8

Holy Motors

Metameditation on Digital Cinema's Present and Future

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Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012) is a film that opens before film, with the photographic motion experiments of Étienne-Jules Marey. Those early moments of movement captured on screen are among the first proto-cinematic human performances, and they appear at the beginning of a film that is entirely shot on digital. Such a clear duality marks an essential trait in *Holy Motors* right from the outset: here is a film that is celebrating the past in order to envision what is going to happen in the future. As the medium is finalizing its transition into the digital age, Carax takes a hard look at the legacy of 120 years of film history and rethinks the basic constituents of the cinematic experience.

With clearly nostalgic yearning for the early days of celluloid cinema, on the one hand, and concomitantly inciteful optimism about digital possibilities, on the other, *Holy Motors* becomes a metacinematic work about both the death of cinema and its concurrent rebirth. The film represents and complicates, as I will argue in this chapter, cultural and critical anxieties about the impact of new technologies on cinema's development in the twenty-first century, whether such impact entails the omnipresence of small digital cameras without an audience; new media capacities for formulating a fragmented and non-narrative story; the virtual, non-indexical presence of the rapidly changing shape of digital performance; or simply the disappearance of an immersive and contemplative filmgoing experience in a theatrical setting. *Holy Motors* also encapsulates a personal dimension, the creative anxiety of a filmmaker making his first film in thirteen years, not without elegiac feelings about how in that period of time the medium has irrevocably changed.

Holy Motors, in my opinion, looks at the transition to digital from a critically balanced position that *puts the old and the new together*—it treats digital cinema *not* as a historical point of rupture and crisis, but as a necessary and evolutionary stage that is merely extending the past indefinitely into the future rather than altering the present completely. It celebrates the past of celluloid technology and mourns the disappearance of "old" cinema in order to

envision how properties of film affect the present and future of digital cinema. In its post-DV (or now nearly all-DV) landscape, digital cameras have become so small and omnipresent that performances are held endlessly in front of what amounts to an invisible audience. Is this really the end of cinema, or a futuristic version of its reincarnation—one that, to our surprise, may have already arrived?

Cinema Is Dead: Long Live the Cinema!

Holy Motors begins with short excerpts from Étienne-Jules Marey's late nineteenth-century chrono-photographic experiments, a few seconds of a naked man moving backward and forward. Those brief black-and-white segments of movement dissected into single frames in succession refer immediately to the idea of performance, and foreground cinema "as a site or vehicle of physical movement, of imaginative transport and technological transformation."[1] Immediately after appears an image of a lifeless and faceless audience sitting in a dark movie theater. Since we cannot see the eyes of the viewers, or hear their reactions, we soon wonder whether they are really watching the movie projected in front of them. Are they paralyzed, sleeping, unaware of what is going on, or simply disengaged with the movie? While the nature of the film being shown on the screen remains unlabeled to us (though attentive cinephiles would probably recognize the image of the audience as a clever homage to the final shot of King Vidor's *The Crowd* [1928]), we hear its diegetic sounds that attest to mobility and movement: heavy traffic, a gunshot, and a ship's siren. The first two shots of *Holy Motors* formulate, then, a telling juxtaposition between cinematic kinesis and the theater "as a place of total immobility."[2]

What immediately follows is a meaningful cameo by its maker, Leos Carax, who is revealed to us all curled up in bed. Our *Le Dormeur* (the sleeper), Carax is one of France's most important film auteurs and had not directed any film for more than a decade since his *Pola X* (1999). Carax (or his character?—an ambiguity that will recur elsewhere in the film) awakens from a state of creative hibernation, a long period of passivity in which technological changes have been overtaking the film industry, yet again. Keeping this extratextual knowledge in mind, we may wonder: Why has he been inactive? Was he disillusioned by the presumably disappointing state of cinema at the dawn of the third millennium? Was it difficult for him to get inspired? With a strangely shaped middle-finger key, Carax opens a door into the theater we saw earlier, or into what could be later interpreted as the age of digital cinema. That is, our age. But is it still an age of or for cinema? The absent audience, the hellhound that walks through

the theater's corridor, the digitally distorted images of *La Père Lachaise* we will later see, or simply the fact that so many characters in the film would later die (whether assassinated, or simply pass away of old age) are all indications that *Holy Motors* is a film dealing with the death of its own medium, and in a related fact or symptom, the death of the spectator in the traditional filmic space of the theater. Can cinema survive out of doors and without beholders?

Yet inside *Holy Motors* itself—a film that contains films and scenes of filmmakers—is it the content of what is shown to the audience that is putting them to sleep? C. M. Olavarria puts the blame for inattention on contemporary Hollywood cinema and suggests that the audience we see is lobotomized "by the hollow triumph of specta-drivel brain-frying 3D superhero comic book blockbusters, endless bankable sequels, prequels, adaptations, and remakes, palpable pretentious 'indies' and everything in between.'[3] Interesting as this suggestion may be to briefly characterize the state of current cinema that has been produced while Carax was "sleeping," I think that the argument here is aimed toward the medium itself. Carax laments a bygone era of theatrical cinema, or at least the experience of it, and suggests that in the digital age the film theater no longer promises a vibrant and engaging experience. If we examine more precisely the reference from *The Crowd*, we will notice that every single member of the audience in Vidor's film is moving in his or her seat while laughing.

In 1975, when Roland Barthes spoke of walking out of a movie theater, he described the act of watching a film as a state of "hypnosis,"[4] characterized by "the relaxation of postures,"[5] in which the image becomes a "lure" with which the spectator is confined. He writes: "The image is there, in front of me, for me . . . the image captivates me, captures me: I am *glued* to the representation."[6] Christian Metz, writing his famous notes on the impression of reality in cinema at around the same time, describes in similar terms how "films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual participation in the spectator (one is almost never totally bored by a movie),"[7] while Gabrielle Pedullà describes the "induced passivity" of the audience in the movie theater as "the enforcement of physical stillness [that] in turn demands not only greater mental action but deeper empathetic reaction."[8] Even Susan Sontag, composing at the end of the previous century a diatribe on film as a decadent art, longs for "the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen." "You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie," she laments, recalling what for her is now a bygone era, "and to be kidnapped was to be overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image."[9]

All of these complex accounts of spectatorship in a traditional movie theater focus on a certain submission to the screen that, instead of leading to a

dormant state of disinterestedness, results in an absorbed and affected audience. But film viewing in *Holy Motors* happens elsewhere, outside of the movie theater and without a screen. We soon realize that the film follows a mysterious Parisian character named Monsieur Oscar (Denis Lavant), a businessman-turned-actor who travels in a limousine from one location to another, performing in each stop a different role in a continuous but overtly incoherent life-drama. The structure is fragmented and episodic, and the meetings (each functioning as a specific film genre) gradually become darker, more brutal, and more violent. The viewers watching Oscar's performances, just like the faceless audience in the theater, seem to care less and less about all his acts (more on this later). Even the fact that our cineaste creature lights up a cigarette in between roles may suggest, as Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece brilliantly observes, his own wish to return to an earlier legacy of watching, or "a more reverential, more immersive, and more contemplative filmgoing experience."[10]

The discourse around *Holy Motors* as a melancholic film that laments celluloid and projects the anxieties of its filmmaker in the midst of the digital revolution is both rich and limited, in my opinion. Elena Gorfinkel, for example, claims that the film is about the "ethical melancholy of the digital abyss,"[11] while Sheldon Gaskell, following Gilles Deleuze's idea of the schizophrenic, argues that "*Holy Motors* can be defined as a new cinema of melancholic longing not only for the past memory of film, but also for the past human that once existed tangibly, before the digital revolution, within the cinema like a gear within a motor."[12] We need to remember, though, that while *Holy Motors* celebrates the analog technology of celluloid in melancholia, it is a film that both is shot digitally and also constructs a hard look back at the history of cinema from the perspective of the digital age. During the opening shot of the dormant audience, almost unnoticeable in the frame is a naked baby running toward the screen shortly before the hellhound appears. Carax is insinuating, perhaps, that every death brings with it a rebirth of something else, and that besides the potential threat that digital poses, it also opens up many possibilities. Is digital really an/the end of cinema in *Holy Motors*? And if so, why and in what sense?

Cinema Will Remain the Same but Will Be Utterly Different: Carax and the Prophetic Discourse on Digital Cinema

It is surely tempting to regard *Holy Motors* as merely a requiem for celluloid filmmaking and to align Carax's position in it with the early apocalyptic discourse that welcomed the digital with statements like the "death of cinema"[13]

or "film after film."[14] Carax, however, refuses to surrender to any simplistic reduction of the medium to specific technological features or to embrace a narrow definition of medium specificity. His *Holy Motors*, as Rose Wei notes, questions alternatively "whether the meaning of cinema has evolved or deflated with the emergence of new technologies."[15] It delineates cinema in the digital age as a medium that is drastically changing, but nonetheless keeps essential ingredients intact to remain gripping and fascinating. There are not too many movies like *Holy Motors*, as Daniel Morgan notes, that embrace such balanced approach toward technological change and "look at how new technologies of image production and manipulation fit within, and change or sustain, older cinematic appeals."[16] But first, we need to look back briefly at the prophetic discourse that expressed both the promise and the anxiety generated by the so-called digital revolution in film.

The emergence of digital film technologies within the last three decades has transformed existing modes of production and postproduction, exhibition and distribution, and may constitute "the most extensive reworking of the role of images since the inauguration of cinema."[17] At the same time, the often-heard labeling of this ongoing period of transformation as a "digital revolution" suggests a radical change in media technology, which various commentators have interpreted as a paradigmatic shift, "an epistemological rupture between existing ideas and patterns of thinking and the ways in which ideas will be conceptualized and conveyed in the future."[18] While digital tools have been significantly refining filmic strategies and reinvigorating major traditions, writing about digital cinema, at least in the early stages of its development, has been predominantly focused on treating the newness of digital technology as radically disruptive, a threat to film's traditional characteristics, and the digital age as a historical point of rupture and crisis.

In this vein, a striking number of film and photography scholars treat the *indexical* as a problem child in the digital age, a term against which the digital may be defined, and which it presumably surpasses. As Mary Anne Doane makes clear, "Within film theory, confronted with the threat and/or promise of the digital, indexicality as a category has attained a new centrality."[19] Side by side with such accounts, a growing number of utopian voices about the promise of new digital cameras have been expressed by different filmmakers and documentarists. These overly enthusiastic expressions of faith in the potential of digital equipment focused primarily on how digital video can enable radical gestures of intimacy and immediacy, democratize filmmaking to make it accessible to everyone, and capture the ultimate truth by becoming less intrusive or simply invisible. Those accounts also predicted that DV

would thoroughly modify the filmmaking experience and were voiced by several canonical filmmakers whose work has been traditionally associated with celluloid practices.[20]

Both types of reactions, essential to our understanding of *Holy Motors*, tend to focus on quite different aesthetic materializations of the technology. Scholars writing in the first years of digital integration were inclined to focus on the anxiety generated by the presumed loss of indexicality during post-production, while filmmakers who have just "converted" to digital looked at the promising contribution of digital cameras to the production of cinema. Those contradictory tones are not too surprising, considering that "all new technologies in our century—film, radio, television, 16mm film, video, and now digital—have been greeted with equal measures of hope and despair, of optimism and pessimism."[21] Even more importantly, though, both approaches characterize a recurring divergence in thinking often accompanying the advent of new technologies in cinema, maintaining that innovations allow us to undertake activities completely different from those we used to take in the past. "This is change when viewed from the fringe, far from the centre," argues Roger Wyatt. "It's a view of the future that contains a future, not just a past."[22]

Any change, though, can also be viewed from the point of view of the status quo, as merely extending the present indefinitely into the future rather than altering the present completely. When digital technologies were starting to take over and change the different stages of filmmaking in the late 1990s, Thomas Elsaesser prophetically declared that cinema "will remain the same but will be utterly different."[23] In other words, even if digital processes have fundamentally transformed the materiality of cinema, they may have not radically changed the production process or the experience of viewing films. *Holy Motors* exemplifies such a claim, in my opinion, showing how digital entails the reproduction and imitation of prior forms, styles, technologies, and models of production and reception, rather than manufactures something completely new and utterly different. The digital in *Holy Motors* is placed within contradictory junctures of idealized promises and concrete actualities. Carax, then, refuses either to accept the dominant discourse of technological rupture or to surrender to what Philip Rosen calls "the strategy of the forecast," an ongoing attempt to treat digital's characteristics as pure futuristic ideals rather than to ground them in tangible actualities.[24] Carax is looking back not only at more than a century of celluloid film, but also at over twenty years of prolific and multifaceted digital production, in order to account for the ways in which the digital is reshaping and refining aesthetic sensibilities.

Appointments All Day: Blurring the Line between Acting and Being

Holy Motors has a metamorphic quality as it transitions from one episode to another, blurring any clear boundaries between all performances. Our protagonist, Oscar, puts on various outfits in the limousine, the vehicle through which he makes this nonlinear narrative exploration and becomes a different avatar each time. Arguably, all nine appointments that occur through the course of one day stand for different film genres. Those include, among others, a family drama (a father picks up a fight with his adolescent daughter), a science-fiction fantasy (whose making-of we watch in a motion capture studio), a monster horror film (where a grotesque leprechaun is terrorizing the city of Paris), and a musical (in which Oscar, or perhaps his character, meets his old-time lover). The future of digital cinema happens outside of the movie theater, suggests Carax, but still maintains the rigid boundaries of genre classification. The noticeable and puzzling blur that occurs is in fact not between genres, but between role-playing and real life. On the one hand, Oscar is fully incorporating the personas of his acts (his performance as a dying uncle seems to be prolonged way after the unheard "cut" instruction is given), but on the other hand, he also seems to be completely unaffected by the consequences of his actions (Oscar, whether as an actor or a character, dies several times during the film but manages to wake up and keep on).

This situation seems to be the imagined utopia that derives from the miniaturization of digital cameras. The cheap cost of equipment and stock, the ability to shoot many takes easily, and the increased mobility of the apparatus all result in a different kind of tension between fiction and reality. "Digital cinema allows for a different kind of relationship between actor and camera, because the digital video camera looks in a different way," write Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib; "the boundaries between the actor as person and the actor in performance become less clear when all can be recorded and edited into the finished film."[25] While Ganz and Khatib refer in their illuminating analysis of performance in the digital age to early DV productions such as Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) and Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), their lucid arguments echo the bizarre situation that happens in the fictive reality of *Holy Motors*: "Since the digital camera is potentially always on, the performers are potentially always performing."[26] If acting was, since cinema's creation, a mode of being in front of the camera, the ubiquity of video surveillance makes us permanent performers: being simply is acting.

The circular nature of Oscar's performances leads to a situation in which he is not capable of doing anything else other than acting. "You look beat, Dad,"

his daughter notices when he picks her up from a house party during the fourth appointment. "Yes, appointments all day," he replies. We cannot help but wonder: are we watching another performance, or is he out-of-character now, talking to his real daughter? A few appointments ahead, when Eva Grace (Kylie Minogue) will sing about their mutual daughter, this puzzling moment will ring louder. The unquestioned complicity between performing and being becomes more challenging during that appointment, which is performed around the contours of the musical.

Oscar meets his ex-lover Eva Grace by accident while she is waiting to begin her role as Jean, an air hostess living her last night on earth. "We have twenty minutes to catch up on twenty years," she tells Oscar and then warns him: "After that you will not see me anymore." Is she saying this with the knowledge that she is going to end her life as an actress and not as a character? And when she suddenly bursts out singing about her tragic love affair with Oscar, are we watching another appointment, this time a musical, or is it an act outside of performance, a making-of or behind-the-scenes moment? She then decides to commit suicide and falls to her death shortly after removing her clothes to reveal an air hostess outfit. As a character in costume, does she fall "within character," so she can later come back to life? If so, why is Oscar screaming in terror when he suddenly notices her body on the ground (along with her lover's from their future appointment), and why is he rushing in fear straight back to the limousine, as if to be transferred quickly to another genre? These questions are all left unanswered.

Shortly before the film ends, Oscar leaves for his last appointment of the day and meets his chimpanzee family. This is a startling moment, because it blurs the boundaries again: Is it another performative act, or has Oscar's life become a performance in itself? What, therefore, constitutes a cinematic identity in Carax's universe, and does an actor really have any personal life outside of cinema? When the cars begin to talk immediately after, one of them says to the rest, "Men don't want visible machines anymore," to which another car replies, "Yes, no more action." Such an enigmatic exchange has been interpreted by many, but a possible reading of it could be the future disappearance of any making-of places, in-between spaces where acting is separated from reality. Those cars would probably disappear soon, either because the dormant audience is not interested in film action anymore (e.g., an apocalyptic discourse about the death of cinema) or, more reasonably, because life and art would diffuse into each other. When tiny cameras are always on and the actors are aware of the fact that they are constantly being filmed even while changing costumes, there is no need for "behind-the-scenes" moments.

"I Miss the Cameras": *Holy Motors* as Total Cinema

At one point in the film, a man (Michel Piccoli) appears out of nowhere and engages in a cryptic conversation with Oscar. We soon realize that this man is in charge of the grand celebration of performances we are watching, and he inquires with Oscar what is it that makes him carry on and stay in the business. Oscar replies that he continues to act for the same reason that made him start, "the beauty of the act [*La beauté du geste*]." To this cinephilic impulse the man replies with skepticism, "Beauty? They say it's in the eye, the eye of the beholder." But then Oscar proposes a possibility that the film has been suggesting throughout: "What if there's no more beholder?" In other words, Oscar insinuates that we are watching the making of a futuristic cinema, one where the audience disappears entirely or simply becomes irrelevant. The series of performances may be occurring in a post-celluloid world where everyone is performing in front of an invisible audience while it becomes difficult to understand who *is* in fact "holding" the camera. "I miss the cameras," Oscar admits. "They used to be heavier than us. Then they became smaller than our heads, and now you can't see them at all." The cameras in *Holy Motors* are both ubiquitous and unnoticeable, thus epitomizing an evolutionary stage in a deterministic process of miniaturizing technology in film. Their transparency also dictates their shapeless form, so when they presumably engage in a dialogue with each other at the end of the film, they may borrow the shape of cars (this could be an alternative interpretation for what the cars stand for). One of them says to the other worryingly: "You'll soon have loads of time to sleep! Won't be long till they send us to the junkyard. We're becoming . . . inadequate."

Shortly after World War II, André Bazin proclaimed that what inspired the invention of cinema and carried it through with every single technological invention thereafter (sound, color, stereoscopy, and so forth) is the myth of an "integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time."[27] Bazin not only theorizes the development of a medium that is fifty years old at the time of his writing, but also envisions its future: "Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins."[28] For Bazin, the notion of "total cinema" is a myth because every development still carries with it an inherent deficiency in its ability to reproduce reality. Cinematic representations are always measured against how people experience the world, and therefore will always remain incomplete: "Inventors conjure up nothing less than a total cinema that is to provide that complete illusion of life *which is still a long way away*," writes Bazin. 'In short, cinema has not yet been invented!"[29]

The future of cinema, as envisioned by Bazin, becomes the present of *Holy Motors*, one where the recording apparatus, along with the audience watching, turn out to be entirely invisible. Once the medium itself disappears, the complete illusion can presumably occur, and the distance between fictional performance and life itself diminishes: actors have no idea where cameras are being placed, at what point a recording begins or ends, or whether cameras exist at all. They are performing for the sake of the act itself, the beauty of the gesture only.[30] However, even this technological utopia leaves viewers craving for more, just like Bazin imagined. "Some don't believe in what they're watching anymore," complains the man in charge of Oscar. Not unlike the disinterested audience inside the movie theater during the opening of the film, those who watch Oscar's bizarre adventures outside also become uninvolved and indifferent to what they are watching. "Some days," Madame Céline (Edith Scob) suggests to Oscar after he leaves one of his assassination appointments all injured and battered, "even one murder is not enough."

Performance or Visual Effect? Motion Capture and the Ease of Transformation

At the outset of the digital cinema era, film theorists have become more and more interested in how new technologies can create a final break between an image and its referent, focusing on the graphical manipulability of digitized images, and privileging the realm of fantasy film and special effects-laden blockbusters to support such a claim.[31] A solid representative of such a dominant wave of scholarship is Lev Manovich, who attempts in 1995, just when cinema celebrates its first centennial, to characterize new options afforded by the plasticity of the digital image. Manovich argues that when cinema, a medium he defines as "the art of the index,"[32] enters the digital age, it becomes difficult to distinguish it from animation: "It is no longer an indexical media technology but rather a subgenre of painting."[33] According to Manovich, cinema was born from animation (with the early films of Stuart Blackton, Émile Cohl, and Georges Méliès), pushed animation to the margins, only to come full circle and become animation again in the digital age.[34] While Manovich should be praised here for reclaiming the stature of animation within the history of early cinema, such a claim is highly reductive. Without much attention given to the significant portion of live-action digital cinema, Manovich goes so far as to suggest that the automatic recording of reality in cinema "was only an exception, an isolated accident in the history of visual representation."[35] Now, with new options for digital image processing,

"cinema becomes a particular branch of painting—painting in time. No longer a kino-eye, but a kino-brush."[36]

The motion capture sequence in *Holy Motors* is a case in point, as it illustrates how Carax's practice is antithetical to Manovich's theoretical stance. It shows how postproduction capacities of digital manipulation can nonetheless retain photographic indexicality and remain entirely dependent on old-fashioned physical performance. Oscar enters a gargantuan movie studio, all dressed up in a dark body suit dotted with motion sensors, and commences a session of an intense acrobatic performance: he engages in a martial-arts dance, runs on a treadmill while holding a machine gun in his hand and fighting imaginary assailants, and even performs a simulated sexual act with a woman wearing a similar latex suit. After a long sequence that emphasizes a techno-human synthesis in which "the bodies of the actors perform their various roles through their material enhancements,"[37] the camera pans to the right and briefly exposes the unimpressive result, a fantasy video game that seems much less inventive than what produced it. We never really see the face of the person who is giving Oscar instructions on his performance, nor do we see the face of the woman, thus granting the whole sequence an alienating quality in terms of its production process.

Daniel Morgan notes that this scene negotiates further the inherent tension between actor and character, because the quick transition from live action to fantasy stands in complete contrast to the intensive preparations Oscar makes inside the limousine in order to "get into character" before each of his appointments (whether that entails putting on makeup, trying different wigs, etc.) According to Morgan, Carax's interest lies in showing us "the *ease* of transformation" that the digital allows from a flesh-and-blood performance to a virtual character (a dragon-like figure), in which "the final product is divorced from the process that produced it."[38] While it is true that movement in the digital age can be easily captured, manipulated, and molded, the scene also shows us that the making of motion capture is more important and interesting than the final result, because it allows Oscar to perform multiple possibilities of the human body. Carax is making clear to us that much is obfuscated by the numeric grid that we finally see on-screen, namely the huge contribution of Lavant's physical performance to the success of the scene. We are asked to marvel at the physical capacities of Lavant as an actor, and the sequence functions as a documentary-of-sorts of these skills. It is here that the envisioned future of film relates back not only to the silent era, when actors relied heavily on their physiognomy to compensate for an inability to express words, but also to the proto-cinematic experiments of Marey and the naked man who runs back and forth at the beginning of the film.

The legitimate place of motion capture as an artistic strategy in animation has been the subject of a heated debate recently. Motion capture is pulled in several different directions at once in the industry, as actors often claim it as a method of performance, while animators label it a visual effect. As Yacov Freedman notes, "By capturing live movement as raw computer data, it [motion capture] exists as an unprecedented amalgam of both recorded and synthetic cinema."[39] Carax's position in this debate, in my opinion, is not simply that digital media fails "to intimately engage the viewer as effectively as the human body behind the digital rendering," as Gaskell suggests,[40] but that motion capture retains a significant performative value that is rendered without the need of a film camera. It is here (again) that Carax demonstrates his balanced approach toward digital cinema and shows how the traditional components of cinema will survive and prolong despite (or simply because of) technological modifications.

Conclusion: Continuity Editing for the Metahistory of Cinema

Holy Motors is a film that poses many challenges for the viewer. It proceeds without any narrative logic, embraces a fragmented and disorienting structure, provides unmotivated character behavior, and produces steady epistemological confusion. The only thing that *Holy Motors* makes clear from its early moments is that it is a film about film, and that its unconventional narrative refers both in content and in structure to the medium of cinema. In *Holy Motors* Carax is paying respect to his characters and actors by placing intertextual references throughout: Kylie Minogue's 2001 hit song "Can't Get You Out of My Head" is playing at the party from which Oscar is picking up his daughter during one of his appointments; Lavant revisits his role as Mr. Merde, referring back to Carax's segment *Merde* in the 2008 anthology film *Tokyo!*; Edith Scob is wearing a medical mask similar to the one she wears in Georges Franju's *Eyes without a Face* (*Les yeux sans visage*, 1960); and there are explicit and periodic homages to the works of Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey, and King Vidor.

Carax, who was part of the *cinéma du look* French film movement of the 1990s, surely has a tendency to cite other films, but his film is much more than simply a tribute to cinema with postmodern or deconstructive intertextuality. *Holy Motors*, as Elena Gorfinkel notes, "conceives the 'cinema situation,' or our contemporary *dispositif* as a series of unexpected instants";[41] it exhibits an abundance of metacinematic traits, referring, as we would expect

in such cases, to itself and to the world beyond itself (including the world of other movies). It entails an intermission (entitled "Entr'acte"), for example, that strangely enough, never really provides a break, neither to the viewer nor to the characters. This alone testifies not only to Carax's interest in exploring boundless performance in digital cinema, but also to his reluctance to meditate on cinema in a purely intellectual manner. As Morgan observes, Carax wishes to "think through the various appeals of cinema, and the kinds of philosophical puzzles it raises, while at the same time remaining within its thrall."[42]

Holy Motors was used in this chapter as a rich case study for evaluating the merits and limitations of mourning cinema's passing era in the midst of the technological revolution. The imaginary landscape of the film, as I have shown, is nonetheless grounded on practice, and envisions what digital cinema can afford, given the current manifestations of technology in both film production and exhibition. Carax is offering us a view of correlations and continuities across the historical gamut of film technologies, thus seamlessly changing his (and our) response to the transition from melancholy to wonder. *Holy Motors* is a film that invites us to re-evaluate today the early rhetoric of crisis, death, and rupture, prevalent in the early days of digital cinema, and to trace not only what has been arguably lost in the transition, but also what could be ultimately gained from it.

Notes

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2. Johannes Pause, "Cinema's Journey into Homelessness: Leos Carax's *Holy Motors*," *Transfers* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 133.
3. C. M. Olavarria, "The Church of *Holy Motors*: A Transformation in Metafilm," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, October 31, 2013, https://brightlightsfilm.com/church-of-holy-motors-transformation-in-metafilm.
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5. Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," 346.
6. Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theatre," 348. Italics added.
7. Christian Metz, "On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 4.
8. Gabriele Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight: Movies and Spectators after the Cinema*, trans. Patricia Gaborik (London: Verso, 2012), 105.
9. Susan Sontag, "The Decay of Cinema," *New York Times*, February 25, 1996.
10. Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, "Cigarettes, Cinephilia, and Reverie in the American Movie Theater," *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 86.

11. Elena Gorfinkel, "Carax's Oneiric Drive," *In Media Res*, December 11, 2013, http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2013/12/11/caraxs-oneiric-drive.

12. Sheldon Gaskell, "Digital Schizophrenia and Technogenesis in Leos Carax's *Holy Motors*" (master's thesis, Western Illinois University, 2017), 55.

13. Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI, 2001).

14. J. Hoberman, *Film after Film: Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?* (New York: Verso, 2012).

15. Rose Wei, "*Holy Motors*: Leos Carax's Island of Cinema" (master's thesis, Swansea University, 2016), 23.

16. Daniel Morgan, "The Curves of a Straight Line: *Holy Motors* and the Powers and Puzzles of Cinematic Forms," published as "Kurverne i den lige linje: *Holy Motors* og den filmiske gådes kraft," trans. Lasse Winther Jensen, *Krystalbilleder: Tidsskrift for filmkritik* 5 (2015): 30–45.

17. Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 4.

18. Keith Beattie, *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 205.

19. Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *Differences* 18, no. 1 (2007): 129.

20. Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, e.g., expressed his newly formed devotion to the format in *10 on Ten* (2004), a prescriptive theoretical film lecture about the possibilities of DV. Using these cameras in films such as *ABC Africa* (2001) or *Ten* (2002), as Kiarostami explains, allowed him to display the "absolute truth" rather than to forge one, to eliminate any artifice embedded in the cumbersome old equipment, and to remain faithful to natural settings. With even more unrestrained enthusiasm, Wim Wenders announced in 2001 that "the future of the cinema no longer lies in its past" (quoted in Shari Roman, *Digital Babylon: Hollywood, Indiewood & Dogme 95* [Los Angeles: iFilm Press, 2001], 35). The new digital technologies, Wenders asserts, are not merely extensions incorporated to film, adding a new dimension to it, as sound did; they are about to take over and replace film, changing everything we know about the craft and the industry (Roman, *Digital Babylon*, 36). Spicing things up even further, David Lynch confessed is his book about new technologies (and meditation) that celluloid, the material he has been so accustomed to work with, is probably becoming a thing of the past: "I'm through with film as a medium. For me, film is dead . . . I'm shooting in digital video and I love it" (David Lynch, *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* [New York: Penguin Group, 2006], 149). Even Agnès Varda opens her *The Gleaners & I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000), a ciné-essay about the meeting between DV and documentary filmmaking, with enthusiasm for the early potential of DV to create different effects than those afforded by film. "These new small cameras," Varda notes in metaphorical terms, "they are digital, fantastic. Their effects are stroboscopic, narcissistic, and even hyper-realistic."

21. Erik Barnouw, quoted in Patricia R. Zimmermann and John Hess, "Transnational Digital Imaginaries," *Wide Angle* 21, no. 1 (January 1999): 149.

22. Roger Wyatt, "The Emergence of a Digital Cinema," *Computers and the Humanities* 33 (1999): 375.

23. Thomas Elsaesser, "Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time," in *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 204.

24. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 316.

25. Adam Ganz and Lina Khatib, "Digital Cinema: the Transformation of Film Practice and Aesthetics," *New Cinemas* 4, no. 1 (2006): 26.

26. Ganz and Khatib, "Digital Cinema," 26.

27. André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 21.

28. Bazin, "Myth of Total Cinema," 21.

29. Bazin, "Myth of Total Cinema," 20–21. Italics added.

30. The idea of performing repeatedly before omnipresent cameras has somehow material-ized in the recent Soviet production *DAU. Natasha* (2020), which won the Silver Bear for an Outstanding Artistic Contribution at the Seventieth Berlin International Film Festival. Already described as the "Stalinist Truman Show" and blacklisted as pornographic prop-aganda in Russia, Ilya Khrzhanovsky's harrowing film experiment consisted of creating a closed Stalinist society in the Ukranian city Kharkov, where participants were required to spend three years of their lives cut off from the outside world, living in a thirteen-thousand-square-meter reproduction of a Soviet-era totalitarian regime.

31. See, on this topic, to name only a few central examples, the writings of Lev Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016), 20–50; Stephen Prince, "The Emergence of Filmic Artifacts: Cinema and Cinematography in the Digital Era," *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 24–33; and "True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 27–38.

32. Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?," 21.

33. Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?," 22.

34. Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?," 29.

35. Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?," 41.

36. Manovich, "What Is Digital Cinema?," 42.

37. Felicity Colman, *Film Theory: Creating a Cinematic Grammar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 62.

38. Morgan, "Curves of a Straight Line." Italics in original.

39. Yacov Freedman, "Is It Real . . . or Is It Motion Capture? The Battle to Redefine Animation in the Age of Digital Performance," *The Velvet Light Trap* 69 (Spring 2012): 38.

40. Gaskell, "Digital Schizophrenia and Technogenesis," 81.

41. Gorfinkel, "Carax's Oneiric Drive."

42. Morgan, "Curves of a Straight Line."