

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265173255>

The beauty of the act: Figuring film and the delirious baroque in 'Holy Motors'

Article in *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* · January 2014

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2014.1.WALT

CITATION

1

READS

283

1 author:



Saige Walton

University of South Australia

22 PUBLICATIONS 25 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Cinema's Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement (AUP, 2016) [View project](#)



Materialising Absence in Film and Media [View project](#)

The beauty of the act

Figuring film and the delirious baroque in 'Holy Motors'

Saige Walton

NECSUS 3 (1): 241–261

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2014.1.WALT

Abstract

Leos Carax's metamorphic *Holy Motors* (2012) has been received as evading conceptual, physical, and cinematic coherence. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the fold and Nicole Brenez's work on the figural powers of the cinema, this article argues that Carax's film reprises the aesthetics of a delirious baroque. Re-evaluating the relevance of the baroque for Carax and for cinema, it identifies the delirious baroque as an embodied aesthetics of movement, materiality, and multiplicity as well as vision.

Keywords: baroque, cinema, figural, film, fold, Gilles Deleuze, Leos Carax, metamorphosis, Nicole Brenez, sensation, traces

To the intuition of an unstable and moving world, of a multiple and inconstant life, hesitating between being and seeming, fond of disguise and of theatrical representation, there correspond, on the expressive and structural level, a rhetoric of metaphor and *trompe l'oeil*, a poetics of surprise and variousness, and a style of metamorphosis, of dynamic spread and dispersion in unity. – Jean Rousset, *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France*

In Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012) we ride alongside the mercurial Mister Oscar (Denis Lavant) as he inhabits one role after another.¹ Transported around Paris in a white stretch limousine by his female driver Céline (Edith Scob), we are privy to Oscar's worldly performances and to his moments behind the scenes. Oscar inhabits so many roles across the course of the film (investment banker, father, female beggar, monster, gangster, lover) that the notion of an original self is placed in question.

If Carax's recent effort has excited cinephilic attention it is because *Holy Motors* is a reflexive film about cinema and the different bodies, affects, and figures that it engenders.² Given its metamorphoses of the self, its allusions to film history, and its propensity for enigma, *Holy Motors* is a film that also eludes neat interpretation. Yet Oscar's eclectic 'acts' do not undo 'any conceptual fixity' as some critics have suggested, just as the hallucinatory world of *Holy Motors* exceeds a surrealist poetic of the cinema as dream.³ In what follows I propose that the multi-layered and accruing performances of this film are anchored in a particular aesthetic regime: the baroque. As Jean Rousset remarks in the quotation that begins this article, the baroque is invested in 'an unstable and moving world [...] a multiple and inconstant life' and its 'poetics of surprise' is expressive of a highly metamorphic style and structure.⁴

Following from Rousset, Gilles Deleuze, and other thinkers of the baroque, this article extends upon the embodied and conceptual relevance of the baroque for Carax's film. While the baroque is often equated with a spectacular visuality in the cinema I begin this article by examining it as a deliriously embodied aesthetic that is steeped in infinite movement, materiality, and multiplicity. For the purposes of this article, it was Jacques Lacan who first indicated how the baroque generates a delightful delirium. Writing on the historic baroque churches of Europe, he described their dispersive effects as 'everything attached to the walls, everything that is crumbling, *everything that delights, everything that is delirious*'.⁵ It is this rampant proliferation that I am interested in with regards to Carax. In *Holy Motors* a deliriously baroque unfolding of vision and form intertwines with the sensuous lures of action and movement, giving rise to a cinema that moves us affectively at the same time as it calls us to delight in its 'pleated' construction.

Finally, in bringing together baroque scholarship with the figural powers of the cinema put forth by Nicole Brenez, Adrian Martin, and others, I look to figural film analysis to enrich our understanding of *Holy Motors*.⁶ As I shall detail, it is a baroque configuration of film, body, and world that drives *Holy Motors* forwards as well as back into the past, figuring on-screen the history, the imaginative possibility, and all the radical strangeness that cinema can be as an infinite baroque fold.

Towards a delirious baroque

Attributed to the Portuguese word *barroco* – the name for an irregular or warped pearl – 17th century ‘baroque’ art and culture was derided by the Enlightenment for its sensuous exuberance and its formal rebellion against classical norms. As a stylistic and critical concept the baroque has since been expanded beyond the stricture of its historic origins. Across the pages of Deleuze, Mieke Bal, Omar Calabrese, and Angela Ndalianis it emerges as a trans-historic and cross-cultural phenomenon whose formal manifestations can inflect contemporary film and media. The intertwining of past and present baroques makes for what Bal calls a ‘preposterous history’.⁷ Refusing linearity and chronology, the trans-historic baroque yields a ‘shared time’ whereby ‘the past is present in the present in the form of *traces*’; past traces, figures, and forms of the baroque still re-circulate today.⁸

In her book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Ndalianis has similarly observed how neo-baroque media of the late 20th and 21st centuries reveal a baroque:

delight in spectacle and sensual experiences. ... The neo-baroque combines the visual, the auditory and the textual in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth-century baroque form, but that dynamism is expressed ... in technologically and culturally different ways.⁹

While Ndalianis underscores the sensuous genealogy of the baroque, few applications of the baroque in film/media studies have engaged with it or its cinematic incarnation as an aesthetic of the senses.¹⁰ Raphaël Bassan’s discussion of a neo-baroque French cinema of the 1980s offers us a typical case in point.

In an article originally published in *Revue du Cinéma* in 1989, Bassan defended a set of filmmakers who were criticised for breaking with the respected traditions of naturalism and politics in French cinema. Amongst those filmmakers associated with the maligned *cinéma du look* (so named for its supposed style over substance effects) was Leos Carax. Rather than pursuing critiques directed against their privileging of the visual, Bassan sought to understand these directors through a different formal logic. Arguing for the rise of a French neo-baroque cinema he details it as such: radical eclecticism; the turning of life into a ‘work of art’; the shift from a ‘narrative to a visual language’; stark uses of light and shadow; neon lighting; hi-tech seduction; and a fetishisation of decorative effects.¹¹ Writing of Carax, Bassan remarks how he:

... borrows from his predecessors (Godard, Garrel, Cocteau, Dreyer) and recycles the material within a very personal vision. His films are closest to the 'irregular pearls' of the baroque.¹²

For Bassan, the *cinéma du look* directors could be appropriately re-evaluated as neo-baroque, whereby the 'heterogeneity of registers in a film is not a sign of weakness'.¹³

While Bassan does not denigrate the stylised or eclectic worlds of Carax, it also remains the case that the neo-baroque cinema that he advances rarely moves beyond visual concerns. Even the term 'neo-baroque' is 'perhaps [a] convenient shorthand', he admits, and it is used interchangeably throughout with descriptors of the artificial or a saturated film style.¹⁴ In failing to engage with the trans-historic figures and forms of the baroque or their embodied appeals, the 'new version of "neo-baroque" spectacle' that Bassan outlines functions as little more than another epithet for the glossy and commercial surfaces of the post-modern in disguise.

Bassan is not alone in understanding the baroque through a visual framework. According to Martin Jay and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, the baroque incites a 'madness of vision'.¹⁵ Alongside the scientific rationalisation of sight or the descriptive spread of details in Dutch art, Jay identifies the baroque as a trans-historic model of vision. Baroque vision overloads the eye through a 'surplus of images in a plurality of spatial planes'.¹⁶ For Buci-Glucksmann the madness of vision that is inherent to the baroque stems from its 'mad desire to see vision'.¹⁷ This madness is played out in art and film through prismatic and theatrical scenarios of being and seeing. Attentive to 'multiplicity and discontinuity', the 'baroque eye' is to be 'distinguished precisely by its infinite production of images and appearances'.¹⁸

Bassan, Jay, and Buci-Glucksmann are suggestive of a baroque mode of perception that might also inform the cinema. However, as Deleuze points out, the 'dialectics of seeing and gazing' that is advanced by critics like Buci-Glucksmann only allows for the 'definition of an optical fold'.¹⁹ In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze counters that the baroque is best understood through the concept of the fold, as this involves a particular 'operative function' or 'trait' – the endless production of folds.²⁰ While the fold is a material phenomenon that can be found in many guises, in its baroque form Deleuze asserts that the fold

knows unlimited freedom ... Folds seem to be rid of their supports – cloth, granite, or cloud – in order to *enter into an infinite convergence*.²¹

Deleuze's fold is in itself a dynamic and highly materialist figuration of the baroque, emblematised by its sensuous folds of flowing draperies.²² Of particular interest to this article is Deleuze's embodied appreciation of the baroque. The fold couples baroque perspectivism with an attention to movement and materiality. According to Deleuze, the baroque can be defined as the 'fold to infinity'.²³ As it is connected to an infinite worldview or attitude – the 'affirmation of one and the same world, and of infinite difference or variety in this world' – what the baroque enacts is the 'continuous process of folding'.²⁴ For Deleuze, a baroque preoccupation with movement, multiplicity, and materiality can be discerned in many of its artistic phenomena. Consider the billowing folds of 17th century costumes and garments, as these exceed the human body and acquire a textural autonomy of display; or the tradition of the baroque still life painting that is so intricately 'packed with folds that there results a sort of schizophrenic "stuffing"'; and historic baroque narratives that enfold stories in upon one another or 'develop infinite possibilities of serial form' by commenting on the plots and characters of their own textual worlds.²⁵

Following Deleuze, it is useful to further consider the mobile presentation of vision that features in baroque art. Art historians such as Svetlana Alpers and Giancarlo Maiorino have both aligned the baroque with an unfolding, serialised, or episodic attitude. According to Maiorino, ideas of 'process' and 'becoming' were central features of the period.²⁶ The coupling of vision with process-like intimations of movement occurs through a number of strategies: the accumulation of multiple points-of-view and spatial planes; the suggestion of the artwork as a small fragment; and a characteristically baroque delight in reveling in the virtuoso possibilities of its own medium, through scenes that interrupt the 'creative act'.²⁷

Instead of completed actions, affective energies, and settings, baroque artworks are characterised by a sequential unraveling of vision and form. Often the artwork presents the viewer with too much detail to be taken in at a first glance. Even a small-scale painting such as *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* (Pieter de Hooch, 1658) can be used to indicate this mobile 'aggregate of views'.²⁸ On the right-hand side of the painting a maid and a child approach the courtyard hand-in-hand. Their advancing movement in the foreground is reversed by a receding passage on the left-hand side. In the background a woman stands looking away from us; she is absorbed with looking out on the street beyond. The thoroughfare is largely hidden from our view, although it hints at alternate perspectives on Dutch life through the partial reveal of other houses and windows. Staging a mobile network of domestic spaces and corresponding viewpoints, de Hooch's painting is

typical of the episodic attitude of the baroque. *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* might offer us a small, quiet, and quotidian fragment of Dutch life but it is one that could easily belong to a series of possible perspectives on the world. This sentiment is echoed by the re-appearance of these same painted figures in other de Hooch works.

According to Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, the baroque does not seek to represent perfect or enclosed states but to capture the world and the work as ‘an incomplete process and a movement towards ... completion’.²⁹ Deleuze echoes this sentiment in his understanding of the baroque as an infinite fold. As it is inventive of ‘the infinite work or process’, the baroque pursues unending movement through its production of fold after fold.³⁰ Cultural historian José Antonio Maravall has also observed how it was not vision but movement that was vital to the historic baroque age. As he writes, movement is the elemental force from which many baroque aesthetic traits derive and persist, including ‘notions of change, modification, variety, decay, restoration, transformation, time, circumstance, and occasion’.³¹

In attempting to flesh out the baroque beyond a visual framework it is important to note how historic baroque art triggers the kinetic activity of the eye. In the de Hooch artwork described above vision is coupled with movement as the eye roves through ‘successive spatial compartments’.³² Vision might move into the depths of perspective that is afforded by our view of the passageway, woman, and street or take the time to absorb the material details of the setting: the neatly-swept pavement and its stones, the abandoned bucket and broom, overhanging plants, or the crumbling garden wall. Alternately the eye might rest upon the actions of the maid and child who are also captured in states of bodily transition and depicted mid-step.

Through the mobile staggering of vision or the expression of a multitude of spatial planes and perspectives, baroque art plays to our embodied lines of sight. As Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd comment, if ‘the eye is the primary locus of inscription’ in the baroque then it is surely that of ‘an agitated, “ambulant” eye’ and an embodied vision that is engaged by its deliriously dispersive effects.³³

The plunge into action

Interestingly, Carax has likened his filming of Denis Lavant to the late 19th century ‘athletes chronophotographed by Marey’.³⁴ In *Holy Motors* human and technological action is configured as the holy or ‘sacred motor’ that

keeps this film – and by extension all of cinema – running, even into states of exhaustion.³⁵

Holy Motors begins with one of Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic studies of the human musculature as we glimpse the figure of a young boy running back and forth. Another Marey excerpt follows in which a man throws an object. The film then cuts to the haunting image of a still audience in a movie theatre whose eyes are closed *en masse*. A film is playing; the sound of footsteps, a scream, and a gunshot hint at scenes of violence, although these sounds are followed by a watery soundscape of lapping waves, birds, a foghorn, and a creaking ship. We watch a sleeping man (Carax himself) awaken in a hotel. Feeling his way across the artificial textures of a strange wallpapered forest, the man uncovers a portal that serves as a passageway to the movie house filled with frozen bodies. His entry to this world – to 'a large cinema filled with ghosts' – is unlocked by the technological prosthetic of a mechanical finger that is fused to his flesh.³⁶ Inside the movie house soft light effects create the glow of an old projector around Carax while the rocking sounds of the sea continue. What appears to be a visual exchange between Carax and a small girl inside the theatre abruptly cuts to locate her as inside another space in which she is pressed up against the window of a ship-like house. She and her family are waving goodbye to their investment banker father. This is the first time we see Oscar, although the film's privileging of transformative action as the alchemical life force of the cinema has already begun.

In the prologue we pass through different physical states and gestures (running, throwing, sleep, stasis, waving) and a re-tracing of bodies that have been garnered from film history – from Marey's athletes to a re-creation of the frontal shot of the audience in *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928). Unlike the laughing audience that closes Vidor's film, *Holy Motors* presents us with a still audience of closed eyes to invoke surrealist traditions of the body sleeping, dreaming, or dead. The figure of Carax/the dreaming man who finds his way into a movie theatre also recalls other 'dreaming' figures in the cinema: Buster Keaton, the projectionist who dreams himself into the film within a film plot of *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), or the oneiric appeals of the keyhole in Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* / *The Blood of a Poet* (1930). The fluid and dream-like connections between the scenes of the prologue and the sounds of running water throughout are in stark contrast to the image of an inert film audience. Unlike the stasis of its representational audience *Holy Motors* begins by foregrounding cinema as a site or vehicle of physical movement, of imaginative transport and technological transformation.³⁷

Despite its evocation of a surrealist dream Carax likens his film to a 'form of science-fiction'.³⁸ The cars are the 'heart of the film – its motor' he remarks, and a means of linking 'humans, beasts and machines' together as they border on possible extinction.³⁹ As the limousines are the conceptual heart of this film the sound of running car engines grace the titles. The limousines themselves come to life and start a comedic conversation in the closing scene, recounting their own weariness and the end of an era of large 'visible machines'.⁴⁰ Given that we never encounter modernist reveals of a camera or of an audience who is watching Oscar perform, the limousine functions as a self-reflexive double for the technological but nonetheless animate and moving powers of the cinema. The film repeatedly returns to shots of the limousine to create mobile and expressive linkages between the acts. This is because the car doubles for and figures on screen the film's broader preoccupation with its own invisible but nonetheless 'holy' engine: the cinema. Like the prosthetic finger that unlocks the movie house the animate limousine is a self-reflexive figuration of film that interweaves the human with the technological to create the 'beauty of the act'.

In Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology action and movement are inextricable from the embodied nature of perception. The 'plunge into action ... is an original way of relating ... to the object', he writes, and 'on the same footing as perception'.⁴¹ In his one dedicated essay on film and in his lecture notes Merleau-Ponty understands cinema as an emotive and a motorially-expressive medium. Just as the human body exhibits internal states of feeling through 'styles of conduct which are visible from the outside', so does Merleau-Ponty understand cinema as gestural in its expressions.⁴² At the cinema he asserts 'dizziness, pleasure, grief, love, and hate are *ways of behaving*'.⁴³ What he calls 'true speaking' in the cinema involves that of non-verbal 'dialogue inscribed within the image' through the stylistic expressions of camera movement, 'montage, editing, visual-sonorous rhythm', and so on; here is what 'makes the movement of a film and not the agitation of characters', he asserts.⁴⁴

As Merleau-Ponty observes, the gestural expressivity of a film is not limited to its characters. Rather, the cinema enacts different bodily states or emotions through the significance of film style.⁴⁵ Likewise, Elena del Río comments upon how individual film characters and the actors who play them are 'necessary channels for the unfolding of an expression that is always larger than themselves'.⁴⁶ With this background in mind we can now consider how it is not only Oscar's body (nor that of Lavant) that adapts and transforms throughout *Holy Motors*, and how it is not only the technological motors of the limousines that 'speak'.

Halfway through *Holy Motors* a scene of cinematic ‘magic’ occurs that is given over to a display of shared rhythm, movement, and spiraling energies. It is pre-figured by two equally telling shots: a close-up on a sheet of annotated music in the back of Oscar’s limousine that reveals the word *entr’acte* (interval) in bold letters, and a recreated silent film clip in which a pair of tuxedo clad wrists and hands luminously flicker. Flexing their fingers back and forth, these hands reprise the gestures of a magician. On cue Oscar – now in the role of the accordionist – steps forward into the hushed space of the Saint-Merri Church. The slow strains of an accordion-led rendition of R.L. Burnside’s ‘Let My Baby Ride’ commence. The accordionist begins his song winding around the columns of the church. During one of these turns the camera suddenly reveals three more figures carrying accordions behind him. Other men, women, and children carting musical instruments join these figures. At each serpentine turn of the accordionist and the camera still more people join in and fill the once empty church space with the footsteps, gestures, and sounds of a multitude of players.

For much of the *entr’acte* the accordionist appears absorbed by his instrument. At one point, however, he suddenly turns back to his ensemble and they mimic each other’s steps, gestures, and rhythmic movements. According to Merelau-Ponty the ‘meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture’.⁴⁷ During the *entr’acte* the stylistic expressions of the film are that of a rhythmically invested and almost dancing participant. The expressive attitude of the film is also involved in the orchestration of musical and kinetic joy.⁴⁸ As the accordionist and his troupe turn a corner the camera veers with them. When the accordionist turns once again to face the crowd the film adjusts its stylistic comportment by cutting to a close-up of the crowd with expectant faces and stilled bodies, as if it is also awaiting instruction. ‘*Trois, deux, merde!*’ the accordionist cries before laughingly returning to the song. Through its extended long takes and its prolonged, winding movements, the stylistic gestures of the film are in clear motorial sympathy with the music makers. As the group makes its way out of the church the camera pulls back. It gestures towards a state of energetic uplift that is made manifest to us through the vertical uplift of the camera rising into an overheard shot of the players’ exit. The remainder of the song plays out over a new scene of Oscar transitioning into the gangster Alex. Its final drum roll ends on a distant view of the limousine.

Occurring halfway through *Holy Motors*, the *entr’acte* fulfills its traditional function as a musical or theatrical intermission. However, Carax’s *entr’acte* is imbued with additional layers of self-reflexive and sensuous

significance. It is for this reason that the *entr'acte* is preceded by the gesture of a magician's reveal, for the sequence is dedicated to the mimetic powers of action and movement in the cinema. The *entr'acte* is a double act for the cinema and more particularly for cinema as a dynamic and sensational aggregate that exceeds the boundaries of any singular or human body/subject. As it is deployed, transmitted through, and choreographed across human and technological expressions, what the *entr'acte* so overtly represents is the capacity of cinema to function as a collective and affectively contagious force between bodies. This is played out through the stylistic gestures of the film and through the growing crowd that joins the joyous path of the accordionist. Any sense of kinetic joy on the part of the spectator arises not just from the actions of the characters/actors but also from the 'sense and sensibility' that is enacted by the film's stylistic gestures and from our 'common sensuous experience of the movies'.⁴⁹

Rather than radically disconnected, then, each act of *Holy Motors* is imbued with lures of action and movement and a shared sensuality that spans the human and the technological. Just as Oscar transforms so does the film transition between very different affective and motorial attitudes. Consider the close vision and tight framings that accompany Oscar as a middle-aged father driving his teenage daughter home. Here the stylistic attitude of the film is one of fixed attention that enhances the affective shift from a shared tenderness between father and daughter to a scene of paternal cruelty. For much of the act the vision of the camera is focused intently on the profile of Angèle's face as she is slowly moved to tears by her father's harsh words. The act concludes with the film's stylistic expression of quiet devastation that is played out in the shot of Angèle in the rear-view mirror of the car, standing alone, and fading further and further away. When Oscar and Jean/Eva (Kylie Minogue) reunite for a musical sequence in La Samaritaine the vertical progression of their bodies up the staircase and the sweeping movements of the camera expressively recall the poignant musicals of Jacques Demy. However, the camera's attention to ruin and decay belies any sense of spatial uplift and affective expansion. The mournful passing of time is conveyed here not only by Jean/Eva's 'Who We Were' song or the gentle actions of the former lovers on-screen but also by an attention to materialist details. This is stylistically expressed through grounded shots of the outdated cameras, accumulated dust, mannequin parts, and other detritus that strews the once grand department store (also a predominantly featured site of the lovers in Carax's *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* / *Lovers on the Bridge* [1991]).

As it repeats and varies the plunge into action *Holy Motors* adjusts its stylistic attitude to meet the demands of each new act. In that regard the metamorphoses of Oscar's body are matched by stylistic metamorphoses on the part of the film. Here feeling is made manifest in and through movement and the intentional focus of the camera, rhythm, or different uses of film style as much as it is through dialogue or a character/performer's actions. As Merleau-Ponty once wrote, 'what is inside is also on the outside' at the cinema, for it is expressed to us through the technological but nonetheless embodied 'being in the world' that belongs to a film.⁵⁰

Figuring the baroque of *Holy Motors*

In *Holy Motors* it is never clear for whom Oscar acts. Is Oscar's driver Céline, the mysterious organisation known as the Agency, or the Man with a Birthmark (Michel Piccoli) ever before the cameras? Are the sentient limousines performing? Carax resists giving us answers to such questions, preferring instead to cultivate narrative instability, convolution, and interpretive proliferation. For instance, in the penultimate scene driver Céline lets down her coiffed hair – styled to resemble the doubled heroine played by Kim Novak in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) – and she then assumes the disguise of a facial mask to return to the 'real' world. By way of this teasing gesture Carax invokes Scob's former role as the masked and disfigured young daughter in Georges Franju's *Les Yeux Sans Visage / Eyes Without A Face* (1960) as part of the metamorphic world that is *Holy Motors*.

In their monograph on Carax, Daly and Dowd are helpful in extending the notion of a cinematic baroque beyond that of a spectacular optics. As they write, 'truly' baroque films eschew formal/affective reserve, classical linearity, and closure, favoring instead wildly 'proliferating forms, formal devices, and narrative strategies which destabilize unity whether considered as prior or derived'.⁵¹ If Carax is a director who has often been invested in the 'baroque powers of the cinema', what drives *Holy Motors* is a deliriously baroque configuration of film, body, and world.⁵²

While the conceptual value of the figure has been explored in different guises for film theory, it is the work of French film scholar Nicole Brenez that is of particular interest to this article. According to Adrian Martin it is Brenez who 'forged the word *figure* (and all its derivations: figurative, figurable, etc.) for contemporary European film studies'.⁵³ The figural, as it derives from Brenez, involves several different elements. It can be linked to 'drawing or tracing, as in figural or plastic art'; to 'an idea of the

body', although it is not limited to the figure of the human body; and to what Martin calls a 'creative shaping' as it pertains to the analytical act as a 'figuring out, a continual essaying and experimentation'.⁵⁴ First and foremost, a figural film analysis arises from the relational elements of the film(s) in question.⁵⁵ The specific figures of a film 'and the (structuring relations) implied by those figures rather than the story and its structure of events' become a primary site of analysis.⁵⁶

Brenez helps clarify the tasks of a figural interpretation. As she remarks it is

about the process elaborated by the film to construct its own type of 'figure' ... it's the films themselves, in their singularity, that are enriching to the method – so the more they are singular and unique, the more they will offer to the knowledge of figurality.⁵⁷

As a critical tool the figural demands more from us than the description of figures in a film. In a helpful gloss on Brenez, Bill Rout observes how she asks us to treat film figures *figuratively*, as these constitute 'complex bundles of sense' that relate to the relational logic(s) of a film and a cultural horde of past and present figures.⁵⁸ The figural method then is to trace genealogies by charting the trans-historic arrangements and assemblages of figures that 'make the film happen in the way that it does'.⁵⁹

Following on from these concerns we might now turn to the relational figures that structure *Holy Motors*. While Carax refutes narrative closure and certainty what clearly emerges from the repetition of Oscar's acts is the figuration of endless movement and propulsion. This is enacted by the film's rhythmic, repeated, and looping 'return to [the] routine, the schedule, the forward-moving limo, the make-up table with its ever-mocking and accusing mirror that can only say to Oscar: *back to work*'.⁶⁰ Looping figures are built into the stylistic movements of the film as well – as is evident in the winding vision and movement of the camera during the *entr'acte*, the circuitous route of a driving Oscar/the middle-aged father, and the repeated shots of the limousine in motion, sinuously *en route* about Paris.

Alongside figurations of perpetual movement the film returns to Oscar's dressing room inside the car. This interior is depicted as highly metamorphic. It appears as vast and as small; it is overcrowded with props, boxes, and costumes, or lonely and empty. Through its insistent return to the corners of the limousine and to Oscar within those corners *Holy Motors* figures Oscar as a perennial inhabitant. Gaston Bachelard, the great phenomenologist of intimate spaces, once located the space of the corner as a mobile and

immobile site for the flight of the imagination. According to Bachelard the corner constitutes a small-scale 'chamber of being': 'I am the space where I am' he writes, and 'nowhere better appreciated than in a corner'.⁶¹ Those who withdraw to the corner, he continues, will 'confer life upon [the] image, *multiplying the shades of being* that characterize the corner dweller'.⁶² Within the corners of his dressing room Oscar is seen caught up in materialist processes of imagining and incarnating his many roles. Dossiers are read, wigs are brushed, and costumes are changed; make-up, rubbery masks, prosthetics, and fake fingernails laboriously applied and then removed. Inside the limousine Oscar becomes an imaginative corner dweller. As with the stopping and starting actions of the car/motor/body throughout *Holy Motors*, Oscar's corner residence is yet another figuration for cinema as an imaginative and potentially inexhaustible chamber of being.

In bringing together Brenez's concept of the figure with *Holy Motors* I would hold that the relational figures that make this film happen 'in the way that it does' also reprise a delirious baroque.⁶³ If we recall Deleuze, it must be remembered that the baroque is expressive of an infinite work or process through its production of a continuous fold. In fact, according to Deleuze the main impetus of the baroque is not 'how to finish a fold, but how to continue it ... how to bring it to infinity'.⁶⁴ Not only are there figurations of endless movement and multiplicity within this film – the snaking movements of the limousine, Oscar's multiple selves, and the running of human and technological motors across film history – but the film is structured *as* an infinite fold.

During the opening act of *Holy Motors* we are introduced to Oscar in the role of an investment banker/father as he leaves his lavish ship-home for work. Towards the conclusion of *Holy Motors*, having died multiple times, including the act of killing himself as the banker, Oscar is spent and weary. He opens his last folder for the day. The film cuts to a shot of the limousine driving down a suburban street and pulling up outside one of these houses. An excerpt from Marey then commences. Oscar's resting place for the evening is located within a seemingly endless stretch of homes and street lamps that recede into the distance. Similarly, the clip from Marey features a man who is repeatedly performing the same action.

Central to Brenez's concept of the figure is a structuring relationship between two sets or points as a 'relation that is not mere simulation, imitation or depiction but something more charged and inventive'.⁶⁵ In this regard figural analysis involves the 'interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfils the first'.⁶⁶ As

Martin points out, a figural interpretation is prophetic – it incorporates a movement between different ‘points, stages, stations in space as well as time’.⁶⁷ According to Brenez we deny the cinema its unique figural powers if we delimit its bodies to that of the organic/human, thereby refusing cinema’s ‘capacity for abstraction, its propensity for allegory, its figurative invention, its various aberrations and *its prophetic force*’.⁶⁸ The example that Brenez gives us is a seemingly ‘banal activity or gesture’ that returns whereby the ‘second image can reveal the truth and suffering hidden inside the first’.⁶⁹

The figural return of an activity or gesture is precisely what occurs in *Holy Motors*. The ‘intensification or deepening of a single entity’ that takes place here can also be affiliated with the structure of a fold, as it involves the ‘matter of passing from the recto to the verso of a given situation or image’.⁷⁰ As the clock strikes the hour Oscar enters the suburban residence. The vision of the camera remains outside, peering into the windows of the house to reveal the film’s elusive truth and suffering. Tonight the home that Oscar returns to is a domicile of loving monkeys. For Oscar this is just one stop in an infinite series of future homes, families, and possible selves. Whereas the opening act of *Holy Motors* had featured a young girl looking out through the window at a departing Oscar/her father, Oscar’s last act inverts this activity. He returns to a new home at the end of the day to be welcomed by a new animal family and look out through their windows. Only in the last act do we discover how Carax’s film is structured as an infinite fold whereby the ‘beginning finally meets or “touches” the ending to offer a striking comparison’ before the act begins anew the next day.⁷¹

Despite its deliriously baroque premise of an infinite series of acts *Holy Motors* does not figure their unfolding as a ceaseless repetition. As Rousset remarks in the quotation that begins this article, the baroque is attached to ‘a poetics of surprise and variousness, and a style of metamorphosis, of dynamic spread and dispersion in unity’.⁷² Oscar’s last act and the stylistic gestures of the film that accompany it are instructive on this front. When Oscar assumes his last onscreen person (the ‘man in the house’) the song ‘Revivre’ (relive) by Gerard Manset mournfully erupts.⁷³ As Oscar makes his way inside the camera performs a final twisting movement around the edges of the house. It then rises towards its upper storey windows to focus on Oscar and the monkeys as they look up into the night sky, absorbed by a vision that occurs offscreen. In that regard, the last act is indicative of hope: the closing song intones the words ‘live’ and ‘relive’, while both Oscar and the stylistic gestures of the film intimate events that are still to come and a vision that cannot yet be seen. In the living and re-living of the ‘beauty

of the act' that is *Holy Motors* there is indeed a figural repetition, but also a renewal.

In Deleuze's discussion of the fold he writes of how a baroque 'point of view on a variation ... replaces the centre of a figure or a configuration', so much so that the 'setting of point of view' and its variation will assume a pride of place.⁷⁴ In *Holy Motors* the re-staging of gestures, movements, images, sounds, and material details foster dispersive connections between the acts. These connections have little to do with plotting cause-and-effect; rather, their interweaving creates 'a gradual, pleated structure of echoes and metamorphic waves'.⁷⁵ According to Benez such a structural pleating can enrich, repeat, and renew the individual figures of a film (or activate the figures of other films) so that a series of 'visual echoes' continuously reverberate.⁷⁶

In that regard *Holy Motors* creates small pleated linkages between the acts that repeat and re-invent their meaning. Throughout the film Carax prompts us to consider or delight in how each episode rhymes or relates with another, with the history of the cinema or his previous films in 'an echoing, insistent and hence pleated way'.⁷⁷ For instance, when Angèle sprinkles her head with glitter while hiding alone she varies Merde's actions at his subterranean rose-petal party with the abducted model Kay M (Eva Mendes). Similarly, the Kylie song that is heard during Angèle's escape from the birthday pre-empts the pop star's later appearance as Jean/Eva. The artificial/enchanted forests that decorate the walls of the prologue are echoed in the glass porthole of the ship-home, while Oscar comments on how he misses the forests in a reference to the forest scenes of Carax's *Mauvais Sang* / *Bad Blood* (1986). The glowing lights of Oscar's motion-capture studio suit re-appear on the roof of Oscar's limousine. These lights re-ignite the figure of the starry sky from Carax's *Boy Meets Girl* (1984) so that it blazes to life again in the pleated world of *Holy Motors*.

According to Deleuze a typically baroque solution 'is the following: we shall multiply principles – we can always slip out a new one from under our cuffs – and in this way we will change their use'.⁷⁸ Despite her predominant focus on the visual Buci-Glucksmann is also useful on this front. She argues that when a 'baroque gaze' opens out in the cinema

a film is always several films, *in a sort of arborescent, proliferating structure which respects no chronology ... everything cited, everything mixed, passing [...] through all the regimes of the image and of the visual ...*.⁷⁹

In the motion-capture factory the actions of Oscar work to enfold the movements and gestures of many different cinematic bodies into his own composite figuration. Running on the treadmill Oscar intertwines Marey's motion studies with the slapstick body of Charlie Chaplin caught in the industrial machine of *Modern Times* (1936), the staccato dancing of Alex in *Bad Blood*, and the fluidity of contemporary digital avatars/monsters. Oscar's act as a dying man is reminiscent of a much older version of the dreaming Carax from the prologue; on and on, the figural repetition and renewal of this film continues. *Holy Motors* actually has no conceptual beginning or end; instead, it reprises the intricate pleating and the relational structure of a continuous baroque fold.

Conclusion: Carax's man of the cinema

As I have demonstrated the baroque is invested in an embodied aesthetics of movement, materiality, and multiplicity, as well as vision. In bringing together Carax's film with Deleuze's fold and Brenez on the figural powers of cinema I have argued that *Holy Motors* is not lacking in aesthetic, sensuous, or figural coherence. *Holy Motors* is the cinematic inheritor and the agitator of a baroque aesthetic that has long coupled vision with movement, multiplicity, metamorphosis, and delirious dispersal.

In drawing on Merleau-Ponty and figural film scholars this article has also considered how Carax's film enacts different gestural expressions at the level of film style at the same as it transforms the human body into renewable figurations of filmic flesh. Approaching cinema as a dynamic art of figuration Brenez argues that cinema needs to be distinguished from the 'corporeal *aperçus*' of any real body.⁸⁰ In Brenez's understanding cinema boasts 'incomparable bodies' (bodies without any model) that enact their own original cinematic logics.⁸¹ Intriguingly, she invokes the early example of *An Interesting Story* (James Williamson, 1905), in which a man is so absorbed by a book that he falls under a steamroller. The man is revived to kinetic activity by being blown up with a bicycle pump. For Brenez such figural plasticity indicates how he is 'truly the man of cinema'.⁸² In the 21st century Carax's man of the cinema, Mister Oscar, is brought back to life over and over again to perform 'the beauty of the act' that is cinema. Configured as a potentially infinite unfolding of acts, affects, bodies, gestures, transmuted stages, and shifting worldly performances, Carax's *Holy Motors* is a self-reflexive figuration of film that re-ignites the aesthetics of a delirious baroque.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Lucio Crispino, Katrina Jaworski, Adrian Martin, and the two anonymous journal readers for their helpful comments and suggestions on the development of this article.

Notes

1. The actor is listed as 'x11 Denis Lavant' in the credits.
2. See 'Hail Holy Motors' 2012.
3. Gorfinkel 2013.
4. Rousset in Caws 2007, p. 6.
5. Lacan 1998, p. 116 (emphasis added). Lacan's use of '*délirer*' translates as 'to be delirious', but it also figuratively means to 'go nuts' or 'proliferate like mad'.
6. Martin 2011, p. 12.
7. Bal 1999, p. 7.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 66, 7.
9. Ndalianis 2004, p. 5.
10. Walton 2013.
11. Bassan 2006, p. 12.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-18.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
15. This term derives from phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, although Buci-Glucksmann is far more concerned with Lacanian notions of the 'gaze'.
16. Jay 1994, pp. 47-48.
17. Buci-Glucksmann 2004, p. 31.
18. Buci-Glucksmann 2013, p. 5. It is for this reason that the baroque has been linked to an alternate visual order or rationale in European modernity. See also Zamora 2006.
19. Deleuze 1993, p. 33.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 34 (emphasis added).
22. Deleuze's French term '*pli*' invokes a twist of fabric as well as the vital origins of life (Conley 2011).
23. Deleuze 1993, p. 121.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 58; Conley 2011, p. 176.
25. Deleuze 1993, pp. 121-123; Conley in Deleuze 1993, p. xii.
26. Maiorino 1990, p. 80.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 80, 84.
28. Alpers 1983, p. 51.
29. Wölfflin 1967, p. 67.
30. Deleuze 1993, p. 34.
31. Maravall 1986, p. 175.
32. Martin 1977, p. 161.
33. Daly & Dowd 1998, p. 46.
34. Cannes 2012, p. 26.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 13. Exhaustion (and possible extinction) is figured by the film's inter-weaving between defunct media of the late 19th century and the digital future of the film.

36. Cannes 2012, p. 10.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 11. As is evident in the images and sounds of ships, planes, cars, the blimp seen in the hotel background, the ship-house, and, of course, the movie house.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 127.
42. Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 58.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 58 (emphasis added).
44. Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 35.
45. Sobchack 2004, p. 65.
46. Rio 2008, p. 50.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
48. Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 58.
49. Sobchack 2004, p. 65.
50. Merleau-Ponty 1965, p. 59.
51. Daly & Dowd 1998, p. 48. On neo-baroque narratives see Ndalianis 2006.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
53. Martin 2012, p. 6.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7. See also Routt 2000.
55. Routt 2000.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Brenez in Martin 2012, pp. 31-32.
58. Routt 2000.
59. Mules 2003.
60. Martin & Alvarez Lopez 2012.
61. Bachelard 1994, pp. 137-138.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 140 (emphasis added).
63. Figural tendencies came to special prominence during the baroque. The use of figural language and thought (metaphors, emblems, conceits) is connected to the baroque's love of motion whether depicted, written, or conceptual. See Zamora 2006, p. 141.
64. Deleuze 1992, p. 34.
65. Martin 2012, p. 10.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
68. Brenez 2012, p. 1 (emphasis added).
69. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
70. Brenez 2007, p. 15.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Rousset in Cawes, p. 6.
73. Cannes 2012, p. 26.
74. Deleuze 1993, p. 20.
75. Brenez 2007, p. 15.
76. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.
77. *Ibid.*
78. Deleuze 1993, p. 67.
79. Buci-Glucksmann 2004, p. 33.
80. Brenez 2012, p. 1.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 3. There are parallels with Deleuze's writings on the cinema here, although Brenez's figural approach constitutes its own mode of analysis.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

References

- Cannes Press Notes. 'Holy Motors', http://holymotorsfilm.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/10-08-12_HOLYMOTORS-press-notes.pdf (accessed on 10 January 2013).
- 'Hail *Holy Motors*', *Lola*, Vol. 3, 2012: http://www.lolajournal.com/3/hail_holy_motors_1.html (accessed on 20 December 2012).
- Alpers, S. *The art of describing: Dutch art in the seventeenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Bachelard, G. *The poetics of space: The classic look at how we experience intimate places*, translated by M. Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Bal, M. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary art, preposterous history*. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Bassan, R. 'Three French neo-baroque directors: Beineix, Besson, Carax, from *Diva* to *Le Grand Blue*' in *Essays on Luc Besson: Master of spectacle*, edited by S. Hayward and P. Powrie. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006: 11-21.
- Brenez, N. 'The Ultimate Journey: Remarks on Contemporary Film Theory', translated by W. Routt, *Screening the Past*, No. 2, 1997: <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/reruns/brenez.html> (accessed on 27 January 2014).
- _____. *Abel Ferrara*, translated by A. Martin. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- _____. 'Incomparable Bodies', translated by A. Martin, *Screening the Past*, 31, 2011: <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/08/incomparable-bodies/> (accessed on 15 September 2011).
- Buci-Glucksmann, C. 'The Baroque Eye of the Camera (Part 1)' in *Raúl Ruiz: Images of passage*, edited by H. Bandis, A. Martin, and G. McDonald. Melbourne: Rouge Press, 2004: 31-44.
- _____. *The madness of vision: On baroque aesthetics*, translated by D. Baker. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013.
- Calabrese, O. *Neo-baroque: A sign of the times*, translated by C. Lambert. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Caws, M. *The surrealist look: An erotics of encounter*. Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 1997.
- Conley, T. 'Folds and Folding' in *Gilles Deleuze: Key concepts*, edited by C. Stivale. Trowbridge: Acumen, 2011: 192-203.
- Daly, F. and Dowd, G. *Leos Carax*. Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 1998.
- Deleuze, G. *The fold: Leibniz and the baroque*, translated by T. Conley. London: University of Minnesota, 1993.
- Gorfinkel, E. 'Carax's Oneiric Drive', *In Media Res*, 11 December 2013: <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2013/12/11/caraxs-oneiric-drive> (accessed on 17 March 2014).
- Jay, M. *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Lacan, J. 'On the Baroque: Where It Speaks, It Enjoys, and It Knows Nothing' in *On feminine sexuality: The limits of love and knowledge*, translated by B. Fink and edited by J. Alain-Miller. Vol. XX. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998: 104-117.
- Maiorino, G. *The Cornucopian mind and the baroque unity of the arts*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990.

- Maravall, J. *Culture of the baroque: Analysis of a historical structure*, translated by T. Cochran. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Martin, A and Álvarez-López, C. 'Screen and Surface: Soft and Hard: The Cinema of Leos Carax', *Cinetransit*, <http://cinetransit.com/el-cine-de-leos-carax/#dos> (accessed on 27 January 2014).
- Martin, A. 'The Body has no Head: Corporeal Figuration in Aldrich', *Screening the Past*, 2000: <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fro600/amfrob.htm> (accessed on 21 December 2013).
- _____. *Last day every day: Figural thinking from Auerbach and Kracauer to Agamben and Benez.* Brooklyn: Punctum, 2012.
- Martin, J.R. *Baroque*. London: A. Lane, 1977.
- Merelau-Ponty, M. 'The Film and the New Psychology' in *Sense and non-sense*, translated by H.L. Dreyfus and P.A Dreyfus, edited by J.M. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964: 48-59.
- _____. *Phenomenology of perception*, translated by C. Smith. London: Routledge Classics, 2002.
- _____. 'The Sensible World and the World of Expression', translated by B. Bannon, *Chiasmi International*, No. 12, 2010: 31-37.
- Mules, W. 'The Figural as Interface in Film and New Media', *Film-Philosophy*, Vol. 7, No.56, December 2003: <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/view/777/689> (accessed on 27 January 2014).
- Ndalianis, A. *Neo-baroque aesthetics and contemporary entertainment*. Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 2004.
- _____. 'Television and the Neo-Baroque' in *The contemporary television serial*, edited by L. Mazdon and M. Hammond. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005: 83-101.
- Río, E. *Deleuze and the cinemas of performance: Powers of affection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
- Routt, B. 'For Criticism Part One', *Screening the Past*, 2000: <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/reviews/rev0300/wr1brga.htm> (accessed on 20 January 2014).
- Sobchack, V. *Carnal thoughts: Embodiment and moving image culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Walton, S. 'Enfolding Surfaces, Spaces and Materials: Claire Denis' Neo-Baroque Textures of Sensation', *Screening the Past*, 37, 2013: <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2013/10/enfolding-surfaces-spaces-and-materials-claire-denis%E2%80%99-neo-baroque-textures-of-sensation/> (accessed on 13 January 2013).
- Wölfflin, H. *Renaissance and baroque*, translated by K. Simon. New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- Zamora, L. *The inordinate eye: New world baroque and latin american fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

About the author

Saige Walton is Lecturer in Screen Studies at the University of South Australia. Her research areas include film/media aesthetics, visual culture, baroque studies, genre, embodiment, phenomenological philosophy, and film-philosophy. Her work appears in such journals as *Senses of Cinema*, *Screening the Past*, and *Screen*, also in edited collections such as *Playing with Memories: The Cinema of Guy Maddin*

(University of Manitoba Press, 2009) and *The Contemporary Comic Book Super Hero* (Routledge, 2008).



© 2014 Walton / Amsterdam University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.