Jean Epstein and Photogénie:

Suturing the Discursively Interstitial

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In his 2013 book, *Jean Epstein: Corporeal Cinema and Film Philosophy*, Christophe Wall-Romana constructs a historiographical model and theoretical model for remediating film history and film theory’s understanding of avant-garde filmmaker and philosopher, Jean Epstein. Wall-Romana provides a surfeit of close textual analysis and nuanced historical citation to position Epstein and his oeuvre into the broader discourses of cinematic epistemology and phenomenology. Wall-Romana has the great advantage of having been granted access to most (if not all) of Epstein’s cinematic work and written theory. He notes that the public’s lack of sufficient access to such material has been the bane of Epstein’s legacy and has contributed to the French philosopher’s reputation as a *fameux inconnu* in the discourse of cinema. Wall-Romana closely examines Epstein’s construction of mise-en-scene, selection in cinematography and design for editing, to account for the Epsteinian poetic philosophical trope – a distillation of the interstitial region between Lumiere-esque documentary realism and Melies-like fictional fantasy. This analysis is then synthesized with Epstein’s written works to produce a reading of Epsteinian *photogénie* that can properly constitute cinematic epistemology through its phenomenological implications.

Avant-garde flourishes such as the three-hundred-and-sixty degree pan in La Bourgogne (Epstein, 1936), demonstrate Epstein’s endeavor to claim the essence of cinema in its “situations”. The interstitial region is where one realizes that there are no stories, but rather situations that articulate the subject within the object’s spatiotemporal register. It is difficult to be immersed in the future through fantasy or in the past through memory because the present dominates experience – the objects of the present dominate our sensorial experience and keep us anchored to the present moment in time and the present place in space. Wall-Romana writes, “(Epstein’s) oeuvre favours ‘situations’, that is, fragments or moments dislodged from the narrative, meant to be experienced and enjoyed for themselves, as direct presentations of the essence of cinema” (W-R, 2). Epstein rejects plot-driven cinema and denies Aristotelian epic structure. Epstein’s work has no body, head and tail, per se. For Epstein, cinema is not representation of pre-existing story, but presentation of dramatic situations – how they appeal to our imagination and perception in the moment of experiencing them. The concept of photogénie is understood by Epstein as the presentational force of shots and sequences for cinematic situations. Life takes places in its “accidents”, which are the tensions that bind our present to past and future (W-R, 3).

Wall-Romana begins by presenting Epstein as adamantly positioned at a “crossroads” – this crossroads being the interstitial region and the discursive coordinates for accidents (those tensions of the present as they attempt to tether the past and the future). Our lack of knowledge of cinema’s past (ie. lost film, untranslated text, etc.) makes it difficult to understand Epstein’s work in the contemporary moment. Epstein has articulated his work through a nuanced expression of a full spatiotemporal framework to which we lack proper insight and vantage from our contemporary moment. As such, Wall-Romana notes correctly that cinema scholarship, media studies and post-structuralist philosophy has examined Epstein almost exclusively through the concept of photogénie as imported to cinematic aesthetics. Wall-Romana’s project is to reveal how photogénie was theorized by Epstein in detailed corporeal, ethical and political terms. The project as relayed through the book is parsed into six topics, with each getting fair treatment through individual chapters.

After stating the project that motivated writing the book, Wall-Romana completes his introduction with important biographical details for Jean Epstein. Epstein’s interest in cinema formed while working as an editor for the Lumiere Brothers and he was then inspired by the Essanay Charlie Chaplin films which were very popular in France, during the First World War. During this time, Epstein met Abel Gance and that relationship encouraged Epstein to attempt publishing some of his poetic philosophical writing, as well as, providing him an opportunity to meet other key figures in the French Impressionist film movement (Richard Abel refers to this group as the French Narrative Avant-Garde1). Prior to making his first film, Epstein had been introduced to, and worked with, all of the other key figures in the movement (Gance, Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc and Marcel L’Herbier). For Epstein, literature and cinema were intertwined through poetics. Blaise Cendrars published Epstein’s “Today’s Poetry: A New State of Mind” in La Sirene in 1921, which received acclaim in the community of artistic intelligentsia and first-generation cinephiles. Wall-Romana remarks on a major transition for Epstein’s cinematic sensibilities near the advent of talking films. Epstein had been directing narrative films (mainly, literary adaptations) and in the late 1920s onward, he switched his focus to documentaries.

Worth noting, is that Wall-Romana relies heavily on biographical explanatory arguments for constructing his historiographical model and that this seems genuinely at odds with his over-zealous advocacy of post-structuralist methods such as hermeneutics, post-structuralist ontology such as corporeality, as well as, post-structuralist theories such as, queer theory and affect theory. From a traditional biographical argument, Wall-Romana presents Abel Gance as planting a seed in Epstein for the latter’s later flourishes of philosophical poetry in the cinematic milieux, however Wall-Romana also claims that Epstein’s queerness was rigourously individualized articulating Epstein’s oeuvre in profoundly unique ways. Gance is an author inscribing Epstein, yet Epstein is paradoxically erasing those inscriptions to produce his work from a state of *tabula rasa.* We can provide Wall-Romana will a modest amount of leeway given that the crux of his thesis regards Epstein’s gravitational flux at a crossroads in the discourse of cinematic epistemology. A real problem arises when Wall-Romana is unable to properly theorize whether the crossroads constitutes a bundle of things or the frayed ends of a single thing, in a phenomenological sense for the understanding of cinematic epistemology. I will elaborate on these ideas later in this paper.

This conflation of biographical explanatory arguments with hermeneutics and affect, leads to some brash deductions on the part of Wall-Romana. For example, while examining primary sources, Wall-Romana determines unique features of Jean Epstein’s socialist character. Epstein is deemed a “good” communist for having believed in equal pay. This assertion is deduced through accounting records that showed Epstein receiving the same amount of pay for his 1939 film, Arteres de France, as the assistant director and the scriptwriter (W-R, 8). Third variables are excluded from Wall-Romana’s analysis and his deductions from the information of the primary sources seem heavily based on other information available to him that already suggest Epstein’s political leftist leanings. For all we know, Epstein may have lost a bet and the remuneration settled the balance, or, the breakout of war triggered a need for equal pay distribution (perhaps, even as a form of loan). Thus, Epstein’s equal distribution of pay in this case may have been pragmatically utilitarian as opposed to altruistically socialist. There may be details that Wall-Romana has left out for the reader, but as it stands there seems to be a degree of confirmation bias that riddles the text and compromises both the historiographical and theoretical models presented.

The Nazi occupation of France made it so that Epstein was unable to continue directing. He was known publicly as half-Jewish and already had fascist opponents who had singled him out in the critical literary community (W-R, 8). Later, Epstein became an alcoholic and found that he was unable to continue his filmmaking. Wall-Romana conjectures that the alcoholism was a result of being stuck in the interstitial region, as it were – Epstein was half Polish and half French, he was half Jew and half Gentile, and he was a closeted homosexual. Again, Wall-Romana is arguing at cross-purposes as the interstitial region is conceived of as a focused point of vantage theoretically, but as a blurry crossroads, both historically and biographically. The theoretical model and historiographic model for Wall-Romana work against each other in fundamental ways, but perhaps there is value in this given that the interstitial region is one that should seem confounding as a place to occupy discursively. The risk, however, is that these oppositional forms of conception might constitute a logical paradox, thus discrediting Wall-Romana’s thesis that Epstein actually occupies the interstitial region (or that anyone else can). The ambiguity certainly diminishes the strength of Wall-Romana’s conclusions despite the incredible value of his close textual analysis of Epstein’s filmic and literary work.

Epstein’s status in film history as a *fameux inconnu* is far from haphazard. The French film industry went from global hegemon to cottage industry when Charles Pathé and Léon Gaumont practiced fiscal restraint through divestment in production2. They focused their investments on distribution and exhibition, ensuring artisanal production of French films, thereafter. Producers and directors had to “hustle” their projects to individual prospective investors and a political bent in the work could help persuade a sympathetic investor to get onboard. Many socialist and left-leaning filmmakers found that communist undertones in the script or scenario would help with realizing its completion as a produced film, as there were a fair number of venture capitalists with leftist sensibilities (especially during the rise of the Popular Front in France)3. The problem with this mode of production is that the films are often esoteric and not apt for public mass consumption. Epstein’s endeavor to hybridize fiction and documentary genres complicated these issues making his films even less economically viable. With the advent of talkies, starting in 1927, theatrical tropes were pushed to the fore through the achievement of audible dialogue and synchronous sound (W-R, 11). Epstein was forgotten academically within film studies during its boom in the 1960s. Film studies focused on the qualities of the medium that had some potential to present facts as opposed to strictly theory: psychoanalysis, semiotics, linguistics, and apparatus theory. As a segue from Wall-Romana’s historical project to his theoretical one for Epstein, I offer some important personal notes on the contemporary moment, not only as a hopefully stimulating aside, but as fundamentally relevant to later discussion of Wall-Romana’s intervention on Epstein’s position in film history and film theory, as well as for his notions about Epstein’s contributions to cinematic epistemology.

Postmodernism progressed, but arguably has been replaced in the West by what I term “post-passé” – an epoch characterized by technological amnesia, culturally. I would like to suggest that post-passé is localized as opposed to globalized and becomes dominant at the point where a society’s members have a direct experience of Moore’s Law. Moore’s Law is an observation that computing power doubles every two years, however recently we have experienced a tapering off of this development (perhaps the effects of post-passé fetish, and disillusionment or dissociation with the present)4. The direct experience of Moore’s Law is theorized as happening when the majority of households in a society have home computers. At this point, there is an end to postmodernism and for argument sake, in the West postmodernism ended around the turn of the millennium5.

Technological amnesia is the dominant characteristic of the psychology of society in the post-passé epoch and can only be understood through a liberal reworking of some basic Freudian psychoanalytic terms. The post-passé individual looks at the technology of the present and realizes that it is already redundant and outdated by virtue of remembering obsolescent technology not two years earlier, let alone a decade earlier. In postmodernism and modernism, the technological leaps are intergenerational; in post-passé, the leaps are intra-generational. The postmodern subject can rightfully scoff at the previous generation for having used outdated technology, and this in fact becomes a defense mechanism for the ego. In the post-passé, you must scoff at yourself and berate your present moment as disappointing, technologically. This is potentially devastating to the ego and threatens self-esteem issues and possible neurosis6. The realization is a site of traumatic rupture in the chain of associations, psychologically. The trauma is disavowed because the subject cannot articulate its meaning and instead a related part of the trauma (a fully controllable part) is fetishized. For the post-passé subject, the fetish involves seeing the present as futuristic and the values of the present society as eternal. This can lead to the development of ideology that encourages over-zealous activism. This denial of an individual’s direct connection to the past through technology is referred to as technological amnesia. Andreas Huyssen has some unique articulations of this psychological phenomenon which guide and inform my formulation7.

To weave another thread, I would offer some thoughts on the development (or adoption) of post-structuralism in the academy’s philosophical bent, from the end of the Second World War. In the academic institution, there was a proliferation in the founding of universities in the 1960s and arguably, the model of the institution slowly shifted from one based in pedagogy to one based in economics8. Profit became the bottom line through an ideology of “excellence” and enrollment was the means to achieve that end in the emerging corporate institution. The academy became saturated with students, yet undergraduates had to have a reasonable representation in graduate school upon graduating for the institution to remain legitimate. Faculties had to expand to meet the demand of high enrollment9. One could argue that as a result, emphasis in the academy’s philosophical methods of analysis shifted from structuralism to post-structuralism with the latter’s emphasis on the hermeneutic turn and then subsequent turn to affect and performative turn. In soft sciences, understanding a structure was replaced by conceptualizing a feeling. There is no end to how feelings can be conceptualized. Hence, the shift to hyper-specialization for disciplines in the soft sciences. Hyper-specialization is necessary when faculties and graduate schools expand dramatically because there needs to be an adequate number of publications and conferences for candidates to participate in as a means for filling out their CV and remaining competitive when applying for open positions in the institution. There is a veritable unrelenting drive to hyper-specialize in order that a candidate for tenure (and lesser professional positions) may justify their candidacy through a long list of publications and talks.

I do not offer this aside on the post-passé epoch and the crisis in academia to be reductive (or insulting) and I do acknowledge other forces that have contributed to what could be considered a dismal state for the academic institution today and Western society as a whole. For example, new digital media forms can be understood as doing labour for the eye in such a way that it becomes psychologically painful over time to do labour oneself with the eye (ie. reading). Such reliance on these digital media forms could be conceived as producing a relative deprivation in literacy and literary competence. In this case, the economic explanatory arguments are substituted with technological ones. Another important consideration for properly theorizing the aforementioned “ruinous” state of the academy is that hard sciences have also experienced hyper-specialization despite being relatively unaffected by philosophical shifts from structuralism to post-structuralism (at least the impact and effects are likely more subtle). Has the imperative to hyper-specialize in hard sciences (technological advancement) affected soft sciences, or does it work in reverse? Furthermore, are they relatively independent of each other? There are clearly other forces and other factors worth considering when diagnosing the contemporary moment as weak in its foundational infrastructure for the viability of vital institutions – especially, so as to avoid superstitious soothsaying. In addition, one can easily list many positive features of the contemporary moment both in the academy and Western society (extending rights and freedoms, expansion of the experience of time and space through rapid technological advancement). However, if the reader can humbly entertain my hypothesis on post-passé technological amnesia and the often spurious application of post-structuralist hyper-specialization that underpin scholarly methods, then it may be shown to have relevant import for my discussion of Wall-Romana’s intervention on Epstein’s contribution to cinematic epistemology as laid out in *Jean Epstein: Corporeal Cinema and Film Philosophy*.

Wall-Romana seems unable to properly explain the new found interest in Epstein’s work outside of its previous contribution to cinematic aesthetics. He attributes it to hyper-specialization in academia and how Epstein’s work can now be found useful for affect theory and queer theory in explaining a cinematic epistemological model (W-R, 27). I would suggest that this is a teleological fallacy in reasoning. Instead, I offer technological amnesia as explaining the renewed interest in Epstein’s work where reaching into the past from the contemporary moment can help rouse the subject from their psychological amnesiac state through reconstructing a full historical framework – a re-anchoring to the past as it is relevant to the present experience. That is to say, valuing Epstein from his modernist position affirms that the past need not be disavowed provided that the past is not hermetically individualist (ie. where past is a site of trauma over the issues of direct involvement in understanding technological obsolescence). Equally, a renewed interest in Epstein can be part of the fetish in technological amnesia, in that collectivist past (the objective, full scope of history and aggregation of histories) is controllable (its meaning is controllable) whereas individualist past (subjective, experiential, and personal past) is not controllable due to psychological vested interest with it in the present. We can choose to value the collectivist past (through a book, film, auteur, etc. – the “fetish object”) without threat to how we value ourselves in the present, psychologically. The objects of the collectivist past become the controllable elements of the past, generally, and constitute the fetish. The trauma remains in the individualist past - a trauma that when articulated does threaten a devaluing of the present (thus is subsequently disavowed for psychological integrity and stability). Arguably, there is no adequate way to parse these two conceptualizations of psychological modes of meaning-production when applying technological amnesia as the impetus for renewed interest in Epstein (an understanding of him as a fetish object), however, the ambiguity (or semiotic polysemy) arising from such plurality is favourable to the teleology offered by Wall-Romana, while it additionally creates a tension that meshes well with the concept of interstitial regions in the discursive formation of Epstein’s philosophical poetics.

Wall-Romana writes with a sense of genuine excitement regarding Epstein’s position as a focal point for new thought on cinematic epistemology, yet defines Epstein’s position in the discourse as marginal, taking up the ‘fuzzy’ interstitial region in the spatiotemporal register for that discourse. I would like to suggest that it is questionable whether the concept of “interstitial” can qualify something as being both fixed-focusing and dynamically-ambiguous. This formulation could be argued as constituting a logical paradox. In linear programming language, “pointers” are used to reference a function without the need to write a second function to call that first function – it is an issue of optimization10. Perhaps, it is more productive to understand Epstein as being a pointer that references the interstitial region without actually occupying it. In this way, our navigation of that region can be dynamic while the region itself retains independent form. Ironically, it would seem that Wall-Romana’s penchant for biographical explanatory arguments has disrupted his ability to understand Epstein in less epic terms.

The chapters of Wall-Romana’s book on Epstein interweave the historiographical model with the theoretical model and this is done bravely and in a very accomplished way with respect to readability. The first chapter addresses the development of Epstein’s concept of photogénie. Epstein, like Dadaists and Surrealists, sought to remediate the broken promise of humanism that modernism wrought with the First World War. Epstein suspected that the philosophical flaws that allowed the horrors of the war arose from science and art adhering to Western Judeo-Christian values that denied the proper role of the body (W-R, 19). The body is an independent thing, a social construct and a vector for the dynamics of psychosexuality. For Epstein, urban workers suffer “fatigue”, which can be understood as the body’s paralysis for inspiring the mind. Oppressive work conditions and overcrowded social conditions provide the body with a surfeit of stimuli such that the body must then actively blunt sensation. The mind is cut-off from messages and the mind searches frantically for what the body has denied – this is the root cause of neurosis. This neurosis constitutes the mind-body gap as a site of trauma (W-R, 22). Cinema becomes a means for articulating around the trauma. This is how Epstein sees cinema as positive and productive, however, I would suggest that using cinema in this “psycho-therapeutic” way may relate to satisfying a fetish where cinema would then become the fetish object (take it a step further and particular genres could be the hyper-fetish object, such as horror, the western, the musical, pornography, etc.). Photogénie is the reified corporeal through the pro-filmic and the filmic material, that then therapeutically addresses the adverse effects of fatigue. Wall-Romana notes that photogénie, “signalled a brand new cognitive-sensorial technology at play within human vision” (W-R, 25). For Epstein, photogénie was the essence of cinema where the pro-filmic is not simulacra of the model (less essential and separated from it) and where the filmic image enhances the moral quality of the pro-filmic.

I would suggest that Epstein has clear structuralist sensibilities with respect to how he conceptualizes photogénie, whereas Wall-Romana’s interpretation is entrenched in post-structuralist theories, such as affect. Plato’s “Cave Allegory” is an argument on epistemology that subsequently drives at ontological issues. In the allegory, the bound human sits in a cave facing a wall. There is a controlled fire behind the human who then sees shadows of other objects behind them cast on the cave wall as those objects pass by the firelight. The human may see the shadow of a bird but only knows the bird from the shadow. Plato is encouraging a process of inquiry that is rigourously tasked to break the bindings and allow the individual to search out the referent for the shadow11. The “shadowbird” suggests a bird, and the bird is what is important to the development of thinking, according to Plato. Historically, Jean Baudrillard can be argued as the true founder of post-structuralism (if one is required), where other figures such as Marshall McLuhan, Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault straddle structuralism and post-structuralism during their careers as philosophers. Baudrillard put forward an understanding of simulation and simulacra such that knowledge is only attained through appreciating the precession of things. That is to say, the shadowbird does not necessarily have a referent – there is no bird, necessarily12.

Affect, performance and corporeality supply content analysis methods for theories borne of post-structuralist Baudrillardian epistemological sensibilities. They too consider issues of precession and referentiality, specifically with respect to the body. I would suggest that in these theories, the shadow-body (the physical body) is the object that matters and its referent of the psychological-body (housed in conscious and unconscious machinery) is severely diminished in its worthiness for serious inquiry – there is a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the psyche’s functionality and ability to construct “reality”. The effect of this process is more often than not, a fetishization of theoretical lenses, as well as, a bent for collectivist ideology. For post-structuralist thinking, the idea that a thousand people can share a body experience is deemed more important than the thousand psychological interpretations on the meaning of that bodily experience. A single nuanced, sophisticated understanding of the experience could refute the other nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine, thus producing a realization for the collective that most suffer from flawed reasoning when producing meaning, psychologically. Interpretation substitutes for understanding and there is a fallacious claim that the former validates the latter. That I interpret an action as hostile can be an aberrant decoding of the action and only through understanding the action can I determine rationally whether it was in fact hostile – the interpretation or “feeling” and affect can completely betray the referent when the referent does in fact exist. The shadowbird or shadow-thing is not very tangible at the ontological level because inquiry into the referent is more-or-less, denied through post-structuralist approaches and methods.

To borrow somewhat liberally from Saussureian linguistics, one could say that the post-structuralist theoretical conceptions of the shadow-thing understand it articulating its meaning only synchronically in the spatiotemporal register of its discourse13. At the same time, the shadow-body or shadow-self is equally synchronic – its articulation of meaning in one moment and place (typically the present – the concept of “becoming”) is idealized as representing fundamental essence (arguably, an ontological fallacy). The interaction between two “shadow” things is a weak bond and to render it covalent, a theoretical lens is employed to reify the experience of analysis (and the experience itself, for that matter). Through Marxism, feminism, affect, corporeality, performance or post-colonial theory (and other lenses), the bond between shadow-self and shadow-thing is made strong and tangible. That the shadow forms could have referents become a site of trauma and that trauma is subsequently disavowed. The theoretical lens is fetishized. Of course, an opponent may note that I employ psychoanalysis in a way that could be deemed fetishistic, but I would add that my appropriation of terms are radically remediated (and intentionally over-simplified) from their canonical definitions (in the works of Freud, Lacan, Jung or Zizek) as a means of providing a prolegomenon for current contemplation (and perhaps, rigourous theorization in the future), with an equal attempt to avoid dogmatism through advocacy of entrenched notions regarding psychoanalytic concepts.

The purpose of walking through the philosophical oppositional forces of Plato and Baudrillard relates to how Epstein’s theorization of photogénie is at odds with Wall-Romana’s interpretation of it. For Epstein, photogénie only exists in the diachronic articulations of the object, such that the observer cannot pigeon-hole the object into having a single meaning discursively (the object has dynamic spatiotemporal coordinates in its discursive formation). Wall-Romana offers that Epstein intends that the body is an organizer of the plurality of sensory material, but my understanding is that Epstein doesn’t want the body to take control because this is the origin of fatigue. The body is an obstacle, a thing crunching sensory data to then articulate meaning synchronically yet attempting to translate the meaning of objects that articulate meaning diachronically. The body is not better at alleviating fatigue during cinematic experience than during regular waking life, but it is instead that objects through filmic presentation and representation are better at accessing the mind past the encumbrances of the body. Wall-Romana writes, “Epsteinian photogénie is then a total and triadic relation between the viewer as embodied and self-sensing, the pro-filmic as material and embodied as well, and the filmic as an interface where they encounter each other in a virtual or imaginary realm that provides a kind of virtual embodiment for the viewer.” (W-R, 28). Whereas, Epstein writes, “the photogenic aspect of an object results from its variation in space-time.” (W-R, 29). For Wall-Romana, the body, in experiencing photogénie, is a unifier of spatiotemporality between three media (the pro-filmic, the filmic, the body), but for Epstein, the object has its own spatiotemporality in a register that is independent of the viewer. The filmic (or cinematic image) is a medium where the mind of the viewer can appreciate the thing itself of the pro-filmic, despite the body. In fact, this reading of Epstein becomes foundational thinking for Baudrian and Comollian apparatus theory in the 1960s and 70s14.

By the end of the first chapter, Wall-Romana has achieved something extremely productive and potentially fruitful for later analysis. Where the interstitial region was conceived of earlier as a definite thing in discourse, Wall-Romana now presents through close textual analysis, that Epstein’s photogénie constructs and reveals “uncertainty”. Superimpositions, delayed fades/transitions, implied movements/suspended animations and mise-en-abyme have a phantasmagoric quality in Epstein’s films (W-R, 29). The phantasmagoric of the cinematic image is that presence doesn’t fully capture what the pro-filmic objects were or what they will be. The object has a diachronic articulation in its discursive formation (its total history), but the viewer observes the object only synchronically (present or ideal moment/place). What is missing constitutes uncertainty and renders the filmic image phantasmagoric. The uncertainty is the denial of corporeality in the interstitial region. The uncertainty is the collection of ideas about a thing that have not been accessed and may never be known. It is a bundle of nerve endings that evoke tantalizing sensation which can reanimate the mind that slumbers due to body fatigue. Wall-Romana correctly remarks that through photogénie’s propensity for revealing uncertainty and making the experience of it available, cinema is “psycho-physiologically homeopathic” (W-R, 29). Although Wall-Romana continues to develop a historiographical and theoretical model for Epstein’s oeuvre that promotes corporeality, affect theory and queer theory, I would suggest that the “triadic” of photogénie-phantasmagoric-uncertainty in the pro-filmic-filmic-psychological registers is more consistent both with Epstein’s overt remarks about semiotic diachronicity of objects and his clear structuralist sensibilities.

In Chapter Two, Wall-Romana explores the uncertainty effect in photogénie as it relates to Epstein’s melodrama films. Epstein embraced melodrama because its climax was defined through suspense and suspense builds dramatic tension that is rife with uncertainty. Epstein enhanced this uncertainty through avant-garde devices such as kaleidoscopic mise-en-abyme shots and multiple signals for endings (signs through the mise-en-scene combined with extra-diegetic signs through intertitle cards). Epstein removed happy endings, denouement and resolution from narratives. The “situational” quality of the narrative allowed the image to emphasize the uncertainty effect through its photogénie. The shot or sequence is hermetically-sealed within the narrative so as to not create a bleeding effect between images that would promote pseudo-diachronic understanding of the cinematic image for the viewer (“metric” or “sequential” diachronicity, could be useful terms here, within the cinematic medium). Wall-Romana, still eager to fetishize theoretical lenses, claims that the lack of happy endings has a historiographical function to complement the aforementioned theoretical function. According to Wall-Romana, the lack of happy endings was a social aspect of photogénie, revealing Epstein’s leftist sensibilities (W-R, 56). I would suggest that there is a syllogistic fallacy at play here: social ills don’t have happy endings; Epstein films don’t have happy endings, therefore, Epstein films are about social ills. In addition, claiming that Epstein is pointed and deliberate in the underlying political discourse of his oeuvre goes far in refuting the hypothesis that the photogénie of his films primarily express uncertainty. Wall-Romana gets into trouble near the end of the chapter when supplanting the uncertainty effect and allegory of the crossroads with the concept of “waywardness”. Uncertainty is the bundle of many things, but waywardness would suggest the frayed ends of a single thing.

The third chapter, opens with a brief history of technophobia and technophilia in continental philosophy and Western literature and this serves to situate Epstein as a techno-utopian. This is also where Wall-Romana manages to crystallize Epstein’s distinction of synchronic and diachronic meaning for objects in cinematic presentation. Epstein writes, “cinema represents the universe as a perpetually and everywhere mobile continuum…” suggesting the diachronic spatiotemporality of what is represented in the pro-filmic. He adds, “… much more continuous, fluid and agile than the directly perceptible continuum,” indicating that the viewer has only the synchronic meaning by which to base their understanding of the pro-filmic objects (W-R, 72). When analyzing Epstein’s work, Wall-Romana has all the right answers floating around within his text, yet he fails to separate the dogmatic practices of post-structuralist theory from the reasonably sound Epsteinian structuralist sense that is arguably based in Saussurian linguistics. For Wall-Romana, photogénie is at first an interstitial region, followed by a producer of uncertainty, and then possibly a site of waywardness. The confusion and conflation likely arises from the teleological practice of using a theory to explicate a phenomenon. David Bordwell elucidates the dangers of such dogmatic practice (“SLAB theory”) in his “Historical Poetics of Cinema”15. Epstein’s work should explain itself through historical analysis such that no one theory or set of theories can reduce it to the narrow purview of that theory. Wall-Romana has three competing conceptions where he likely hopes to find one that will “fit” into the framework arranged through his array of post-structuralist theories.

Wall-Romana relies heavily on psychoanalysis for his understanding of the body and he formulates particularly narrow conceptions of the psychoanalytic terms of “conscious” and “unconscious” in order to marry the epistemological concerns of his project with the phenomenological ones. Early in the book, he posits that the unconscious manifests through the body and the conscious arises in the mind (W-R, 20). Once again, I will submit an intervention and provide an understanding that is both true to my own experience and seemingly more consistent with Epstein’s writing on the matter at hand. I would like to suggest that human beings are psychologically Manichean in that they have a distinct conscious and unconscious mind. The unconscious is much like a super-computer - it crunches all data passing through the senses and in the thought articulations of the conscious mind. All sensory information and conscious information is organized to satisfy a kind of Kantian-like categorical imperative16. The “good” for the unconscious is to maximize novel experience, which requires that new experience not become coded redundantly by old experience. Redundancy means more threads and nodes in the network of ideas and meaning. The list, “R1, R2, R3, R4” recalls “R” from which the list derives and every new connection with each member in the list must also “call” or “recall” at least “R”, if not all other members of the list. The list, “A, B, C, D” has members that recall nothing else when referenced. To call “A” does not imply creating a new node in the network to connect “A” to other members of its list. The unconscious mind diligently works to have the individual not experience meaningful redundancy.

Satisfaction is necessary for happiness and satisfaction cannot be achieved through redundancy because redundancy implies excess mental labour for organizing ideas and concepts. Satisfaction comes from success and success is the completion of something. Redundancy implies incompletion through there always being more of something than what is required. With redundancy, the psychological implication is that more work required in removing excess connections or at least in managing them. Redundancy leads to new experiences not being novel because they are pre-coded through old experiences. Only novel experience is complete (it calls or recalls nothing else, **necessarily**). However, novel experience requires that the individual properly manage the only real power relation – the one existing between the conscious mind and unconscious mind.

Cultures form through their individual members seeing this power relation as traumatic and thus disavowing it. The fetish is external power relations (Foucauldian power relations17) and these are not true power relations but the fetish of power relation. This fetish of power relation (or external power relations) stimulates and propagates redundant experience. Redundant experience is the opposite of “good”, however once the individual is implicated in the culture of society they have no choice but to initially reject the categorical imperative of the unconscious because of a dependency on redundant experience, such as Freudian “fixations”18. Sucking my thumb is necessarily dependent on having used a woman’s breast to feed, thus sucking my thumb is not novel experience. The rejection of the unconscious categorical imperative is achieved through the formation of the subconscious – a pseudo-unconscious. The subconscious is part of the conscious and takes ideas or concepts, and stores them there with the intention of organizing them similarly to the unconscious. In this way, the subconscious can create reassurances that the unconscious categorical imperative is not a driving force for what the mind wants and what life requires for satisfaction, and then happiness. Meanwhile, the unconscious continues to push for recognition by the conscious. It crafts “coincidences” and produces dreams/nightmares as a means of rousing the individual out of their deluded state. Different institutions in culture might explain the coincidences as “karma” or “providence” in order to invalidate the unconscious workings. A sincere attempt in allowing the unconscious to impress itself on the conscious implies a piercing or puncturing of the subconscious – a conscious realization that the individual has been living a lie and that the subconscious is manufactured to cover up these lies. In many cases, running back to the suggested safety of the subconscious has often been mislabelled as “bi-polar disorder” and the successful vanquishing of the subconscious has been mislabelled as “paranoid schizophrenia”. Psychiatry does in fact presently recognize that these disorders are blanket terms for a plurality of cognitive dissociative conditions that cannot be properly explained with a single neurological cause19. Thus, I would argue that psychoanalysis as the qualitative method for explaining quantitative psychological effects is still valid at present and until such a time that hard science can narrow the scope of psychoanalysis or prove it speculatively invalid.

My formulation of unconscious-conscious dynamic power relation through psychoanalysis is not simply to contend against Wall-Romana’s own bifurcation of those psychological structures between body and mind, but also is provided for its integrity with Epstein’s theoretical writing on the interplay of human consciousness with the cinematic medium. In Epstein’s final written work, *Alcohol and Cinema*, he understands the fundamental phenomenology of cinema to be a hermetic materialism and I would suggest that this refutes the use of corporeality or affect theory for properly understanding Epstein. Epstein sees more development in the interstitial region through the thing itself and our unconscious understanding of it than what we are able to achieve with knowledge of the thing through our conscious understanding (Epstein remained extremely concerned with the process of fatigue). The fatigue is actually facilitating an incredibly rich and nuanced unconscious understanding that would be hindered if the conscious were able to appropriate more of that active process and control the interstitial region as a discursive formation. The apparatus captures objectively, the thing produces its meaning objectively, our unconscious organizes information objectively and the interactions for these media operate smoothly as a network. However, the subjectivity of the conscious experience has the unique quality of feeling – both joy and anguish, happiness and sadness, dread and the sublime. Therefore, cinema and technology must never lose their capacity to be useful and stimulating for the conscious mind as otherwise there would no longer be an interface for the objective aspects of things and minds (which all interact through their diachronic meaning). Photogénie is recognition of uncertainty – the uncertainty about discourses developing with us but beyond our conscious appreciation. We inevitably have uncertainty about discourses operating through diachronic meaning, and not synchronic meaning as we only articulate thoughts synchronically – we call and recall thought material (ideas and concepts) synchronically, and always in the present moment and place. That we can identify something as “photogenic” in an image suggests that there is a relatively inaccessible part of us that truly appreciates the object’s diachronic meaning – that part is our unconscious.

In the fourth chapter, Wall-Romana focuses on Epstein’s contribution to the Breton School film movement. Gilles Deleuze noted about the Breton School, that Epstein shifted his focus to drama without human characters (W-R, 110). Epstein explored the dynamic flow of nature and its intra-relational network. Perhaps, I can offer that Epstein’s work suggests that there is a hard separation between object-based phenomenology and subject-based phenomenology, but that we cannot construct meaning to achieve understanding without an appreciation of the workings of both. Cinema is a medium for suturing the chasm between the two phenomenological modes. Cinematic epistemology is therefore not emerging from an interstitial region as much as it is an actual suturing of the rupture. Epstein was not so interested in uncertainty and waywardness, but instead wanted photogénie to be a needle-and-thread tool for maintaining integrity in the skein of cinematic discourse. The suturing effect through cinematic photogénie could also help to mend the psychological rupture between the unconscious and conscious mind that is exacerbated through the body’s production of fatigue. For Epstein, institutions (collective bodies) are in the way of external humanism while the physical body (individual body) is in the way of internal humanism, and this interpretation runs counter to Wall-Romana’s main thesis. Bodies are disablers of humanism as they reinforce spatiotemporal demarcations for individual and collective, conscious and unconscious, subject and object, while mediating those relationships. Bodies bring intra-relational networks to interrelated entities, thus producing redundancy in experience and precluding the possibility for happiness.

Wall-Romana constructs a historiographical model for Epstein that understands him as a socialist struggling for collectivist integrity in an increasingly fascist world – a fuzzy, uncertain crossroads. The theoretical model for Epstein is engineered to confirm the historiographical one. Cinematic photogénie connects the body’s unconscious back to the mind’s conscious – collectivist integrity through embodied experience. The interstitial region is a place that reaffirms the value of togetherness – the crossroads where things meet and a powerful focusing point. However, beyond the contradictions that may actually work decently for conceptualizing the interstitial, Wall-Romana, problematically, uses Epstein’s written theory to validate his own claims about corporeality, ethics and politics in Epstein’s oeuvre. Epstein’s written theory is quite clear on the necessary separation of object-based phenomenology and subject-based phenomenology through his formulations of spatiotemporal registers that seem guided heavily by Saussurian linguistic concepts of synchrony and diachrony. The object articulates meaning in a diachronic way that is beyond the conscious appreciation of the subject. The surfeit of objects articulating their dynamic meaning on the human senses leads to the body shutting down – in other words, fatigue. Photogénie is recognition of the object’s diachronic meaning through the subject’s synchronic understanding. Photogénie produces understanding in spite of the body, and not because of it enabling a particular process of understanding. The body is a disabler of individualist understanding in the same way that institutions are disablers of collectivist understanding. Epstein is a humanist and perhaps a “healer” such that photogénie might be understood as a “cure” or “remedy”. A more productive way to put it might be agreeable to Wall-Romana: Jean Epstein is a techno-utopian and an engineer such that photogénie is a tool for construction and repair. Epstein’s work suggests that cinematic epistemology is based in the filmic image having the capacity to suture the gap produced by the oppositional synchronic and diachronic meaning-production modes of subjects and objects. The experience of photogénie is revelatory, and ultimately, liberating.

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