

Fold upon fold: figurative logics and critical priorities in Nicole Brenez's work on *Abel Ferrara*

This article is a study of aspects of the criticism, and critical methodology, of Nicole Brenez, taking her book *Abel Ferrara* (2007) as its primary text. *Abel Ferrara* was translated by Adrian Martin, who has done a great deal to champion Brenez's work in the English-speaking world. I am fully in agreement with Martin about Brenez's significance, but I find that he sometimes appears to overstate the distinctiveness of her methodology. He has written that she practices 'a mode of film criticism that calls itself *figural analysis*' (2015); in what follows I shall argue that, rather than representing a wholly distinct 'mode of film criticism', Brenez's work has affinities with that of critics in the tradition associated with *Movie*, specifically V.F. Perkins (affinities that I have not seen commented upon elsewhere). But, though both Brenez and Perkins give a central role to notions of synthesis, their critical priorities are somewhat different, and I shall also indicate some areas of divergence, which could be said to hinge around ideas of credibility and the importance of the viewer's uninterrupted immersion in the fictional world.

Brenez has published extensively, but her single major work (still untranslated into English) remains *De la Figure en général et du Corps en particulier* (On the figure in general and on the body in particular) from 1998. As the title indicates, the notions of figures and figuration are central to

her approach; she frequently makes reference to things like 'figurative invention' and 'figural logic'. Martin remarks that 'quite deliberately it seems to me, Brenez never defines the concept of figure in any direct, simple, clear way', though he also reproduces an email to him from Brenez where she insists that she's 'trying to be very clear: the analysis is about the process elaborated by the film to construct its own type of "figure"' (2012: 7 & 31). I think Martin is quite correct that there is, in Brenez, a deliberate decision not to offer a single, easily digestible definition of figuration; the definition offered by Brenez and Luc Vancheri that is cited by Martin (2012) is anything but simple and digestible.¹ This reluctance does not, however, result from any wish to be mysterious or elusive but rather from the fact that figuration is, for Brenez, an absolutely fundamental concept. In illustrating how this is the case I would like to draw attention to the intersection of two familiar senses of the figurative in her work, an intersection that has interesting consequences for film criticism. This will enable me to indicate some important assumptions that Brenez shares with Perkins and other critics in the *Movie* tradition.

In studies of rhetoric or literature, the figurative exists in opposition to the literal: figurative language is language that is *not literal* (or at least not merely, or not entirely literal). In visual art, however, the notion of the figurative exists in

opposition not to the literal but to the *abstract*. Figurative art represents people, animals, plants and objects, whereas abstract art – which does not – is referred to as 'non-figurative'. These two senses could be seen as pulling in opposite directions. In visual art figuration moves *towards* some kind of 'replication' of the world we know, while in literature it pulls *away* from it; away, that is, from direct, literal, factual statements about the world. These remarks need to be qualified somewhat to emphasise that I am referring to *tendencies*, not mutually exclusive properties. Not all linguistic figures are non-literal, hence my qualification 'not merely, or not entirely'; they are all, nevertheless, distinguished from an idea of plain, 'non-figured' language (even if such a thing could never actually exist in practice). Film is interestingly placed because of the way it makes use of phenomena that can be described using either sense of figuration. It is not unique in this; when illustrated, novels also negotiate the distinction of the figurative from both the 'literal' and the 'abstract', and certain genres of painting employ something akin to literary figuration in their use of imagery (Dutch *vanitas* still lives, for example). Nevertheless, although it is only infrequently remarked upon, the fact that fully accounting for many filmic sequences, images, or motifs requires that we attend to both senses of the word is very striking. Brenez's work, I want to argue, suggests that it might be illuminating



to think of the role played by what we shall see her refer to as the “plastic” (visual) and “rhetorical” operations in a film as aspects of one broader process, that of figuration.²

Brenez compares Ferrara's *The Blackout* (1997) with George Cukor's *A Star is Born* (1954) which, she claims, ‘serves essentially as a “rough draft” for *The Blackout* to the extent that the common motif of disappearance determines an exigency of figurative invention’ (2007: 106). In *A Star is Born*, Judy Garland plays a singer named Esther Blodgett who the alcoholic film-star-on-the-decline Norman Maine (James Mason) discovers, makes a star (after she has been renamed Vicki Lester by the studio), and marries, before his drinking causes her to plan to end her career in order to care for him. Maine overhears this intention on her part, which prompts him to commit suicide in an attempt to liberate her. Towards the end of the film, Maine drowns himself, an event indicated by a shot of Maine walking off into the sea followed by the sight of his dressing gown drifting helplessly among the rocks in the shallows. The film ends with Esther announcing on stage that ‘This is Mrs. Norman Maine’. Brenez writes:

A Star is Born metaphorizes disappearance before and after the elided suicide. Before, by the transformation of Norman into a reflection: we see him already dissolved in the oceanic image, glazed in the glass window. It is thus an anticipation, a *figurative prolepsis*. After, we witness

the return of the deceased on a new stage, that of the music hall where Vicki, before an immense blue background that transposes the Pacific Ocean into an almost fluorescent monochrome, begins her number with the famous words, “This is Mrs. Norman Maine,” thus immortalizing Norman in the form of his alter ego. This time it is a case of *figurative analepsis*. (107; my emphasis)

What Brenez intends by the phrase ‘metaphorizes disappearance’ is not entirely clear; it relates to her claim that both *The Blackout* and *A Star is Born* explore heterosexual couples that somehow fuse – “This is Mrs. Norman Maine” – and that this fusion is achieved first by ‘each partner playing the other’s image’ and subsequently ‘because the event of suicide engenders the visual principle of figurative propagation’ (107). This claim is not, however, necessary for the point I wish to demonstrate, which is rather more simple, but also much more general in its application. Norman’s suicide is ‘elided’ because it is narratively crucial but only indirectly represented. The scene of the death itself, as I have mentioned, indicates the event by showing only its preparation – Maine walking into the sea – and its aftermath, in which the sodden dressing gown also serves as a metonym for Maine’s drowned body. But, Brenez shows, the death is also indirectly represented both before and after its occurrence; it is foreshadowed in a ‘figurative prolepsis’ and recalled in

a ‘figurative analepsis’. The images mentioned by Brenez are connected figuratively in two ways. First, they predict or recall particular representational images: the actual images resemble each other, which is to say that their figuration – in the sense familiar from visual art – has something in common. Both images represent the sea by featuring a wide expanse of blue, emphasised by the breadth of the Cinemascope image. But the images are also connected figuratively in a second way, by means of their symbolism. A ‘literal’ reflection of the ocean in a window becomes a metaphor for the way Norman will soon meet his death, while the blue of Vicki’s stage backdrop is a metonym for the ocean, and hence for that same event (now in the past). This, I think, is partly what Brenez means when she writes that ‘we have to envisage a figurative logic, not merely as a treatment of a motif, a theme or a singular form, but also in terms of the grouping of figures, in senses alternately plastic [...] and rhetorical’ (1998: 16).² Given that anticipation and recall of narrative events are part of a film’s narration, Cukor’s film offers an instance in which such narrational devices require that we attend to figures both in the sense of visual representation (which Brenez refers to as a ‘plastic’ sense) and in terms of pattern and symbol, in a ‘rhetorical’ sense (cognate with the linguistic meaning of ‘figurative’; attentive to aspects of signification such as metaphor and metonymy). It is not merely that Norman’s death by drowning is prettily and poetically evoked by certain figurative (metaphoric or metonymic) procedures, but that *narrative* functions of foreshadowing and recalling his death are achieved by the use of representational images (figuration in one sense) that signify in the way that they do by means of metaphor or metonymy (figuration in the other sense).

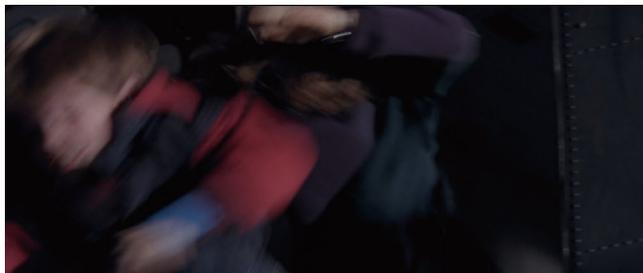
For Brenez, then, a film’s metaphoric connotations (say) may be crucial to its narrative strategies: ‘This is not merely a matter of rhymes aiming to establish a thematic coherence but of constructing a film through the form of a passage between altered images’ (21). We should not, she argues, approach visual or rhetorical echoes or rhymes merely as devices that help generate a supplementary layer of, say, symbolic patterning, but examine the ways in which, as we progress through a film, we encounter images that resemble one another but are ‘altered’ in significant ways. Metaphorical or metonymic



meanings, or many other kinds of implicit meaning, can be central to the narrative of a film, and we often understand them by means of the film's 'passage between altered images'. Brenez's use of the term 'figurative' to cover the intersection of the visual and the rhetorical is reminiscent of V.F. Perkins' use of the word 'image' in the following: 'A fur coat provides Max Ophüls with an image for the rewards and limitations of the role of bourgeois housewife in *The Reckless Moment*' (1981). The coat is, simultaneously, a *visual* image and a *metonymic* image; Perkins underlines this by choosing not to put all the weight on the rhetorical connotation by saying, for example, that the coat is a 'symbol' or an 'emblem'. Not only this, but Perkins also shows a profound sensitivity to the 'passage between altered images', if we take 'image' in a broad enough sense. He observes about Ophüls's *Caught* (1948) that the director 'uses three different coats to depict the options open to his indecisive heroine [...]. The use of dress here goes beyond working as a simple but effective visual presentation of changing circumstances. It helps also to define an attitude to those changes' (1981). The passage from one coat to another is central to our understanding of the film on a number of interpretive levels. Another example, from the same article, is Perkins's treatment of three shoulder-clasping gestures at the beginning of Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950), which help to 'establish that neither hero nor heroine is sure whether the man's embrace is protective and loving or threatening, murderous' (1981). This is achieved by means of three gestures performed by three different characters, each gesture being 'significant in their own right' in delineating the boundaries of the film's Hollywood setting, but also – by means of the 'passage between' them, Brenez would say – serving 'to dramatise the ambiguity of gesture itself' (1981).²

To repeat: Brenez recommends that we should see our understanding of films – of both their narrative and metaphorical aspects – as coming about by means of our response to the relationships between images which change. Tracing the differences between these images is crucial, and is an operation which she thinks of as elucidating a dynamic process of transformation rather than explaining an abstract scheme of patterning. Articulating the way that this happens is central to her critical project; her references to 'figurative logic' very

often apply, in a broadly Deleuzian way, to the 'logic' of a particular film or group of films. The goal is to indicate the distinctive ways that figures (in all senses) transform in the film(s) in question (this is what we saw her refer to above as 'the process elaborated by the film to construct its own type of "figure"'). Having seen how Brenez's understanding of figuration leads her to share key assumptions with Perkins, I shall now offer an example of the kind of figurative logics that particularly interest Brenez, and which often lead her in directions that Perkins might not have found so amenable.



Brenez devotes a number of pages in *Abel Ferrara* to the notion of 'figurative anamorphosis': 'Ferrara's films are structured like passages through the looking-glass; it is a matter of passing from the recto to the verso of a given situation or image' (2007: 15). A clear example of what this means can be found in Ferrara's *Body Snatchers*, Ferrara's 1993 remake of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which is a film that, for Brenez,

plainly obeys the anamorphic logic of Ferrara's work. At the start, in an eminently familiar domestic gesture, Marti [Gabrielle Anwar], riding in the back of the family car, pushes away her stepbrother, Andy [Reilly Murphy]; at the end, she hurls him from a helicopter

down into a world consumed by blood and fire. The fold is perfect. (20)

A simple act of sibling impatience is transformed at the end of the film into something far darker; Andy has to be destroyed because he is no longer Andy, having been replaced by the body snatchers. The image of Marti innocently pushing away her brother has been 'anamorphically' transformed into an image of his (replacement's) destruction, in a process that illuminates both images. By referring to this as an instance of 'figurative anamorphosis' Brenez, it seems to me, intends the same blend of rhetorical and plastic meanings that we encountered earlier: this kind of pattern is figuratively (metaphorically) anamorphic – the rhetorical sense of figurative – but also operates by means of visual images – the plastic sense. This kind of procedure (of 'figurative logic', to use Brenez's own language) she claims to be characteristic of Ferrara's cinema; his

[f]ilms are organized upon a single major fold, where the beginning finally meets or "touches" the ending to offer a striking comparison, or a more gradual pleat, where the major fold is progressively translated throughout in a series of small folds (akin to a pleated skirt) over the entire structure of a film. (15)

Such procedures are, of course, not unique to Ferrara: we might see *A Star is Born* as another example of such a procedure, in which the disappearance and death of James Mason is the central 'fold', around which the proleptic and analeptic images mentioned above are organised.

Brenez is also interested in how pre-existing figures, such as archetypes, are deployed and transformed within a particular film; she writes that '*Body Snatchers* progresses by superimpositions and slippages from one maternal archetype to another' (84). A distinctive feature of the film, for Brenez, is the dizzying *range* of archetypes it puts into play, connecting one with another and thereby complicating and destabilising the possibility of using any of them to generate a rigid interpretation of the film – one that, for example, attempted to 'decode' the film according to a static set of oppositions. *Body Snatchers* involves, in the first place, 'not the double status of mother/stepmother but that of mother/wife' (84); it is not only a question of the legitimacy of the



substitute mother but also the relationship between the female, and her body, as nurturer of children and as erotic being. The false, body snatched version of a woman who was already a replacement, a stepmother – Carol (Meg Tilly) – appears ‘in the marital bedroom as a nude body, a body

posed as improper, suspect, displaced, and menacing’, in part because the ‘erotic vision is attributed to the scared little boy’ (84). Andy sees the body of his real stepmother, lying on her bed, crumble into dust, after which her replacement steps out of a closet. We see a naked female body framed from the

neck down, emerging from darkness into warmly lit clarity, emphasising it as an erotic vision. We then cut to the face of a retreating Andy, terrified and disgusted, before cutting back to a close-up of the false Carol’s face, indicating the separation between the familiar mother (terrifying *because* she is so familiar to the boy, and yet he knows she cannot be his mother, not even his stepmother) and the eroticised female body. The editing emphasises both the separation between the two archetypes (the mother and the sexual object) and their connection, because we know they are aspects of a single body. The replacement of the real stepmother is represented in a way which both singles out these two archetypes and rearticulates them in an uncanny, disturbing way. Andy rushes downstairs to his father, screaming that ‘Mommy’s dead’, only for the false Carol to descend the stairs in a white dressing gown, now reintegrated into a form that Andy can see is a terrifying substitute, and that his father, Steve (Terry Kinney) can only see as his completely non-threatening wife, in her familiar role as weary mother. Brenez also analyses Ferrara’s use of myth, anchoring the film within popular iconography:

Carol is Wicked Stepmother, witch, ghost (in her white nightgown, haunting the house with her oppressive presence), ghoul (vampires), succubus (demoness who comes in the night to be united with a man whom she will then eat), Medusa, enigma (her smile, whose trace appears in the final shot of *New Rose Hotel*), and, last but not least, she incarnates death. (84)

Rather than simply listing any association that occurs to her, Brenez is attempting here to indicate the richness of the various tropes of illegitimate substitution that the film alludes to. (The list is anchored with concrete details: the white nightgown, the nocturnal setting, the smile.) Furthermore, she does not restrict her interpretation to a simple translation of the narrative into a psychoanalytical, metaphorical or mythic register; it is not merely a question of ‘timeless’ archetypes, but of establishing relationships between them, or transforming one into another. Each viewer is likely to register different associations somewhat differently, at different points of the film, but nevertheless Brenez indicates that the way relationships form between such associations is

something that necessarily takes place *in time*, as we watch the film – not only when we contemplate it afterwards – resulting in ‘a film not of disquieting strangeness but its opposite, abominable familiarity’ (85).

For Brenez tracing such procedures can take precedence over the maintenance of the world of the film; this is where the difference with Perkins, who writes in *Film as Film* that ‘[a]ll that matters is to preserve the illusion’ ([1972] 1993: 121), begins to emerge clearly.² Brenez writes approvingly that ‘Ferrara’s scenes are less plot events than visual echoes. Their logic is not especially Aristotelian, for they are not determined by linkages of cause and effect or before and after. They belong to a psychic process: the *reproduction of a trauma in multiple aftershocks*’ (17). She remarks that we are led, in a number of Ferrara’s films, ‘to the limits of understanding’ (129). For Brenez, these films do not merely depict the pathological, but are themselves organised pathologically: ‘it is no longer the protagonist who becomes delirious but the film itself. Trauma no longer functions merely as a narrative cause or motor; it becomes a structuring principle’ (128). She gives an example of this from *The Driller Killer* (1979), in which a painter named Reno (played by Ferrara himself) becomes a serial killer. The film ‘offers, in visual terms, the passage from local to total delirium’: at one point

[...] the link between creative torment (painting a canvas) and murder (drilling a tramp’s body) undergoes a lengthy visual elaboration. The rest of the film is devoted to economizing these transitions, directly joining creative act and criminal gesture, neither of which is connoted as more realist than the other. This leads to the formal fusion of both dimensions of experience in the final red monochrome. (129)³

We are often unable to distinguish between hallucination and reality in Ferrara’s films, which can put their narrative coherence at risk. One of the most dramatic instances of this is the conclusion of *New Rose Hotel* 1998, about which Brad Stevens – in a book Brenez describes as ‘magisterial’ (5) – refers to as an instance of ‘the destruction of narrative: in *New Rose Hotel*’s final section we are presented not with a resolution of the story [...] but rather with a state of total collapse in which the protagonist [...] is simply abandoned at a

moment of crisis’ (Stevens 2004: 274). But for Stevens, as for Brenez, such procedures do not make the films themselves incoherent – do not turn them into hallucinations – but are tools for a coherent investigation into hallucination itself. For Brenez, what looks at first glance like formal disarray need not be evidence of incoherent unintelligibility but can help us gain an understanding of disorder, particularly ethical and political disorder.

For Perkins, on the other hand, neither effective narration nor effective symbolism are likely to result if the film becomes incoherent or undermines its credibility, which will only distract the viewer and unbalance their response. A well-known passage in *Film as Film* finds a lighting effect in Losey’s *The Criminal* (1960), via which a convict’s ‘face is seen isolated against a black background’, to be destructive of ‘the framework of maintained belief’, because although the device is intended, Perkins assumes, ‘[a]s a means to eliminate distraction’, it in fact ‘merely substitutes one distraction for another’ (83). Aaron Smuts, in a critical but sympathetic assessment of Perkins’ views on credibility, argues that Perkins uses the word ‘in at least three different senses and [...] never makes it clear how they all fit together’ (2006: 86). After exploring credibility in *Film as Film* in the sense of, first, correspondence to reality; second, as a function of internal consistency (‘something like playing by the rules of the game’); and, finally, as convention, Smuts argues persuasively that belief is, for Perkins, the goal of credibility, and thus that ‘[w]hat Perkins’ concept of credibility amounts to is a rough composite between internal consistency and correspondence with reality in the form of convention. Perkins is insistent that the filmmaker must remain out of mind’ (2006: 88 & 90). Achieving credibility, for Perkins, is one of the ways films also achieve coherence, and ‘[c]oherence is the prerequisite of meaning’ and ‘the means by which the film-maker creates significance’ ([1972] 1993: 116). Katerina Virvidaki has, however, recently argued that ‘if we dissociate a basic aspect of Perkins’ understanding of film coherence – namely, a film’s “synthetic” understanding – from a particularly tight form of “synthesis”, valued by Perkins, it then becomes ‘possible to argue for a *pliant* and *variegated* understanding of the workings of’ coherence and incoherence

(2017: 4 & 3). Perkins is willing to grant that incoherence can be significant, but sees it as likely to lead only to profligately unconstrained interpretation: ‘Meaning may exist without internal relationship; but coherence is the prerequisite of contained significance’ ([1972] 1993: 117). One reaction to this claim, pertinent to many of Ferrara’s films, might be to wonder whether a film could, somehow, contain – which is to say motivate, make intelligible use of – its *incoherence* or, in Brenez’s terms, its *disorder*. I propose that Brenez’s treatment of credibility, coherence, and synthesis suggests ways of reconsidering, or resituating, some of Perkins’ fundamental claims. This might, for example, be one way of reading her statement that Ferrara’s ‘work introduces disorder into a cynical world; misunderstandings begin here, since some critics attribute this disorder to the films themselves’ (3). She implies that the films’ disorder can be seen as *motivated incoherence* that is intelligible in relation to the disorder of the world at large, and would agree with Brad Stevens’s claim that ‘Ferrara imbricates our responses to imagery with our responses to external reality’ (2004: 272).

It would be beyond the scope of this article fully to tease out the affinities and divergences between these proposals and Perkins’ assertion that his claims rest on seeing the fiction film ‘as a synthetic process whose conventions allow the creation of forms in which thought and feeling are continually related to our common experience of the world’ ([1972] 1993: 187). But we can say with confidence that, though Brenez shares some fundamental assumptions with Perkins, she has a different attitude with regard to the role played by credibility and the ways in which a truly successful narrative film must efficiently integrate all its elements. Like Perkins, she is concerned with synthesis; one of the great strengths of Ferrara’s cinema, for her, is the way it ‘manifest[s] Ferrara’s genius for figurative synthesis’ (6). What she intends by ‘figurative synthesis’ is not made entirely explicit, but there are clues. She admires *Body Snatchers*, for example, because of the way it maximises possible interpretive avenues. Is it, diegetically, a fantasy, a ‘dream of a teenaged girl [...] a lethal fable invented so that she can do away with her brother, mother, and father’ (7); is it a science-fiction, ‘a futuristic essay on industrial pollution and global militarization’ (6); or is it, perhaps, ‘a

retrospective meditation on “Hiroshima man” (6)? Brenez does not ask, like Perkins, for synthesis to be achieved by means of a balance predicated on maintaining the illusion of the fiction but, rather, for a synthesis that comes about via the forging of links between narrative, metaphorical, and visual procedures – even if this process disrupts our involvement with the narrative world; the emphasis is always on movement and transformation, on what we saw her above refer to as ‘a passage between altered images’ (21). This passage may reorientate hierarchies at any moment; even Ferrara’s use of allegory she admires because it ‘is especially kinetic: his characters allegorize not fixed notions but questions or problems’ (13). A maximally ‘figuratively synthetic’ film seems, for Brenez, to be one that activates, moves among, and forges connections between, *as many* different narrative, thematic, and visual phenomena as possible – whereas for Perkins, a maximally synthetic film is one whose synthesis is itself maximally *efficient*, as smooth and integrated as possible; for him a synthetic theory is ‘a theory of balance, coherence and complexity’ ([1972] 1993: 189).

This difference in critical priorities can also, I think, be seen in the way Brenez manipulates interpretational priority. Demonstrating the credibility of her critical claims is not always her first priority; there is, in her work, a role for what may initially appear to be rather implausible claims, in the way that they encourage the reader to reconsider their sense of a film’s organisation or significance. An instance of this can be found in her discussion of a short sequence from *Body Snatchers* that Brenez refers to as ‘the fifty most terrifying, synthetic seconds in narrative cinema’ (10). The young boy Andy lies listening with worry to an argument between his father and sister. There is a dissolve to what Brenez calls the ‘dark, speckled brilliance’ (10) of an asphalted road. The camera moves right to bring Carol, Andy’s stepmother – or rather her false, alien replacement – into view, dressed in dark clothes, her dark hair moving slightly in a gentle breeze. She is seen from above, at such an angle that her face is visible but its expression foreshortened and unreadable. The camera lowers itself, getting closer and closer but maintaining the same angle on her face before eventually rotating slowly so that she is presented at eye level in close-up, to the right



of the screen. Conventional framing is only achieved at the very end of the camera movement. A military truck can be seen facing us, out of focus and slowly approaching. ‘Carol’ is looking off to screen left; now she turns her face slightly to the right (further towards screen left) and another truck enters the frame from the left. The truck passes her and she hands a soldier at the back of the truck a black plastic bag which contains, we know, the remains of the real Carol.



The way the crane shot transfers our point of view from above the earth – only gradually bringing us into alignment with the false mother’s own level – mimics the extra-terrestrial arrival of the body snatchers and their adoption of human scale. Mimicry is an entirely appropriate strategy (figurative strategy, Brenez would say) for a film largely concerned with that very process. Brenez emphasises both the sequence’s symbolic dimension and the way it is connected to the preceding sequence:

In a slow-motion sequence-shot, the false, snatched mother, Carol (Meg Tilly), moves toward a truck, carrying a garbage bag that contains the remains of the real mother. Much is fused in this image of man-as-ashes: the Nazi ovens, the obliteration of bodies in Hiroshima, and the contemporary transformation of genetic patrimony

into industrial property [...]. But the lap-dissolve that begins the sequence-shot, superimposing the disturbed face of Andy upon the cosmic asphalt, suggests that it is all the nightmare of a young boy. (10)

The first part of this passage permits a perfectly conventional division between narrative content and its symbolic resonances which may, out of context, appear a little far-fetched but which Brenez integrates into her wider reading of the film’s ‘figurative synthesis’, arguing for example that in it ‘[t]he capitalist system is figured as a toxic military base’ (10) and linking an image of the shadows cast by a group of soldiers to ‘the outlines of bodies imprinted onto Hiroshima’s walls’ (7). But the point about the nightmare of the young son instead takes its starting point from a purely visual feature of the film: the dissolve superimposes the asphalt on the face of the boy. Brenez is not arguing that, diegetically, what is going on *is* merely a nightmare – ‘It was all a dream!’ – but rather that what she would call the film’s figurative invention raises this possibility, or connotes such an idea. It does so because it is a merely one instance of a pattern that Brenez finds in a great many of Ferrara’s films. *The Funeral* (1996) ends with the coffin lid being lowered above Johnny’s (Vincent Gallo) dead body, leading Brenez to suggest that ‘the final image suggests that the entire film might have been the dream of a corpse’ (77). She also argues that the way that a scene in *Dangerous Game* (1993) in which Harvey Keitel confesses his infidelities to his wife after having just learned from her of her father’s death is sandwiched between two shots of air stewardesses offering him a drink gives rise to the idea that he was ‘dreaming the intervening scene’ (97). Brenez’s claim is that it is part of Ferrara’s style, of his films’ figurative logic, to employ certain images in such a way as to evoke a sense of dream or fantasy without going so far as actually to generate a fantastic diegesis. But because films that *do* wish to indicate a diegetic dream or fantasy often use the exact same devices, the result is a curious and distinctive effect that hovers between possibilities, with both the prosaic diegesis and the sensation of a dream active simultaneously; such effects are common even in those of Ferrara’s films not primarily concerned with hallucination.

Brenez's mode of writing is, then, related to her critical priorities if we understand that term with reference to the way she structures her arguments. It is true that she doesn't, as a rule, give much attention to detailed description, but her work has other strengths and pleasures. She does at times employ a somewhat apodictic tone, which can result in what might appear to be grandly sweeping claims. Take, for example, her discussion of the scene in the restaurant after crime kingpin Frank White (Christopher Walken) is released from prison in *King of New York* (1990), and the modes of complicity with his criminality that it displays: 'There are five orders of complicity: subordination, connivance, collusion, attraction, and embrace' (65). Although, in context, it is relatively clear that the claim about 'five orders of complicity' is specific to the restaurant scene, its placement soon after the opening of the section, which refers to Hobbes's view of human nature and its 'three principal "causes of quarrel"' leading to 'three modes of behaviour involving the use of violence' (64) means that the possibility of reading the claim about complicity as a general one is, one might say, connoted. But it would be a mistake to read the way she structures her arguments as evidence that her criticism begins with the abstract and simply imposes extraneous ideas on the films she discusses. On the contrary, returning to the films after reading her criticism shows how closely attentive she is. Nevertheless, perhaps because she wants to distance herself from an empiricism that might consider itself to be neutral and purely objective, or (in another Deleuzian gesture) to dissuade us from thinking that philosophy needs to be 'applied' to films – rather than that films can be examined with an eye to determining the philosophical work that they themselves are doing – she tends to introduce specific details as *evidence* for more general claims, rather than as *material* on which to build those claims. This strategy might well make us miss the vivid description of films to be found in other critics, but there is surely no reason to wish for a single model of textually attentive criticism. Brenez, I would argue, draws out lines of thought which one can follow upon returning to the films in question, rather than merely extracting themes or pursuing loose associations. John Gibbs and Douglas Pye correctly observe that '[i]nterpretation has to be rooted in

the concrete details of the text (its style) because it is only through these that we gain access to the film's subjects', but there are different ways such a 'rooting' might exhibit itself in written critical texts (2005: 10). Brenez's style is not wholly devoted to demonstration through close reading – though it does do this – but it is nevertheless *based*, throughout, on close reading.

I want, finally, to ask whether Brenez always fulfils her commitment to fluidity and transformation by examining a single tiny example, which is again an instance of 'the movement of one thing towards its other', from *Ms .45* (1981). This film tells the story of how suffering two rapes on a single day transforms a mute seamstress named Thana (Zoë Tamerlis) into a vengeful killer, who eventually wants to destroy all men simply for being men. The film's culminating massacre takes place at a Halloween party, at which Thana – who takes on the trappings both of 'virgin' and 'whore' by dressing as a heavily made-up nun (combining the insignia of the only

sexual roles traditionally allowed women by men in order to enact her task of obliterating all men) – is eventually stabbed to death by her friend Laurie (Darlene Stuto). Brenez writes:

By erasing Thana, Laurie bears witness to the gesture – at once castrating (she wields an enormous knife) and protective (without this gesture, society is no longer even possible; it would be the reign of pure violence, Thana's reign) – through which the human creature participates in his or her own enslavement. (90)

The gesture is presumably castrating because it puts an end to Thana's use of her (phallic) gun. But what are we to make of the fact, unmentioned by Brenez, that the *knife* is also clearly shown as *Laurie's* symbolic phallus?

Before she stabs Thana, Laurie holds the knife erect at her crotch, accentuated by her black skirt which is open at the front, revealing her legs and underwear. The gesture is not exactly emphasised but the slow motion of the sequence gives us plenty of time to notice it. Despite the tiresomely familiar





misogyny which is on plentiful display elsewhere in the party (two men discuss buying virgins, while another man denies his partner the option not to be a mother by refusing to have a vasectomy despite earlier having promised to), at the moment of her death Thana is positioned between two instances of *subversion* of gender, combinations of supposedly contradictory gender codes in single individuals. Her final victim is a man dressed as a bride in white, who stands in front of her; behind her is Laurie, wielding her knife as surrogate penis. Even given the fact that, as Brenez argues, there is a sense in which Thana ‘incarnates the logical, politically radical response to an intolerable situation’ (89), the consequence of fully enacting this response would, as Brenez says, be the obliteration of all society. Brenez notes that ‘Thana drifts towards a collective massacre – erasing all masculine bodies suspected of sexual aggression, then any man whatsoever, and finally [...] every kind of body, whether male, female, or transsexual’ (42), but she neglects

the application of imagery that transgresses gender boundaries to Laurie, the agent of Thana’s destruction. Perhaps we could read the gender slippage in this final composition as a whole as giving the lie to Thana’s misandry, which dominates her violence. Even if it is initially directed against one man, and eventually becomes indiscriminate, the majority of the film’s narrative outlines the way the object of Thana’s hatred expands from men who approach her sexually to *all men*, in general. According to this misandry, men are utterly other than women, and therefore utterly unworthy of existence. In fact men and women are *not* wholly other to one another, but this Thana will never understand; hence the complete incomprehension with which, as she dies, she says to Laurie the only word she speaks in the entire film: ‘sister’.

Why, then, does Brenez not mention Laurie’s phallic knife? Perhaps she simply did not notice it. Perkins wrote in his final published piece that ‘[w]hen some salient detail escapes comment, the omission may as soon result from a writer’s

decision and priorities as from a failure of observation’, but that it is also ‘inevitably’ the case that ‘we do fall victim to failures of observation’ (2017: 384). Even if Brenez’s omission is the result of an oversight, perhaps she was prompted not to notice it – if one can say such a thing – because of her interpretation of Laurie as an agent of accommodation with regressive norms. In Brenez’s reading, Laurie’s ‘irritation and rage in the face of harassment [...] nonetheless expresses itself in a socially admissible way’ which serves ultimately to ‘render the situation tolerable’ (89). Thana is, as we have seen, the radical alternative to such behaviour, who must ultimately be destroyed, and destroyed by Laurie, the socially acceptable face of protest: ‘Laurie kills the adolescence that is represented throughout the film by Thana’s bodily mutation. This is an adolescence entirely aligned with rebellion [...] Once dead, Thana can become an adult, that is, servile’ (90). It would not have been easy for Brenez’s argument to explore the consequences of any transgressive sexuality associated with Laurie while retaining such a firm opposition between two forms of protest as embodied in the two characters. This small example can serve as a reminder of how vigilant the critic concerned with figurative transformation needs to be, because of how seductive static oppositions can be even to those explicitly dedicated to avoiding them.

There does not, then, seem to me to be such a thing as ‘figural criticism’, if it is considered to be an alternative to other, supposedly more traditional, methods. (Not to mention the fact that the *Movie* tradition is by no means monolithic or even entirely coherent; the writings of, say, Andrew Britton or Raymond Durnat are in some ways almost as different from Perkins as is Brenez.) Brenez’s approach offers an example of alternative emphasis rather than a wholly distinct approach to criticism. This is not, of course, a weakness because it increases the ways in which Brenez’s practice could usefully inform other styles of criticism; to take on board its example does not require that one subscribe fully to her method in all its aspects. Brenez may sometimes invert critical priorities, but she does not do so merely to be different. Her thinking is systematic (in that it makes structurally interconnected theoretical propositions and articulates a strong sense of films as interrelated wholes, as well as parts of oeuvres that

themselves, in turn, form interrelated wholes) but not in such a way that any omission discovered risks its collapse. I see no reason why one cannot envisage a criticism that combines the nuanced description and sensitivity to pattern and motivation we find in critics such as Perkins with the interests in explicit theoretical construction and varied forms of excess and disorder that motivate Brenez. Such a criticism might provide some fresh perspectives as well as facilitating the application of some of Perkins' most important insights to films that those critics who draw on his methodology have sometimes tended to consider as lying out of bounds.

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Dominic Lash recently completed his PhD on confusion and disorientation in film at the University of Bristol. An article on faith, agency, and self-pity in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) has just been published in the *Quarterly Review of Film and Television*.

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with, or resulting from, such processes would involve us in complexities that are not to the point here.

- ³ My translation. 'Il faut envisager ensuite la logique figurative, non pas seulement comme traitement d'un motif, d'un thème ou d'une forme singulière, mais aussi en termes de groupement de figures, au sens tour à tour plastique (le contour corporel, l'effigie) et rhétorique (enchaînements et déchaînements, syntaxe et parataxe des liens eux-mêmes).'
- ⁴ Thanks to Alex Clayton for prompting me to think harder about this resonance between Perkins and Brenez and suggesting these examples.
- ⁵ This phrase should not be seen as implying than Perkins was any kind of naïve realist; it indicates, instead, his resistance (at the time he wrote *Film as Film*) to certain aspects of modernism. This resistance finds expression in the stipulation – which this phrase reflects – that once the rules of the film world are set up, whatever they may be, then it is important for the film to abide by them, lest the viewer's experience be unhelpfully disrupted.
- ⁶ The film draws connections between the acts of painting and (murdering by) drilling, and both activities reach a culmination in the final monochrome, which is both a 'painterly' image and a metonym for blood – once again the two senses of figuration (plastic and rhetorical) are entwined.

¹ The definition states that figuration is the 'symbolic game or process aiming to establish a fixed, evolving or unstable correlation between the plastic, aural and narrative parameters able to elicit fundamental categories of representation (such as the visible and invisible, mimesis, reflection, appearance and disappearance, image and origin, the integral and the discontinuous, form, the intelligible, the part and the whole [...]) and other parameters – which may be the same parameters, depending on the particular type of determination effected – relating to fundamental categories of ontology (such as being and appearance, essence and apparition, being and nothingness, same and other, the immediate, the reflective, inner and outer, [...]).' (translated by Adrian Martin and cited in Martin 2012: 8).

² I shall concentrate in this article on the notion of *figuration*, rather than attempting to define what a *figure* might be. This is because, as I attempt to make clear in the course of the article, figuration is, for Brenez, so fundamentally processual that defining the noun associated