, more as a collective than individuals—was meant to ease the actors into their roles; to abandon their own selves in favor of another, and this exercise is later on discussed and analyzed; providing its own meta-scene. This is when the mannequin is thus sighted, very briefly and without drawing attention to itself, as the camera pans from the floor, past other left-overs—pots and pans, hats, scarfs, the mannequin—to the group, who are situated to the left of the off-screen space, amassed in a group; figuratively abandoning the mannequin once more, whom they’ve used up, exhausted, like the other objects.

Smoking, letting off a sigh, looking rather contented and speaking at ease, Thomas, the director, asks Bergamotte, one of the actresses, “how was it for you?,” drawing a parallel between the exercise: the coalition and meshing of bodies, with that supreme

⁴⁵ The preface to *The Persians and Other Plays* reveals that *Prometheus Bound*, among other plays by Aeschylus, may in fact have been written by his son; the relationship between father and son looms over the discourse at all turns.

and rare abandonment of the self which is enjoyed and accepted by our culture—love-making. In *Prometheus Bound*, Io, once a beautiful priestess of Zeus, has been transformed into a cow and is chased by gadflies, punished by the jealous Hera for the possibility of this act of abandon to occur between her and the Father of the gods, which Zeus longed for. His desire made Io's family abandon her, turned her into a cow and had her chased across the country, unceasingly. To be desired by the Father may bring unwanted repercussions.

Back in Paris they speak because they wish to better their performances. During their discussion of the exercise, the six actors—four of them quite new to the whole thing—agree that it was not wholly successful; that it felt kind of forced, that some engaged with it too quickly, and that they could not completely let go of themselves without remaining self-aware—and so they abandon it, yet thankful for the experience. Thomas, the director of the group, adds with a snigger—flippantly mastering a cigarette with his lips and occasionally drinking water from a small glass bottle in such a manner that it seems he'll swallow the bottle rather than its contents—that he “can't stand Aeschylus's thing any more.” Drawing on the close of the serial, he will say that he doesn't feel Prometheus anymore, that “he has vaporized,” and that he is “*de trop*,” whilst sitting in bed, laughing with two female friends, Sarah and Beatrice, drinking wine. Soon after, when taking out a cigarette, he laments: “No Prometheus, no fire, no matches.” Prometheus has abandoned him, and he Prometheus. They've turned their backs on each other. The god who granted mankind fire, life and knowledge has withdrawn his gifts, and mankind has abandoned Prometheus. Yet the line of causality is broken, or at the very least, not divested. Because it is unclear who abandoned who first.

Back at the loft, they've literally turned their backs on Aeschylus and Prometheus, who are left lying in the dust, face down, embodied in the faceless mannequin, left behind by the camera. During a short course of time, a barrage of figures bearing the inscription of 'abandonment' are being perceived, or read, in passing; figures brought about by several means of expression: movement, objects, language, noises, images; a figural activity, the eddies of *abandonment*; caught in displaying these figures of abandonment: the signifier; yet without leading to any signifieds, only leading back to itself.

These figures are not wholly marked—rather, they occur in passing; opening up onto several fields of reading, yet deciding not to choose any single one, instead keeping all

passageways open. During the course of the serial, the whole staging of the play dissipates, similarly abandoned. *Out 1* can be said to stage a play of abandonment, and ironically, one which it abandons as well. Yet the abandonment is gradual, and not disruptive; so gradual, in fact, that it's barely perceptible. It must be condensed and rewritten to appear once more on the surface. The narrative of the film dilutes and obscures the figural practice of the abandoned.

III. *Who is the father?*

The interpretation of this question goes more than one way: just as Jesus is the embodiment of God (father and son in the same image), there is a reversal between the roles of father and son in the figures of Prometheus, Aeschylus, and Thomas (and to open up another field of reading: Rivette). Instead of being the one, all four are, paradoxically, both at once. Or is it a paradox? Even Zeus, father of the gods, has a father—Cronus, and he a father—Uranus, creator of the world. My father has a father, and his father has a father, and so on, *ad infinitum*. To look back to the father is to look back to the origin of the world, from which all springs. This search for the father, Barthes says, is the source of all narratives.⁴⁶ Is narrative the source of life?

Looking at this line of succession, what is the role of the son? To overthrow the father; to keep the world in perpetual motion (to keep the story going). The unconscious longing of Thomas is, according to the myth of Oedipus, to kill and to make obsolete Prometheus and Aeschylus in putting on the play of *Prometheus Bound*; quite literally to take on their roles. But where will this leave him? Abandoned.

At one point, Thomas says that Prometheus is only used to “get at something else”. But as he says this, his gestures betray him: talking with a friend, he is shaken because he has come to understand that Prometheus is still relevant for him. Prometheus, he says, stands for “the way for us to commit without knowing the ultimate end or goal,” and that what matters in his work “is first of all to do something,” to act, without heed for the consequences, exactly what Prometheus came to bequeath mankind:

Prometheus: I stopped mortals foreseeing their death.

Chorus: What remedy did you find for that affliction?

⁴⁶ R. Barthes. *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 47

*Prometheus: I planted blind hopes within them.*⁴⁷

It is quite obvious that Prometheus still has meaning for Thomas, and that he has been affected by his words, but still he comes to abandon him. The myth of Oedipus tells us that the fate of the son is to kill the father, *unknowingly*. It is only Prometheus who is able to foresee the end of things⁴⁸ (to subvert telling). Thomas, for all his might, is not Prometheus. He has not obtained the mastery of telling (he is not the Father).

Prometheus' bargaining chip with the almighty Zeus in the narrative of *Prometheus Bound*, his only hope of being unfettered from the rock to which he has been shackled for giving mankind fire (he crossed the will of the Father, and may bring others to do the same: Power, asking Hephaestus why he too does not "loathe this god whom the gods hate so much," receives from him the answer, "Kinship is terribly powerful, you know, and so is companionship." Power replies: "I agree, but how is it possible to disobey the word of the father?"⁴⁹ The word of the Father comes before all else; the Father before all other filiations), is that he has been foretold of which woman will bear Zeus the son who will overthrow him, just as Zeus overthrew his father before him. Thus Zeus hopes, in retrieving this information from Prometheus, to break the link of causality, to abstain from death, to stop time; to break down narrative. What is this then that Zeus attempts, if, as Barthes says, narrative is "a way of searching for one's origin"?⁵⁰ It is the antithesis: a halt in telling; ultimate reversal of the roles: to be neither father nor son; to castrate. *Out 1* posits itself as a film which abandons the telling of all its stories, leaving them suspended, only *half-told*. It refuses to gratify through completion; no "bliss" for its characters, and therefore no end; only limbo.⁵¹

In the fiction of *Out 1*, whilst Thomas is in a sense the son of Prometheus (Prometheus came before Thomas, and Thomas has to live up to his name in putting on the play), just as Aeschylus is the father of Prometheus of *Prometheus Bound*, Thomas is also the father; he brings Aeschylus and Prometheus to life once more by staging the

⁴⁷ *Prometheus Bound*, 247-250

⁴⁸ Prometheus means "the Forethinker," and he was thought to be able to see into the future. *Prometheus Bound*, 85-90

⁴⁹ *Prometheus Bound*, 36-42

⁵⁰ R. Barthes. *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 47

⁵¹ "Bliss": translated by Richard Miller from the French word "jouissance", identified by Richard Howard in his introduction ("A Note on the Text") to *The Pleasure of the Text* as having been referred to throughout the history of literature as "knowing" (The Bible), "dying" (the Stuarts), "spending" (the Victorians), whilst we call it "coming" (as in achieving an orgasm).

play. The son may choose to revere or abandon his father. In *Out 1* there is interplay between abandonment and reverie, where they not only take turns, but also coalesce. Yet the supreme father in the narrative must be Rivette, who recreates all three characters, having them exist at his every whim: the director-author as God. But, just like Zeus in *Prometheus Bound*, he is a god who can be overthrown, and even though he cannot be seen, he exists behind the curtain. The Father is he who holds the power of creation; he who holds the word; the narrative. The Father is the one who tells. Paradoxically, *Out 1* tells almost nothing.

IV. *The angry Prometheus*

Why is Prometheus angry? Because he suffers (“behold what I, a god, suffers at the hands of the gods!”⁵²). And why does he suffer? Because he has been abandoned, chained to a rock at the ends of the world, “left to wither on these elevated rocks, my lot cast on this deserted, neighbourless crag.”⁵³ He is suffering from supreme solitude, abandonment. The narrative of *Prometheus Bound* continues for as long as he is visited by others, who happen upon him, or come to offer aid. This is “the contract of telling”⁵⁴: they offer him their presence so that he is not abandoned, and he tells them what they wish to know. After the exchange, they are free to leave; Prometheus remains steadfast, rooted to the rock; abandoned.

He has been cast out from Olympus by Zeus, whom he aided in seizing power, because he decided to give aid to the human race, which Zeus wanted to obliterate. He, the only one who stood up for the abandoned, becomes himself abandoned. What is the fate of *Out 1*, staging of the abandoned? To be abandoned, in turn. Abandonment spreads like a plague, infecting whoever comes into touch with it, infecting the very discourse of the film. After the appearance of the mannequin, all that is left is abandonment. It seethes into every crack of the film, touching not only Prometheus, but others: Colin, a young man, abandons his guise of being a deaf-mute; he abandons his quest for the thirteen; he is abandoned by the woman with whom he falls in love; Frédérique abandons her life in a duel; Thomas, at the close of the serial, abandons not only Prometheus, the play, and the thirteen, but also Paris. He goes off to live by the ocean,

⁵² *Prometheus Bound*, 91-92

⁵³ *Prometheus Bound*, 270-271

⁵⁴ “A desires B, who desires something A has; and A and B will exchange this desire and this thing, this body and this narrative: a night of love for a good story.” R. Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 89

and in a final flash deceives his friends by feigning that final abandon: death. Collapsing on the beach, he lies down, supine, as the mannequin, to receive the final rest.⁵⁵ Only this rest is a sham, for in *Out 1* there are no ends; only suspensions (no signified, only suspended signifiers). For its characters, as for Prometheus, there is never respite; all of them are unable to “bend their knees,”⁵⁶ which the mannequin, quite literally, can’t do either.

V. *The modern Prometheus*

Seen in a different context; read another way, does not the abandoned mannequin stand in for Aeschylus’, and by proxy, Prometheus’ abandonment of the modern day? During a different exercise when Faune, another of the actresses of the group, plays the role of Prometheus in a modern



setting, being visited by strangers who are allowed three questions, a woman asks the now goddess Prometheus what her political motives were. Faune as Prometheus answers: “no politics here,” abandoning the question, and goes back to smoking a cigarette (are cigarettes in *Out 1* the last vestige of Prometheus? Everyone is in a constant state of smoking, sucking at the proverbial sticks of Prometheus), smiling, and eating a cookie. The woman leaves, only to later return to the site, screaming and charging this modern Prometheus with fraudulent behavior, calling the whole thing a “masquerade”. She is tossed out, and left without further answers.

Is this an ironic poke at the masks worn by the Goddess Prometheus with her smile (which she in a sudden flush of anger abandons as she is seen, two-facedly, slapping her side-kick, Achille, the man in the mask above, shouting for a “Cigarette!”) and her loyal servant with the literal mask; actors of a masquerade, or at the anger of Prometheus

⁵⁵ “I long for scenes where man have never trod/A place where woman never smiled or wept/There to abide with my creator, God/And sleep as I in childhood slept/Untroubling and untroubled where I lie/The grass below—above the vaulted sky.” Final stanza of John Clare’s *I Am*, 1848.

⁵⁶ “‘Bending the knee’ idiomatically means ‘resting’ (396; *Iliad* 7.118, 19.71); but Prometheus in his bonds will be *literally* unable to bend his.” Notes to *Prometheus Bound*, p. 239

himself in *Prometheus Bound*? He is, as Bergamotte adds at a different point when revealing a picture (ironically not seen) representing the “two faces of Prometheus,” a god of duality. Beatrice adds that these two faces of Prometheus are representations of him in his two utmost extremes of being: the god who is angry with the gods (“Quite simply, I hate *all* the gods who are so unjustly harming me after I helped them.”⁵⁷) and the god who is serene, despite his sufferings. Having two faces implicitly calls out that at least one of them is a mask to hide what lies underneath.⁵⁸ But what can Prometheus be thought to hide?

VI. *Prometheus hidden*

What he hides by his anger and serenity is his sorrow, or at least what he attempts to: “Yes, I certainly am pitiful for friends to behold.”⁵⁹

When Thomas plays Prometheus, he lies on the floor with his face covered, as if to literally hide his emotions. Yet his wailing in unceasing, deafening even, when compared to the relative silence which the normal speech of those around him assumes once he starts with his bemoaning. This discrepancy is highly illogical if not taken into consideration that in *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus constantly refers to his visitors (or as he himself says, “spectators”⁶⁰) that they should *see* his torments (“Look, with what indignities I am tormented to endure...”; “Behold me, the prisoner...”; “look, see in what bonds...”), receiving reply that “I see, Prometheus, and fear brings rushing into my eyes, a mist full of tears on seeing you...”⁶¹ Thus Thomas, keeping his torments hidden (yet heard), requires to be seen as a case of ‘wearing dark glasses’: “To impose upon my passion the mask of discretion (of impassivity): this is a strictly heroic value.” Prometheus wishes, despite his lamentations, to *keep a straight face*, to no longer be seen in his sufferings, but only a little: “Yet to hide a passion totally... is inconceivable: not because the human



⁵⁷ *Prometheus Bound*, 976

⁵⁸ “Two faces have I/I pretend that I’m happy/But I’m Mr. Blue” from the song *Two Faces Have I* performed by Lou Christie, 1963.

⁵⁹ *Prometheus Bound*, 246

⁶⁰ “Has someone come to this rock at the end of the world to be a spectator of my sufferings - or what do they want?” *Prometheus Bound*, 127-128

⁶¹ *Prometheus Bound*. All occurring within a very tight frame, in lines 93-4; 119; 140; 144-6

subject is too weak, but because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen..."⁶² It is another reversal: in *Prometheus Bound*, his suffering was silent ("Do not think my silence is due to vanity or arrogance."⁶³), but seen; here it is heard, but hidden from sight.

Bergamotte, after having taken on the role of the serene Prometheus, harassed by the others of the group donning the cloak of anger, adds after an exercise, speaking on what Prometheus must have felt upon being tied to that rock, also lying on the floor, tears in her eyes: "Above all he must have a man, rather than a god..." finishing her sentence in silence. The group lament at what Prometheus suffered for them. What Prometheus hides is his humanity, his weakness that comes from uncertainty: is there a God?

VII. *The Anti-Prometheus*

Modern society can receive no answers from Prometheus; he has nothing more to give; he has vanished, "*vaporized*," as Thomas remarks. "*No Prometheus, no fire, no matches*," is the case, once more (yet they still go on smoking). Today's society only wants, but is not prepared to give anything to Prometheus in exchange; to enter a contract; to engage in the act of telling his story. The play is abandoned because no one is willing to tell the story of Prometheus, or even listen to him. When they perform the exercise where Faune and Thomas take turns in being Prometheus, none of the visitors respect his/her wishes. Instead they scream, like children, and have but requests.

Prometheus can find no place in society of today, and he left no heirs, as Faune remarks when asked who her successor is, "Prometheus, of course." Is Prometheus unable to bear sons? As by a reversal of roles (Prometheus now also literally a woman; supreme annihilation of the father), the only thing which Prometheus takes upon herself to grant these visitors is rain; water: the antithesis of fire. The modern Prometheus is the antithesis of the old.

⁶² Both quotations come from Barthes' figure "Dark Glasses / to hide", *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 42. This figure is explained in the following: "Let us suppose that I have wept, on account of some incident which the other has not even become aware of (to weep is part of the normal activity of the amorous body), and that, *so this cannot be seen*, I put on dark glasses to hide my swollen eyes (a fine example of denial: to darken the sight in order not to be seen)." A person who resorts to this stratagem is one explained as wanting to be "both pathetic and admirable... at the same time a child and an adult," that is, to be, at the same time, father and son; to defy classification. p. 43

⁶³ *Prometheus Bound*, 436

VIII. *The impossible sign*

In the object of this mannequin there lie myriad interpretations. The first appearance of it occurs long before there is any mention of a play, let alone it being *Prometheus Bound*. Instead, it begins as an empty sign, left in the loft where the actors rehearse; bearing no imprint of being (no face, no discernable features: an anagram of the actors effacement of the self: a *blank*); no figure of abandonment. It is through a succession of figures that it becomes impregnated with meaning. At the moment when the above figure first occur, that is, at its designated place within the fiction—which must then be retroactively deconstructed and moved to bear any tangible signification—it is still this unknown sign, or no sign at all, other than its literal object: mannequin; open to several codes and to the heuristics of interpretation. As a sign, it is incomplete; impossible to read. Nor can there be said to be a fixed reading of it as *a sign*; rather it should be thought of as a mutable sign, stretching beyond its appearance and bearing several inscriptions at once, which change throughout the course of reading. The mannequin enjoys during the exercise a literal and lateral displacement as object: the five actors move it about, engage with it in numerable ways. Its meanings change as they interact with it; it abandons fixity. Yet through their interactions with it, it becomes Prometheus: does this mean that it was man that created Prometheus? The myth tells us that it was Prometheus who created man. So who is really the father, and who the son? The mannequin holds no answer; it is mute, as God of today.





These four images attempt to capture some of the permutations the mannequin endures during the exercise. It is first created: the group take turns in dressing it up, providing it with more and more human artifacts: clothing, an ersatz face. They begin to revere this figure (created in the image of its makers; gods?), lying at its feet, groveling like worms on the floor, emitting guttural sounds, behaving like spastics, lacking control of their bodies (fetal beings?). Gradually, they rise up, become cognizant of their surroundings, themselves, and others. They begin to mimic the stature of this figure before them. They dance around it, playing music. Yet it refuses to reply: it is mute. They grow weary, aggressive. They lash out at it, because they feel abandoned. They raise it to the skies, only to bring it back to the ground. They lie on top of it, deface it. They leave it on the floor and go back to their lives. This impossible sign, the message which does not manage to get through can be seen as the impossibility of communication, in this case between the gods and mankind; between benefactor and recipient; between father and son. This failure of language invariably makes it so that both are left abandoned. The father is the son and the son the father and the father abandons the son and the son the father, *ad infinitum*.

5 Summary and Discussion

The Textual Analysis

Through the textual analysis, deploying the method so far constructed, it is revealed that the staging of *Prometheus Bound* in *Out 1: Noli me tangere* is deeply rooted to the play itself, if its presentation is deconstructed and fragmented. What gradually appears is a fundamental reversal through a highly coded adaptation of themes, stylistic measures, and haphazardly alluded to quotations from the play that have found their way into the figural activity of the film through discourse. The play is quoted without brackets, as Barthes said of the Text, and requires heavy decoding to be brought to the surface. The viewing assumed for this type of reading takes the form of fragmentation, as there sometimes are, if subsumed to the order of the film as it occurs in viewing, massive temporal gaps between these occurrences of the figural which is connected to the eddy. The act of viewing the film here takes on the form, as for actors in rehearsal with a script of the play in hand is a kind of figurative *performance*, where the viewer must deconstruct, put together, and then *perform* the very reading itself, in order to construct meaning out of what has been viewed.

Just as the play in the film is a re-working, a rewriting, of *Prometheus Bound*, the reading of this adaptation in *Out 1* is seen as a similar rewriting, one which may engage with a combination of the discursive elements in the figural activity of *Out 1*, *Prometheus Bound*, and a host of other texts which broach similar subjects, all commingling to produce several pathways of signification, which, ultimately, the viewer is free to choose from. Here the thesis has proposed a method of viewing that is open to the benefits of fragmented viewings, where the material, so to say gathered in reading the film, is thought beneficial to be applied in an additive manner to readings of other texts, which combined, may produce meaning, but only through active decoding and deconstruction by the viewer.

An Elegy for...: Concluding Discussion of the Essay

I must end as I began; with a confession. Much, I regret, has been omitted. The essay first took the form of an analysis on *Out 1's* strategic use of time as a form of displacement, an undertaking that was highly indebted to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, (1922) which I saw as a

spiritual forbearer of the film in its dialectical use of condensation and elongation, producing remarkable effects in reading.

Quite rapidly however, this led to a rising interest in how *Out 1* made use of “hypotexts”, a term by Gerard Genette attributed to a form of ‘anterior text’ which the “hypertext” has transposed itself upon; *Out 1* being the “hypertext”, the fictions mentioned within the essay, among them, of course, *Prometheus Bound*, the “hypotext”.⁶⁴ Since then, the form of the essay has been, you could say, in constant flux, bearing little traces here and there of its antecedents. But only one thing has been a constant; it has never been about the narrative of the film; yet no matter how much I tried, I constantly found myself fixed under its looming shadow; it constantly imposed itself on all my efforts; seeping in through every crack, etc.

Perhaps the main discovery through the course of writing was the indebtedness to the fictional character of Thomas; he attempting to make *Prometheus Bound* relevant in his day and age and this essay attempting the same for *Out 1*. As the character once remarks of how he has dealt with the play, this essay has been an attempt to “shed light on it through the things I know,” a kind of commitment “without knowing the ultimate end or goal,” and something which has been “discover[ed]... through talking about it.” You could say that for the evolution of the essay what has mattered the most, in retrospect, has been “first of all to do something,” just as it was for him.

But to wrap things up, hopefully in a neat little bundle, what use is there in the method of reading which has been so far constructed?

First and foremost, the method of reading could be said to be a form of textual analysis, inherent in the reading itself, to break away from, rather than only reveal, the “controlled reading” imposed by film. In the case of *Out 1*, narrative came to act as a distortion of meaning; diluting, rather than condensing; hiding rather than revealing. For it was this very break with an ordered narrative which came to unearth the latent relationship between the sequences in the film and *Prometheus Bound*, where the narrative surrounding it acted as a screen to hide this.

Yet for all of this, it is not to say that narrative is detrimental, nor that it is a waste of time to focus upon it; often it may be very rewarding to do so, but not always. The film here studied is obviously a fringe case, governed by its own set of rules. But if such a film is subsumed to the laws which normally govern our viewing it runs the very possible

⁶⁴ G. Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, 1997.

risk of remaining on the fringe, rather than advancing to the fore. And what pleasure can there ever be had from a film if it is never seen?

This method of reading may be regarded as functional in that it seeks to adapt itself to the problems which *Out 1* posed. The film, because of its length and fragmented structure required a method of reading in the same form, thus breaking with a successive order; because of its use of intertext, the manner of reading had to adapt itself, considering a text as being something more than just a single object, and rather something mutable, ever-changing, and intangible; and because of its style, the reading had to acknowledge the possibilities of contradictions and plurality when it came to the very process of signification itself.

What the theoretical framework thus granted were the means required for a pleasurable viewing; the conditions necessary for a union between viewer and film. Because a viewing, or reading, should perhaps be thought of as a dialogue, where both speakers may have their own demands; just as the film might to be said to be highly aware of how it operates, and how films in general operate, it may demand the same of its viewer, if it is to be seen in a stimulating way. A pleasurable viewing could thus be said to depend on both viewer and film communicating on the same frequency.

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Films

2 or 3 Things I Know About Her (2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle, Jean-Luc Godard, 1967)

Blue Is the Warmest Color (La vie d'Adèle, Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013)

Fantômas (Louis Feuillade, 1913-1914)

From Up on Poppy Hill (Kokuriko-zaka kara, Goro Miyazaki, 2011)

Last Year at Marienbad (L'année dernière à Marienbad, Alain Resnais, 1961)

Lemon (Hollis Frampton, 1969)

Les Vampires. (Louis Feuillade, 1915-1916)

Out 1: Noli me tangere (Jacques Rivette, 1970)

The Gleaners and I (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Agnès Varda, 2000)