F. W. Murnau, C. D. Friedrich, and the Conceit of the Absent Spectator

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Nosferatu (1922): Following a cautionary title-card, the iris opens briefly on a provincial town square. Shot from the roof of a Gothic church, its spire prominent in the foreground, the scene has the burnished feel of an albumen print. Tiny human figures can be made out on the streets below, the first harbingers of morning bustle. The iris reopens on Thomas Hutter, arranging his neckwear in a mirror, the back of his hair gilded by sunlight entering through the window at his right. With an air of characteristic self-approbation, he straightens and faces left. Suddenly, as if reined in by an unexpected sound, he tiptoes to the window and peers out over its ledge (Fig. 1).[1] He has overheard his wife, Ellen, shown standing at an adjacent or facing window (Fig. 2). The sill is covered with potted plants; ornate wallpaper and an array of family portraits are visible in the room behind her. She is toying with a cat, inciting it to play with a locket on a chain. The camera lingers as Ellen contends with the kitten's nonchalance. The scene has all the attributes of a *tableau,* presented to a gaze of which it is, or purports to be, unaware. Ellen's innocence, which is consistent with the autonomy of the ambient space, depends on the absence of an observer. Or more accurately, the self-containment of the latter scene is made possible by the stealth within the

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Fig. 1   Fig. 2

former: Thomas, intent on being neither seen nor heard, takes pains to uphold the fiction of the absent spectator.

In the juxtaposition of these two shots, we find an apt and almost programmatic illustration of a paradox described by Michael Fried with respect to the "rapprochement between the aims of painting and drama" that occurred during the second half of the eighteenth century: "A *tableau* was visible . . . only from the beholder's point of view. But precisely because that was so, it helped persuade the beholder that the actors themselves were unconscious of his presence."[2] Emphatically pictorial, the shot of Ellen at the window is reminiscent of those canvases, increasingly prevalent in the eighteenth century, in which an attitude of rapt attention or profound meditation was tantamount to an obliviousness towards the beholder. A similar absorption was to emerge as the trademark of a modern dramatic form bent on becoming untheatrical—a form in which, in contrast to popular and festive theater, the audience does not participate in the spectacle.[3] Spying on Ellen from behind a curtain, Hutter literalizes the "as if" of modern drama, which in not addressing itself to the spectator grants him the illusion of being undetected. To say that Hutter is a voyeur may be too routine a point to make nowadays, yet he clearly embodies the "mechanism of satisfaction" that, following Christian Metz, "relies on my awareness that the object I am watching is unaware of being watched." In close parallel to Fried (who cites Diderot's distinction between "a woman who is seen and a

woman who exhibits herself"), Metz explains the "fundamental disavowal" behind the codes of classical cinema: "The film is not exhibitionist. I watch it, but it doesn't watch me watching it. Nevertheless, it knows I am watching it. But it doesn't want to know."[4]

The "realism," i.e., the "non-exhibitionism" of these scenes from *Nosferatu* (and of classical cinema generally) is the result of a visual syntax that at once centers the viewer and disimplicates him from the space represented. As is the case with modern (bourgeois) drama, the spectator beholds the scene but does not recognize himself as constitutive of it (even though the spectacle is constructed around the unity he occupies). This is distinct from more popular types of theater, in which forms of direct address have the effect of calling the audience into the spectacle. Early cinema had much in common with these popular forms, and the emergence of cinematic realism entailed the adoption of rules and prohibitions that had been part of the established theater for more than a century. Goethe's insistence, for example, that an actor always move at a diagonal when approaching the front of the stage is akin to the use of camera angles meant to deflect the frontal encounter or divert the reciprocated gaze.[5]

In the opening minutes of Murnau's film, a carefully plotted syntagm of diagonal framings fortifies a spatial integrity that subsequent moments reveal as a bulwark against the terror of a full-frontal approach: when Hutter's employer, the real estate agent Knock, instructs him to offer Count Orlok the vacant house "directly opposite your own" (*gerade gegenüber dem Euren*), the building's gaunt façade is seen obliquely from the left (Fig. 3)—an appropriate angle given the modest distance Thomas covers by foot on his way to work. Rushing home to tell Ellen of his imminent departure for Transylvania, the excited Hutter bursts in through an interior door to reveal that same vacant building, visible through—and perfectly parallel to—the couple's bedroom window (Fig. 4). Conspicuous here as a two-dimensional prop, the uncanny façade exposes the state of being "directly opposite" (*gerade gegenüber*) as a formal principle. Knock,

[4] Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Ben Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982) 94–95.

[5] *Regeln für Schauspieler*. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, ed. Erich Trunz, vol. 12, *Schriften zur Kunst* (Munich: Beck, 1978) 261. For an analysis of diagonal movement within *Nosferatu*, as well as a detailed examination of these same shot sequences, see Ellen Risholm, "Raumpraktiken in Murnaus *Nosferatu*," *Raumkonstruktionen der Moderne*, ed. Sigrid Lange (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001) 263–88.
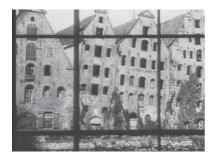
Fig. 3

Fig. 4

diabolical matchmaker that he is, has orchestrated a disquieting vis-à-vis in which, ultimately, Ellen and Orlok will face each other directly through opposing windows. The sequence of meticulously redirected gazes is resolved once and for all when Ellen, contending now with her husband's nonchalance, "exhibits" herself, throwing open the bedroom window and exposing herself to the vampire.

Overtly theatrical, Ellen's gesture toward a visible observer runs contrary to the essentially bourgeois prohibition against "making a scene," the social equivalent of an aesthetic regimen that sought to rid the theater of practices whose effect was to reinforce an awareness of the audience. The sanction against histrionic self-expression both on stage and in private life—*Mach kein Theater!* is the German variation—defines a domestic realm whose physical confines conform to those of a stage divided off from the spectator by a "fourth wall." Domestic drama, with its realism and interiorized autonomy, is part of the aesthetic armature of *Nosferatu*, as is illustrated by the various scenes just described. The diametrical opposition, in one of these scenes (Fig. 4), of the house facing Hutter's (right background) and the arrangement of crystal and porcelain heirlooms on a table (left foreground) clarifies the threat posed by the former, both discursively and structurally. These carefully displayed objects are the essence of *milieu*—an interior that is total and palpably full. Witness those several Vermeer-like shots in which Ellen, shown reading, sewing, or adjusting her shawl, is placed before a window that admits light but affords no view of the outside world.

By contrast, the starkly two-dimensional façade is reminiscent of Robert Wiene's *Caligari,* in whose stylized and patently artificial renderings of deep space Noël Burch discerns a "*self-conscious return* to

the major features of primitive cinema (and especially the autarchy and fixity of the primitive tableau in preference to the 'realism' of modern editing)."[6] The careful coordination of shots in *Nosferatu* exemplifies this "realism"; the "primitive tableau," of which the façade "directly opposite" is a plausible vestige, is typified by the work of Méliès, in which variety acts were filmed against unmistakably flat backdrops. The modernism of Wiene's film lies in the sustained, calculated tension between two traditions, one essentially theatrical, the other realistic (anti-theatrical). Murnau fully incorporates the former within the latter, securing the illusion by reproducing the more primitive code as part of the story. Staring at Ellen from the facing building, Orlok embodies what Burch, with reference to Méliès, terms a "rigorously centered frontality" (167), and we may see in Murnau's vampire the diegetic return of the primitive tableau. His destruction, by the first rays of sunlight, not only restores the integrity of the milieu he has violated but also makes good on the prophecy issued in *Caligari* after the hapless Alain addresses the spectacle on stage: "You die at dawn."

The shot/reverse shot that positions Ellen and Orlok directly opposite each other also produces Ellen as a figure seen from behind, which puts one in mind of the *Rückenfiguren* familiar from the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*The Wanderer Above the Sea of Mist* [ca. 1818]) is certainly the most frequently reproduced of many examples in which a land- or seascape is partially eclipsed by the figure's back, which is parallel to the picture plane it evenly divides. Objects within these compositions reinforce a symmetry that is seemingly compulsive: a cross, which imports a simple geometry into the image; the mast of a ship, likewise cruciform; a lone tree, cleanly bisecting the horizon at the painting's center. In the delicately toned *Frau am Fenster* (*Woman at the Window* [1822]), the crosspieces between the panes supply a precise grid that gathers up all the vertical and horizontal lines of the room and guides the placement of the figure.[7] Writing on *Abtei im Eichwald* (*Abbey in the Oak Forest* [1810]), Robert Rosenblum links the austerity of structure to the wintry theme (monks bearing a casket beneath barren trees and a crumbling monastery): "Aligned characteristically for Friedrich, on a central axis, [these ruins] form the frozen, inflexible focus of a

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[6] Noël Burch, *Life to those Shadows*, trans. and ed. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 183.
[7] Werner Hoffmann, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich: Beck, 2000) 110.

Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at the Window* (1822). Oil on canvas, 44 x 37 cm.
Photo: Jörg P. Anders. Courtesy Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

funerary procession."[8] Thus aligned, Friedrich's figures seen from the rear are dispositive of that "rigorously centered frontality" by means of which, following Burch, Méliès' painted tableaux enhanced "the effect of visual flatness and the spectator's sense of externality" (167).

While Friedrich's paintings are anything but "primitive" or plainly two-dimensional, aspects of his technique, including his habit of overdrawing outlines in ink, lend his work a sense of almost hallucinatory surrealism. Observing a similar penchant for minutely drawn natural detail, Kenneth Clark compared Albrecht Dürer's famous watercolor of grasses to "the back of a case containing a stuffed animal."[9] Overstated as this may be, it suggests a parallel comparison between Friedrich and the diorama, of which the box containing a toy animal is a trivial but true specimen. Around 1830 Friedrich executed a transparent painting, experimenting with techniques developed by Daguerre in the making of his famous dioramas. When lit from the front, the piece displays a river landscape in the muted hues of dawn. When illuminated from behind, however, the pale morning is transformed into a fiery sunset, the river reflecting red sky, and mountains, previously invisible, rise up in the distance.[10] Painted later in his career, Friedrich's one surviving foray into *Transparentmalerei* seems merely to explicitize the transparency of his paintings overall, with their limpid and diaphanous light, the paint applied so thinly as to retain no trace of a brushstroke.[11] The programmatic *fort/da* of this particular composition is implicit in a plethora of paintings in which subjects are transfixed before scenes which they partially obscure. The wanderer, boldly silhouetted against a luminous background, or seated figures gazing out at ships against a shimmering sunset, are cast *in relief.*

Where does the *Rückenfigur* fit within an aesthetic program aimed at minimizing an awareness of the spectator? In the true spirit of the fetish, the placement of these figures constitutes a rear-guard action that works to neutralize—to send into remission—the knowledge that

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[8] Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 29–30.

[9] Kenneth Clark, *Civilization: A Personal View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 151.

[10] The painting is entitled *Gebirgige Flußlandschaft am Morgen/Abend* (*Mountainous River Landscape in the Morning/Evening*). See Birgit Verwiebe, "Transparentmalerei und Romantik: Zur Vorgeschichte moderner Lichtmedien," *Ernste Spiele: Der Geist der Romantik in der deutschen Kunst 1790–1990*, ed. Christoph Vitali (Stuttgart: Oktagon, 1995) 532–37.

[11] Fried's brief comments on Friedrich emphasize the same symmetry and transparency—features he characterizes as "un-French" (104).

the spectacle is not "the whole thing" but has its cause somewhere
else. The reverse shot in cinema, like the figure seen from behind,
undoes the rupture that arises from an awareness of an apparatus.
Indeed, the shot/reverse-shot formation presents a means of interro-
gating, via the pictorial regimes of Romanticism, the effacement of
the viewing public and its role in a cinema whose debt to the
Romantic tradition is commonplace.[12] This effacement may be thought
of in terms of the "naturalistic" dramatic tradition that began with
Diderot and Lessing and culminated in the work of Ibsen and
Chekhov—a tradition of domestic drama whose principal aesthetic
conceit was the absence of an audience. The "Vorspiel auf dem
Theater" of Goethe's *Faust* already addresses the tension between the
popular dramatic tradition, represented here by an entrepreneurial
street theater, and stage practices aimed at establishing an autono-
mous, "despatialized" space—the *Himmelsenge* envisioned by the Poet,
who shuns the surging throng of spectators. To the extent that early
cinema reanimated this tension, the technical means by which the
maturing medium worked to overcome the "theatricality" of its
infancy may be brought to bear on the study of competing dramatic
traditions themselves.

   Theatricality is itself absorbed within the plot of Chaplin's *City
Lights* (1931), in which Charlie, in his familiar role as tramp, falls in
love with a blind flower-vendor.[13] Sightless, she not only personifies
the spectacle innocent of its audience, she also represents an ideal
point of view that cancels out the mute, physical comedy that is
Chaplin's stock in trade. Attempting to elude a motorcycle cop,
Charlie slips across the seat of a parked limousine, exiting onto the
sidewalk. This brings him face-to-face with the young woman, who,
alerted to his presence by the slamming of the door, mistakes him for
a wealthy man and offers him a carnation. Not wishing to disillusion
her, he parts company with his last dime, and after she fastens the
flower to his lapel, he hovers nearby, at pains to observe her
undetected. Unaware of his continued presence, the woman empties
a pail of water into Charlie's face, her blindness an effective short-

   [12] See Eva M. J Schmid, "Magie der Zeichen: Murnau und die bildende Kunst," and
Ursula von Keitz, "Der Blick ins Imaginäre: Über 'Erzählen'und 'Sehen' bei Murnau,"
both in Klaus Kreimeier, ed., *Die Metaphysik des Dekors: Raum, Architektur und Licht im
klassischen deutschen Stummfilm* (Berlin: Schüren, 1994) 49–99; Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted
Screen*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 106–08.
   [13] See Kenneth S. Calhoon, "Blind Gestures: Chaplin, Diderot, Lessing," *Modern
Language Notes* 115 (2000): 381–402.

circuit that disconnects raucous comedy or gestural excess from naturalistic theater, which relies on the conceit of not being watched. Put differently, her inability to see neutralizes the Brechtian potential of Chaplin's theater, erecting in its place a dramatic style that requires a minimum of expression. Charlie, soaked to the bone, tiptoes around the corner and out of sight, at once preserving the girl's insouciance and erasing himself from the spectacle of the world.

A certain autonomy is marked out on both counts. The young woman exhibits a self-sufficiency akin to that of a child, for whom objects are perfected by an imagination unencumbered by the real. Hers is the pleasure that diffuses from the mirror image and projects the spectacle of the world as all-seeing. "[T]his all-seeing aspect," Lacan writes, "is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows."[14] The flower-vendor's actual blindness merely obviates the pretense, which is likewise the ruse of the absent spectator. Žižek's gloss on the Lacanian dynamic fleshes out its implications for the theater and enables us to identify Charlie as the prototype of the subject:

> While we perceive ourselves as external bystanders stealing a furtive glance into some majestic Mystery which is indifferent to us, we are blinded to the fact that the entire spectacle of Mystery is staged *with an eye to our gaze*: to attract and fascinate our gaze—here, the Other deceives us in so far as it induces us to believe that we were *not* chosen; here, it is the true addressee him/herself who mistakes his/her position for that of an accidental bystander.[15]

What Žižek here defines as the "external" or "accidental" bystander conforms to the foundational illusion of modern drama, in which the spectacle is "blind" to the spectator. The young woman's blindness projects the innocuousness that Chaplin's tramp requires, enabling him to blend in to the point of invisibility. She appears suddenly as if in fulfillment of his wish *not* to be seen; as such she constitutes an antipode to the various policemen who punctuate the plot of this and so many other of Chaplin's films. In this sense, too, Charlie is *the* subject, repeatedly hailed in the manner evoked by Althusser to

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[14] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 75.

[15] Slavoj Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large," *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan . . . But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verson, 1992) 224–25.

illustrate the process of interpellation. Fried's observation (92) that, for Diderot, the painting should "arrest" (*arrêter*) the beholder resonates broadly with a theory that models subject-formation on the experience of being singled out by a cop. A person is a subject by virtue of his recognizing himself, and himself particularly, in the personal pronoun with which he is summoned. Althusser: "Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place on the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By way of this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*."[16]

If the apparatus of the state and that of the cinema have a common interest in self-effacement, then what Althusser has here called a "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion" has its parallel in the so-called "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree rule," first elaborated at Vitagraph, which dictates that a given shot not encompass more than half of an implied circle.[17] For the camera to rotate more than 180 degrees would call attention to the apparatus and undermine the apparent autonomy of the shot. Now, the viewing subject finds in the plenitude of the shot a pleasure akin to that of the child before the mirror, but this pleasure is soon eroded by the awareness that the shot is limited, bounded by or framed against an unseen or absent field *behind*. The reverse shot answers the viewer's demand to know who or what is controlling the shot. Its point of view located within the visual field of the first shot, the reverse shot explores the formerly occluded field, locating within it a spectator through whose eyes the preceding shot was presumably seen. The gaze that controls our look is thus displaced from the camera onto a character within the diegesis, restoring the integrity of the fiction by concealing the level of enunciation. In the words of Jean-Pierre Oudart, this effacement of absence—the reappropriation of absence within the film— amounts to "the abolition of the Absent One and its resurrection in someone."[18]

If we are at all inclined to perceive an analogue of this resurrection in certain images by Friedrich, we may also see in the succession of his paintings a vacillation between those in which the view belongs to no one and others in which it belongs to someone. Like the reverse shot, the insertion of the *Rückenfigur* satisfies the viewer's need to know

[16] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 174.

[17] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 201–02. My reliance on Silverman's account of the shot/reverse-shot formation is considerable.

[18] Quoted in Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) 87.

whose vision it is.[19] Contrastively, those paintings that place the viewer before a vast and vertiginous void and leave the absence unaccounted for are compatible with what Oudart terms a "theological cinema"

> intended for a profoundly religious spectator, in the Lacanian sense of someone who leaves to the Other (God, the artist, the Absent One) the burden of the cause, demanding of that Other the guarantee of a meaning supposed . . . to proceed directly from a vision, from *a look which gives meaning to things*. A theological cinema again in that its writing comes down to proving the visible by means of the invisible and vice versa. (Heath 92)

It has been argued that a reading of Weimar cinema in light of Romantic painting must take into account the shift from a *craft* notion of technique to an *industrial* notion of technology.[20] However, Romanticism was already deeply invested in defending the subject against the suspicion that his purportedly distinctive vision had been scripted, "a product of a palpably social practice of representation."[21] It makes sense that a new medium, honing the devices meant to thwart such suspicion, would find recourse in an aesthetics already wrestling with the problem of reauthentication. At stake is not simply the illusion but an object both beautiful and complete, an inside without an outside. The effect of the reverse shot is to make the apparatus disappear behind a semblance of nature, and what Metz says about the film within a film may also be true of the figure seen from the rear: the effect is to "downgear the mechanism of our belief-unbelief and anchor it in several stages" (74).

In *Nosferatu*, it is within a plausibly Gothic setting that the shot/reverse-shot formation accords with an architecture that effaces technology altogether and institutes the vampire as the ghost in the machine. We recall that Hutter is delivered to Orlok's castle by a horse-drawn carriage whose driver we will come to recognize as the Count himself. Hutter disembarks and looks up in wonder at the coachman, apparent purveyor of a stunning technique. The driver returns Hutter's gaze while redirecting it towards the castle with a

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[19] A connection between these figures in Friedrich and the reverse shot has already been drawn by Robert Spadoni in "The Figure Seen from the Rear, Vitagraph, and the Development of the Shot/Reverse Shot," *Film History* 11 (1999): 319–41. For a less technical but highly suggestive discussion of Friedrich and the cinema, see Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991) 292–308.

[20] Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000) 227.

[21] Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 135–36.

stern gesture of his whip. Hutter strides up to the massive front gate, glancing back at the carriage, which is shown racing away at supernatural speed. The gate suddenly swings open, causing Hutter to start before pressing forward (Fig. 5). Murnau cuts to Orlok, approaching from the opposite direction, emerging out of the blackness of a tunnel-like passage. Cut back to Hutter, who approaches the camera through an arched passageway, glancing over his shoulder as the gate shuts behind him. For the subsequent shot, the camera is placed behind Orlok, his back to the viewer, the advancing Hutter appearing small in the distance. Both figures, Orlok in the middle foreground and Hutter in the background, are encompassed by the arch of yet another covered passageway, which both frames and separates them (Fig. 6). Catching sight of the Count, Hutter again hesitates but proceeds forward, doffing his hat as the two come face to face. A close-up frames the faces of both, Hutter watching in awe as Orlok remarks on the lateness of the hour. The title-card is followed by a shot from behind as the two disappear into the same dark tunnel whence the vampire emerged moments earlier. Just before they disappear, Orlok, as if to torment his guest, halts for an instant, causing Hutter once again to hesitate anxiously. Throughout, the vampire appears to glide through space, while Hutter's forward movement is an aggregate of fits and starts—expressions, respectively, of filmic continuity and discontinuity. Hutter's various backward glances—at the departing carriage and the closing gate—seem directed towards the apparatus itself, and the doubling of the vampire as coachman projects the dual placement of a single camera, which here facilitates a full-frontal and reciprocal approach.

The succession of apertures and passageways that guide this

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

approach provides for a careful multiplication of framings, which in turn helps create the extreme depth of field that is Murnau's signature. This framing explores a spatial depth that seems always to convert itself into the phantom. During the second night of Hutter's sojourn, Orlok enters his guest's bedchamber, almost floating out of the darkness through an arched doorway, leaving Hutter to cower in his bed, the covers pulled tightly over his eyes. A card reading "at the same hour" (*Zur selben Stunde*) inaugurates a series of cross-cuts between Transylvania and Wismar—a pronounced disruption that passes for continuity only by virtue of the vampire's clairvoyance. A delirious Ellen bolts upright in bed and desperately calls out her husband's name. Murnau cuts back to Transylvania, where the sharp silhouettes of the Count's talon-like hands hover menacingly on the wall above Hutter. These hands, which form a virtual shadow of Ellen's outstretched arms in the previous shot, suddenly retract as if in response to her cry. Arrested—"hailed"—Orlok straightens and slowly turns, facing across his left shoulder in her direction (Fig. 7). When this shot dissolves back into the previous scene (Fig. 8), the faint superimposition of Orlok's figure reveals a perfect eyeline match. The two in effect face each other, the sequence of shots installing a vast geographical space within the left-right axis of the screen.[22]

This literal turning point represents a lateral realignment of reciprocal address whose circuit now excludes Hutter, shown variously with his head covered or his eyes simply averted and shut tight. As if he could not be seen by what he cannot see, his attitude is that of a child vis-à-vis the "all-seeing aspect of the world," to which Orlok, as *malocchio*, lends an evil personification. Hutter is privy to a spectacle that is suddenly indifferent to him, and while Ellen's wide-eyed gesture is as intensely theatrical a moment as one finds in this film, it effects a compositional integrity consistent with traditions—in both painting and theater—meant to feign an obliviousness toward the spectator. Much in the way that painting, following Fried, learned to enhance the aesthetic illusion by granting the beholder a fictive invisibility before the tableau, so the cinema, following Burch, learned to maximize the "diegetic process" by minimizing the vulnerability that ensues whenever the actor looks along the axis of the lens,

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[22] See Elsaesser 238 on the "architecture of secret affinities" created by "the logic of the imaginary space constructed by the editing" in this specific sequence. See also Risholm 286–87.

Fig. 7   Fig. 8

i.e., directly at the viewer. We have seen how visibility and vulnerability converge in *City Lights*, as Charlie finds refuge in the vector of the flower girl's blank stare. Her inability to see her admirer guarantees the wholeness of the image that contains her, which is not unlike that of Ellen toying with her cat. Fried identifies in certain eighteenth-century painters the habit of "exploiting the theme of blindness for manifestly absorptive ends," and his description of one particular painting seems relevant to the climax of Murnau's film:

> Greuze's canvas [*L'Aveugle trompé*] depicts a young wife and her lover wholly engrossed in an effort to deceive her blind and aged husband. Indeed the young man appears so intent on not making a sound that without knowing it he has begun to spill the contents of the jug he carries in his right hand. In short the theme of blindness is made the basis for a narrative-dramatic structure which . . . asserts the primacy of absorption. (69–70)

In accordance with the triangulation of looks detailed earlier with respect to *Nosferatu*, the scenario described here has a striking analogue in the film's final sequence, in which the vampire is framed as a spectator spellbound before a domestic scene observed through a window. Hutter is not aged but clearly impotent in his lethargy, and he is blind to the point of being easily deceived: Ellen wakes him and sends him to fetch a doctor, thus clearing the way for Orlok, whom she summons with a gesture that is grandly theatrical.

Ellen is likewise, however, a *Rückenfigur*, seen from the rear in a manner reminiscent of Friedrich's *Frau am Fenster*. While Ellen's pathos is clearly at odds with the meditative repose shown in the painting, the element of predation that defines the difference may

help identify what is at stake in those of Friedrich's compositions that rehearse the problem of precarious but as such mesmerizing visibility—images in which human subjects are rendered motionless, held in silent thrall by the prospect before them. To explore the full sense in which these figures in Friedrich are *captivated* is to bring us closer to an explanation of his importance for Murnau. The inducement to silence that initiates *Nosferatu* institutes the viewer as one who *dares* not draw the attention of the spectacle. At risk is not simply the illusion, but survival:

> Nosferatu. – Tönt dieses Wort Dich nicht an wie der mitternächtige Ruf des Totenvogels? Hüte Dich es zu sagen, sonst verblassen die Bilder des Lebens zu Schatten, spukhafte Träume steigen aus dem Herzen und nähren sich von Deinem Blut.

> Nosferatu. – Doesn't this word resound like the midnight call of the bird of death? Beware of speaking it aloud, lest the images of life fade to shadows and frightful dreams arise from your heart and feed off your blood.

Echoing this warning is the motto used by Roger Caillois in his famous study of natural mimicry: "Prends garde: à jouer au fantôme, on le devient."[23] Behind the experience of the Uncanny is a magic that undoes the border between self and world and recalls the dead to life. An insect's assimilation to a leaf or twig is evidence of a "magical tendency" in the biological world. The sickly-pale Nosferatu, who sleeps by day and eats nothing, leads the "reduced existence" of the organism that adapts itself to the inanimate. Nosferatu is simply the more grotesque incarnation of the same reduced existence, for his is the self-imposed austerity of the social class that seeks pleasure in the deferral of pleasure, survival in a manner of living that is itself death-like. What Caillois terms the "inertia of the élan vital" is part of a general "instinct of renunciation," which in the social order corresponds to a modern mode of living that, in withdrawing from what is physically vital, culminates in the "mimesis unto death" wherein the subject, following Horkheimer and Adorno, "mimes the rigidity of a nature bereft of its soul," i.e., "die Starrheit [der entseelten Natur] imitiert."[24]

Starrheit ("rigidity"), along with *Erstarrung* ("petrification") and

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[23] Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (1984): 16–32.
[24] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1985) 53.

even *starren* ("to stare") are key terms in a comparison of Murnau, whose studied pictorialism is in part dictated by the physical immobility of the camera, and Friedrich, whose *Rückenfiguren*, in the words of one scholar, appear "frozen in contemplation, their stillness a mark of immense interiority."[25] We underscore the word "frozen" and perceive in this "immense interiority" an emotional void—one that seeks out its echo in land- and seascapes that guarantee isolation. *Das Eismeer* (*The Sea of Ice* [1823/24]), in which the vacant hull of a schooner is wedged between towering fragments of arctic ice, may be the *summa* of what Manfred Frank once termed "the cold heart" of German Romanticism.[26] A less grandly tragic variant is Müller's *Die Winterreise*, whose subject has not lost love but fled from it. In one of the poems, the wanderer exhorts his own heart to recognize in the river, still swelling beneath its icy crust, an image of itself.[27] The speaker etches his lover's name in the river's frozen *Rinde*, and one is tempted to see here an image of the process whereby, following Freud, character is itself an encrustation formed by the precipitates left behind whenever pleasure is foregone. We need but reflect on the arid circumstances that often cause us to characterize our lives as "monastic" to see in Friedrich's *Mönch am Meer* (*Monk by the Sea* [1809]) an expression less of spiritual longing than of the compromise by which, again citing Freud, a kind of low-grade contentment is achieved through the cultivation of distance: "Gewollte Vereinsamung, Fernhaltung von den anderen ist der nächstliegende Schutz gegen das Leid, das einem aus menschlichen Beziehungen erwachsen kann. . . . [D]as Glück, das man auf diesem Weg erreichen kann, ist das der Ruhe" ("Voluntary isolation, keeping one's distance from others is the most readily available shield against the suffering that can arise from human relationships. . . . The happiness that one can achieve by this path is that of rest").[28]

Freud's words are accurate to the general Romantic inclination

[25] Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990) 166; on the relation of "Erstarrung" to "starren," see Christopher J. Wild, *Theater der Keuschheit—Keuschheit des Theaters: Zu einer Geschichte der (Anti-)Theatralität von Gryphius bis Kleist* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2003) 75.

[26] Manfred Frank, "Steinherz und Geldseele: Ein Symbol im Kontext," *Das kalte Herz und andere Texte der Romantik* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1978) 345–57.

[27] Peter Rautmann, *C. D. Friedrich: Das Eismeer* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991) 29–30.

[28] Sigmund Freud, *Werke aus den Jahren 1925–1931*, vol. 14, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud (London: Imago, 1952) 435; Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989) 27 (translation modified).

that sought solace through an accommodation of the self to a circumambient stillness. Goethe's "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh" frames this in terms of an aesthetic disposition that attunes the senses to what is barely perceptible—the faint breath whose long afterlife in German letters is phantasmatic.[29] Goethe's poem is evoked toward the end of Fontane's *Effi Briest* when Effi, severely weakened by consumption, exposes herself to the chill night air:

> [Effi] setzte sich an das offene Fenster, um noch einmal die kühle Nachtluft einzusaugen. Die Sterne flimmerten, und im Parke regte sich kein Blatt. Aber je länger sie hinaushorchte, je deutlicher hörte sie wieder, daß es wie ein feines Rieseln auf die Platanen niederfiel. Ein Gefühl der Befreiung überkam sie. "Ruhe, Ruhe."[30]

> Effi sat down by the open window in order to drink in the cool night air one last time. The stars twinkled, and in the garden not a leaf stirred. But the longer she listened, the more clearly she heard a fine drizzle falling upon the sycamores. A sense of release came over her. "Peace. Peace."

This *Hinaushorchen* both recalls and contrasts with those episodes, years earlier, when the recently married Effi found herself drawn to the pounding surf, the cemetery by the dunes, and the mysterious voices heard faintly on the wind—Friedrich-esque elements that are condensed in *Nosferatu* when Ellen is shown seated beside a sailor's graveyard, looking out to sea, awaiting the arrival of an unspecified "him." The parallel that emerges identifies *Effi Briest* as an intermediary textual register: in both Fontane's novel and Murnau's film, a phantom stands in for a husband whose careerist ambitions lead to inattention, prolonged absence, and a lack of intimacy. Just as a frustrated Ellen summons the vampire in place of her catatonic husband, so Effi may be thought to conjure the Chinese ghost. Manifest as little more than fresh air, the phantom projects the susceptibility that ultimately claims Effi's life.

Likewise, it is a "fatal breath" (*tödlicher Hauch*) that in *Nosferatu* fills the sails of the speeding ship, drives the surf, and as the vampire draws near, extinguishes a candle and causes a translucent curtain to dance fitfully in the moonlight. The shot-sequence that links the bellying canvas of the sails to the blowing curtain naturalizes the

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[29] Eichendorff's "Mondnacht" ("Die Luft ging durch die Felder") lends the breeze an air of personification, and the scarcely audible *Hauch* echoes cryptically through the final "nach Haus."

[30] Theodor Fontane, *Werke, Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger, vol. 4 (Munich: Hanser, 1974) 294.

connection by means of the mounting breeze registered by the
breaking waves, the swaying boughs of trees, the locks of Ellen's hair,
and even her nightgown, which like the curtain is luminous in the
night. The relatively fluid transition of otherwise discontinuous
images is facilitated by the breath of the Absent One whose own
ambiguous hold on life gives supernatural form to the very project of
cinema. The curtain's sudden movement hints at the problem of
animation and implicates the silver screen in the same interplay of
revelation and concealment prevalent in Friedrich. The function of
screen is performed by the sail itself, which as veil (*velum*), finds in *Der
Mönch am Meer* (*Monk by the Sea* [1809]) a peculiar apotheosis:
infrared analysis revealed that two ships, formerly prominent in the
image, had been painted out, leaving the monk dwarfed by the vast
and wind-swept emptiness of the coastline.

If the sails represent the discursive counterpart of the canvas on
which Friedrich painted them, then their deletion is likewise the
equivalent of the function of painting per se, which is that of making
canvas disappear. In a study with broad ramifications for the present
discussion, Norman Bryson argues that oil pigment, the medium
most genial to the Western tradition of painting, is well-adapted to a
process of double erasure meant to secure the painting's transcen-
dence by obliterating any trace of the labor that produced it: "stroke
conceals canvas, as stroke conceals stroke."[31] By means of such
camouflage, the work achieves a semblance of autonomy and with it
an apparent indifference towards the viewer. Much as Žižek describes
the mechanism that causes us to "perceive ourselves as external
bystanders stealing a furtive glance into some majestic Mystery,"
Bryson, with emphasis on the term "glance," evokes a "furtive or
sideways look whose attention is always elsewhere, which shifts to
conceal its own existence" (94). In this "inadvertency" Bryson sees a
refinement of a Western technique whose essence is the suppression
of the kind of "deictic reference" that implicates both artist and
viewer in the process of creation (89). What amounts to an efface-
ment of the viewer achieves new heights of perfection in Vermeer,
whose paintings install the spectator as an accidental bystander, not as
an implied presence on whose vantage point the entire composition
depends. His *View of Delft* (1660–61) exemplifies for Bryson a vision

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[31] Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale UP,
1983) 92.

Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea* (1809). Oil on Canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm.
Photo: Jörg P. Anders. Courtesy Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

that claims an integrity unto itself; it purports to be "there" prior to
the viewer's "chance" arrival, the result being a formal closure that
looks ahead to the anti-theatrical bias that emerged a century later:
"the spectator is an unexpected presence, not a theatrical audience."
This is in contrast to the tradition of more deliberately geometrical
compositions in which painted figures are *advertent*, in the literal
sense of "turning toward," i.e., "fully aware of the presence of an
unseen witness towards whom they direct their physical stances"
(Bryson 111).[32]

   An emphatic inversion of that "rigorously centered frontality," *The
Monk by the Sea* absorbs into the "majestic Mystery" of its redoubled

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   [32] Bryson (114) finds a *Rückenfigur* of sorts in Vermeer's *The Artist in his Studio*, in
which a painter, seated at his easel, has his back to the observer, his torso largely
obscuring the image taking shape on the canvas before him: "the viewer and the
painter no longer cohabit the same continuum, and so far from entering into the inner
perceptual field of the painter's body, the viewer sees that body from the outside, from
behind. What the turning of the artist's back indicates . . . is the exclusion of the viewer
as physical presence. . . . [The viewer] is not given this place to stand in, this privileged
focus of a spectacular moment."

void any and every vestige of technique or process.[33] Notoriously vacant, the image conveys what Michael Taussig has called the "breath of empty space," something "sexually and supernaturally charged with the power of the phantom presence of the known-unknown."[34] He is referring to a vernacular tradition of sacred flute music, which, silent for its being heard, replicates the wind that washes over hills and grasses. The call of a mythic bird, the music made by these flutes may be heard, but the flutes themselves must never, "on pain of death," be seen. There is an "as if" element to the ritual of concealing what everyone knows to be there (the flutes, the apparatus), and what Taussig deems the "public secret," namely, a community's willing participation in a charade which it recognizes to be just that, is entirely compatible with the "fiction" underlying modern drama: the actors only pretend to be ignorant of the spectators.

Regarding a sacred music whose power is "intimately associated with its being everywhere yet nowhere" (Taussig 208), it is interesting to consider—by way of conclusion—the "artificial silence" that, according to Burch, was fostered by the introduction of music in cinema. This music came first in the form of live accompaniment, a "hangover" from popular entertainments such as the circus:

> But confronted with moving photographic images, music . . . created a "higher" space embracing both the space of the auditorium and the space pictured on the screen, and formed a kind of sound barrier around each spectator. Thus from the beginning music served to isolate the spectator from projector noise, coughing, whispered commentaries, etc. In this respect, the introduction of music at projection points was *the first deliberate*

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[33] Given certain similarities, it even seems plausible to regard *The Monk by the Sea* as a rarified version of the *View of Delft*. The tiny figure of the monk, standing on a strip of shoreline at lower left, replicates exactly—if coincidentally—the size and placement of the two figures conversing at river's edge in Vermeer's painting. Yet these same two figures, beyond the fact that they seem uninterested in the view that interests us, are viewed from above, while Friedrich's viewer is level with the monk, the latter's head being nearly flush with the horizon. We might even say that Friedrich's *Wiesen bei Greifswald* (*Meadows at Greifswald*) conforms to the regime of topographical painting that preceded Vermeer, in which the city is reduced to a narrow ribbon of buildings stretched out and essentially flattened along a perfectly horizontal line. In *The Monk by the Sea*, this pure horizon is all that remains, guiding the beholder's eye not into the distance but laterally, both anticipating the moving diorama (and cinematic pan) and emphasizing the picture plane. See John Nash, *Vermeer* (London: Scala, 1991); also Albrecht Koschorke, *Die Erfindung des Horizonts: Grenze und Grenzüberschreitung in literarischen Landschaftsbildern* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990) 67–68.

[34] Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 206–07. On the subject of the sail as veil, see Taussig 262.

step towards what was to become the institution's interpellation of the film spectator
as individual. (235, italics added)

In contrast to the pointedly theatrical "laugh track," which undoes the isolation of today's tele-viewer by simulating the presence of others (comedy being hard to separate from community), the musical score muffles the apparatus (projector noise) and the fellow spectator (coughing and whispering) in the service of a "higher" space. Music becomes a means by which the cinema, still mute, affords the viewer an "immense interiority," which is at odds with externalizing techniques, both popular and baroque, which post-Enlightenment drama suppressed, and which early cinema, in part *because* of its silence, revived.[35] "Frozen in contemplation," Friedrich's subjects partake of the mechanism that makes of Odysseus, immobilized before the Sirens, the forerunner of the musical connoisseur (Horkheimer and Adorno 53). Just as the speaker of Goethe's "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh" finds himself surrounded by the faintly heard "breath of empty space," so Friedrich's wanderer and monk (not to mention Ellen or Effi amidst the dunes) embody that "reduced existence" which, nurtured by "deliberate isolation," passes for happiness. Enveloped by the stillness they emulate, they aspire to a higher space, a *Himmelsenge* devoid of the throng, the machine, and the outside.

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[35] The manner in which cinema—silent cinema in particular—straddles the divide between the popular (theatrical) tradition and the institution defined by the conceit of the absent (silent) spectator is illustrated by a family anecdote: the author's father-in-law, born in 1919 in rural Northern Italy, tells the story of the local movie-house in which the musical accompaniment was performed by a blind pianist, Carleí. Because he was blind, Carleí had to rely on the audience to describe—to shout out—the events on the screen ("Carleí! They're kissing!"; "Carleí! The cavalry's charging!").