Cinema | Diptych: *Grindhouse* | *Death Proof*

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by Caroline Bem

Abstract: The term "diptych" designates visual artworks in two halves that are simultaneously united and separated by a hinging mechanism. This article explores the form's adoption by narrative film through the double case study of *Grindhouse* (Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodríguez, 2007) and Tarantino's *Death Proof*, one of *Grindhouse*'s constituent halves. Considering the diptych's relevance both to the history of film exhibition and to the logics of revenge and masochism, I argue, first, that the diptych stages especially fruitful encounters between material and narrative concerns and, second, that as a narrative form, the diptych is particularly apt at making ethical paradox accessible.

> In the end, the diptych became the fundamental form of cinema, in very varied shapes but each time having the effect of putting time into bodies.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze[1]

> *Death Proof* might well present two visions of a singular thing, especially since the film is organized as a diptych. In the first panel, murder takes place at night; in the second, revenge exposes itself in the daytime.
>
> —Corinne Rondeau[2]

Although it is primarily associated with pictorial representation, the term "diptych" is sometimes also applied to narrative forms, like novels or poems, and to works produced in any medium—music, performance, film—that either come as a pair or are in some way divided into two parts. In writings pertaining to the latter, "diptych" is most often used to simply emphasize the relation between two separate films, usually by the same auteur. In 1972, for instance, André Bazin refers to *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) as "the great diptych" of Orson Welles's filmography.[3] Writing in 1983, Yvonne

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 197.

2 Corinne Rondeau, "Surface et polarités: Boulevard de la mort," in *Quentin Tarantino: Un cinéma déchaîné*, ed. Emmanuel Burdeau and Nicolas Vieillescazes (Paris: Capricci and Les prairies ordinaires, 2013), 85 (translation mine).

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Guers-Villate similarly designates Marguerite Duras's films *India Song* (1975) and *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* (1976) as a "diptych."[4] Like Bazin, however, she takes the term's significance for granted and refrains from engaging in a theorization of the form itself. In a 2006 article on the relation between contemporary cinema and games, Carl Therrien similarly self-evidently labels the two films *Smoking* and *No Smoking* (Alain Resnais, 1993) a "diptych."[5] More recently still, in 2013, John Alberti speaks of "[Judd] Apatow's influential diptych *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) and *Knocked Up* (2007)," and David H. Fleming has discussed the ways in which two films by Darren Aronofsky, *The Wrestler* (2008) and *Black Swan* (2010), make use of an array of techniques, including digital doubling, to foreground issues related to performance both within and beyond cinema.[6] Fleming repeatedly uses the term "performance diptych" to designate the two films—in the first line of the article he also calls them a "Janus-faced cinematic diptych"[7]—but, as with the already-cited examples, he refrains from defining the term and does not, in the end, draw concrete conclusions from it for his analysis of Aronofsky's films.[8]

To date, it appears that the sole, somewhat extensive theorization of the cinematic diptych occurs in the penultimate chapter of Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, where the word makes its first appearance to describe the relation between two films by Agnès Varda (*Mur murs* and *Documenteur*, 1981) and then, soon thereafter, to designate a number of double- and single-film diptychs by Jean Eustache.[9] In spite of being named only a handful of times, the diptych is essential to Deleuze's discussion of a new direction in French cinema, which he calls "post–New Wave" and traces across the work of several filmmakers. Most interesting to Deleuze is the notion that modern cinema at large "finds in the 'posture-voyeurism' couple"—shorthand for the main function he attributes to the diptych as it is used by Eustache—not only a fundamental site for auteurial expression but also a formal end point of sorts. As Deleuze points out, "The richness of such a cinema cannot be exhausted by one author," and so he sets

3 André Bazin, *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, trans. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 51–82.

4 Yvonne Guers-Villate, "Marguerite Duras' Cinematic Production: Towards the 'Acknowledged Murder of the Cinema,'" *Orbis Litterarum* 38 (1983): 363–374.

5 Carl Therrien, "Le cinéma sous l'emprise du jeu: Références ludiques et mise au jeu dans le cinéma contemporain," in *Jeux et enjeux de la narrativité dans les pratiques contemporaines*, ed. René Audet (Paris: Dis Voir, 2006), 92–104.

6 John Alberti, "'I Love You, Man': Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity, and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 30 (2013): 160.

7 David H. Fleming, "The Method Meets Animation: On Performative Affect and Digital-Bodies in Aronofsky's 'Performance Diptych,'" *International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media* 9, no. 2 (2013): 275.

8 A rare instance of direct engagement with the idea of the diptych in cinema is Mark Betz's unpublished conference presentation titled "Apichatpong's Diptych as Structure and Figure" (Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Boston, March 24, 2012). Two years earlier, my own presentation on the cinematic diptych had laid the groundwork for this article by focusing on the narrative structures of "divided films" and focusing on *Death Proof* as a central case study. See Caroline Bem, "From Writing Tablets to System Reboots: The Diptych in Contemporary Cinema" (Film Studies Association of Canada, Montreal, QC, June 4, 2010).

9 In the French edition, the word is spelled *diptyque*, with the exception of one occurrence of *dyptyque*. This is relevant insofar that it further underlines the relative lack of interest that seems to accompany the use of this concept. For the two spellings, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1985), 257.

out, over the next few pages, to trace manifestations of such a post–New Wave cinema—which, by this point in Deleuze's text, has surreptitiously become synonymous with the diptych form itself—in the work of other filmmakers, in particular Jacques Doillon and Philippe Garrel.[10] Simultaneously, a slippage in meaning occurs between Deleuze's initial use of the diptych (to describe related films or a single film, divided in two) and the way he deploys the term to designate moments of doubling or repetition that take place at the level of the figure rather than that of narrative form.

Despite the evident promise the diptych holds for film analysis, Deleuze does not expand on the form's role, and in fact, the diptych disappears from his text as abruptly as it entered.[11] This article, then, picks up the "loose thread" of the diptych as it is found in *Cinema 2* and, unwinding it further, asks what a more systematic theorization of the concept might yield for the study of narrative film. Drawing on the form's early manifestations in visual culture, I offer a brief theoretical account of the diptych before inquiring into the mechanisms by which it maintains its defining features when it is no longer a purely visual form but a time-based and narrative one as well. By interweaving film historical and narratological approaches to the cinematic diptych, I argue that, as a form whose primary investments lie in simultaneity and reversibility, the diptych makes paradox accessible in a way that is unique in narrative film. Instead of asking viewers to choose between two diametrically opposed readings of a film, cinematic diptychs introduce the possibility of a "third space." This third space represents not a compromise but rather an alternate space wherein formalized representations of competing political or ethical positions *coexist* with equal validity and also are read as coexisting in such a way. The diptych, in other words, gives rise to filmic narratives that do not seek to resolve but instead elect to "sit with" irreconcilable tensions. While the greater philosophical implications of such paradoxical narratives surpass the scope of this article, they highlight a paradoxical aspect of the diptych's largely undertheorized contribution to narrative form, namely that the diptych can be effectively deployed to provide an alternative to binary logic.

As a case study, I have chosen a complex, twice-folded film object in two parts: Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof*, a film whose narrative is split into two halves of equal length and that is itself one half of the curated double-bill-turned-narrative-feature *Grindhouse*, which Tarantino released together with Robert Rodríguez in 2007. What follows takes the form of a two-way process: I aim to theorize the cinematic diptych through *Grindhouse / Death Proof* and at the same time to offer a renewed understanding of *Grindhouse / Death Proof* through the paradoxical form of the diptych. The purpose of this second layer of analysis is to add to heretofore-common interpretations of both films that, without devoting much time to an analysis of the complex layers of "twoness" that pervade them, have almost exclusively framed the two films as tributes to both film formats and generic forms of decades past. Instead, the diptych

10 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 198.

11 Generally speaking, Deleuze appears to have been more partial to the form of the triptych, which receives a substantial amount of attention, in particular in his book on Francis Bacon. See Gilles Deleuze, "Note: What Is a Triptych?," in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), 74–85.

offers an essential key to unlocking both films—*Grindhouse* in its entirety and *Death Proof* on its own.

In *Grindhouse*, the diptych form is mobilized not simply to work through and pay tribute to salient aspects of historical practices of film exhibition (through its kinship with the double-bill format) but also to revitalize formal and generic elements from this history. In particular, structures borrowed from film exhibition practices like the double bill are woven into the narrative fabric of this two-in-one film opus. In *Death Proof*, these elements are all the more relevant as the film continues the incorporation, begun in *Grindhouse*, of historical and material considerations into its narrative form. However, the diptych also carries a pronounced ethical function. As I show in an analysis that leaves behind *Grindhouse* to focus on Tarantino's film as a stand-alone object, applying the diptych as an interpretive lens—that is, viewing *Death Proof* both as a diptych and through the diptych—brings to light how the film articulates itself around the interchangeability of two gendered, ethical positions that also contain apparent contradictions: that of victim-avenger and that of attacker-masochist. Before deploying the diptych as a tool for film analysis, however, I want, first, to say a word about the form's general characteristics and the ways in which these find themselves adapted within narrative film.

Diptych: Simultaneity | Hinge | Paradox. One of the earliest documented appearances of the diptych occurred in the Roman Empire, where consuls, the annually elected chief magistrates of the state, would bestow the gift of two writing tablets upon their senatorial peers. These tablets were bound together and most likely featured an inner reinscribable wax layer within their outer shell of carved ivory (see Figure 1).[12] During the subsequent evolution of the form, throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods, diptychs most often took the shape of smaller, portable artifacts—devotional diptychs—that echoed the book-like appearance of early consular diptychs.[13] These diptychs were made for individual use and typically represented the supplicant on one panel and one or several holy figures on the other, joined symbolically through the diptych's hinging mechanism. An important feature of most of these small diptychs was that they occupied three-dimensional space in a variety of ways. They could be positioned upright to create "'booklike' little altars," or as recent research suggests, they may have been displayed with only one of their panels attached to a wall, leaving the other wing free for manipulations of opening and closing.[14] In this way, two spatial

12 For a precise account of the social and economic significance of consular diptychs, see Antony Eastmond, "Consular Diptychs, Rhetoric and the Languages of Art in Sixth-Century Constantinople," *Art History* 33, no. 5 (December 2010): 742–765. For an essential resource on consular diptychs, see Kim Bowes, "Ivory Lists: Consular Diptychs, Christian Appropriation and Polemics of Time in Late Antiquity," *Art History* 24 (June 2001): 338–357.

13 Victor M. Schmidt, "Diptychs and Supplicants: Precedents and Contexts of Fifteenth-Century Devotional Diptychs," in *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, ed. John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 15.

14 The citation is from Laura D. Gelfand, "The Devotional Portrait Diptych and the Manuscript Tradition," in *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, ed. John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 49. See Silvio Savarese, Ron Spronk, David G. Stork, and Andrey del Pozo, "Reflections on Praxis and Facture in a Devotional Portrait Diptych: A Computer Analysis of the Mirror in Hans Memling's

positions (an open and closed state) coexisted at all times, as potentialities, within these portable diptychs, and the attempts that were made—as in the case of the semi-attached display—to minimize the distance between both positions speak to widespread interest in the form's inherent capacity to bring together complementary conceptual positions, as is the case in devotional diptychs as well as diametrically opposed ones.[15]

Figure 1. Ivory consular diptych of Areobindus, Byzantium (AD 506). 34 x 11.8 x 0.9 cm (13.4 x 4.6 x 0.4 in). Musée du Louvre.

On a temporal level, the spatial paradox of simultaneously available open and closed states finds an equivalent in the modality of viewing that the form introduces. Indeed, in contrast to other types of panel painting whose viewing requires several steps of opening or unfolding and whose totality can never be grasped at once, the diptych "forces the viewer to behold the paintings together and to come to an understanding of their divergent and convergent aspects."[16] Thus, not only are opposed utilizations of the form equally accessible, because the diptych can be used to show similarity or difference, repetition or variation, but also the diptych's comparative mode of viewing is deeply rooted in the paradoxical nature of simultaneity itself. Here, it is useful to recall how Henri Bergson defines simultaneity as "two instantaneous perceptions . . . that are apprehended in one and the same mental act." Importantly, for Bergson, "the attention [must be able] to make one or two out of them at will."[17] Simultaneity, then, is in itself paradoxical because, much like the diptych form, it is entirely consumed by the process of making graspable or available two entities—two object-states, two modes of viewing, two temporalities—at once. However, far from being simply a matter of overlapping temporalities (fragments of linearity forever striving to convey "at onceness"), simultaneity also conveys two competing yet coexisting possibilities: that of keeping two events, or linear flows of time, separate and that of viewing them as a singular entity.

Finally, a third feature—the hinge—completes the diptych's firm installation within the realm of paradox. Through a singular movement, the diptych's hinge makes and unmakes the form by simultaneously holding together and separating its two—typically equally wide—halves, ultimately bringing the outside into the inside and the whole into the part. It is worth noting that, in aesthetic terms, the diptych is typically associated with balance and harmony, largely through its relation to symmetry, which is itself

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Virgin and Child and Maarten van Nieuwenhove," *Computer Image Analysis in the Study of Art* (2008): https://doi.org/10.1117/12.761226.

15 The latter has been recently exemplified in Ed Ruscha's *Heaven and Hell* (diptych) (1988), a work that draws on the form's religious history in which the two panels were often used to show polar opposites rather than complementarity.

16 Yvonne Yiu, "Hinging Past and Present: Diptych Variants of Jan van Eyck's *Virgin in the Church*," in Hand and Spronk, *Essays in Context*, 112.

17 Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity: With Reference to Einstein's Theory*, trans. Leon Jacobson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 51.

dependent on the equality of a diptych's two halves, as the term "diptych" suggests an even repartition of content across the two parts of a work. Balance, here, is not solely an aesthetic category, but as the latter part of this article makes clear, it also points to the ethical affordances of the form.[18] For now, suffice it to say that, although from an art-historical perspective the presence of a physical hinging mechanism is a key constituent of the diptych, art historians have spent little time theorizing the conceptual implications of this device. Therefore, one must look elsewhere to come to grips with the hinge. A starting point is found in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's introduction to her translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, in which she substitutes Derrida's *brisure* with the term "hinge." While Spivak's intervention convincingly highlights Derrida's unquestionable investment in hinged structures of thought, language, and ethics, it is noteworthy that the theoretical origins of the hinge have since been misattributed to the *Grammatology* itself when they stem, largely, from a posteriori readings of the *Grammatology* in Spivak's English translation, not to mention the influence of later writings by Derrida on these readings.[19] More generally, then, the absorption of the hinge into a largely North American collective Derridean imaginary, marked by frequent appearances of the term across post-deconstructionist writings, can be traced back to Spivak's translation decision.[20]

In addition to the *Grammatology*'s *brisure*, the conceptual hinge whose main field of application remains language, another Derridean concept proves useful in theorizing the diptych's visual hinge through analogy. In the first chapter from *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida takes as a starting point Immanuel Kant's concept of the *parergon*, that element of a painting or sculpture that does not belong to a work's representational content and, in appearance at least, merely adds to its aesthetic value. Whether it takes the shape of a work's frame as a whole or of an ornamental detail within that frame, the *parergon* is defined by Derrida as "neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d'oeuvre*], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any

18 On the connection between symmetry in aesthetics and in retributive justice, see in particular Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 96–97.

19 See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 65–73. In the chapter "Hinge," the word *brisure* appears only twice, and in accordance with the book's project, it is defined exclusively in relation to language as that which "marks the impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and a signified, be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence" (69). *Spectres of Marx*, in particular, offers a lengthy discussion of the famous line from *Hamlet* "the time is out of joint," relying heavily on the rhetoric of joining-disjoining and hinging-unhinging. See Jacques Derrida, "Injunctions of Marx," in *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 22–33.

20 A particularly creative example of such rhetorical riffing on the hinge is found here: "In reading à la Derrida, one looks for the 'hinges' in texts, those places where the writing could 'fold either way,' those places where articulation (i.e., purposeful, official meaning) meets difference (the infinite capacity of words to mean many things at the same time, including contradictory things). The hinge is the place where the text 'breaks open' because it is the place where the words 'hinge,' where they fold, admit multiple meanings, work against themselves. To show how a text undercuts itself, one must look for the hinges." Robert Brooke, "Control in Writing: Flower, Derrida, and Images of the Writer," *College English* 51, no. 4 (April 1989): 406. I am fully aware that the present article is not exempt from this tendency to shroud the hinge in Derridean terminology, and if I highlight it, it is essentially to draw attention, yet again, to the irrepressible, and thus noteworthy, link that exists, by way of the hinge, between the diptych in particular and Derridean philosophy in general.

opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work."[21] The parergonal frame, then, is neither exclusively a liminal marker nor simply a third space: it is the ontological center of a work—it is what makes a work a *work*—and yet, simultaneously, it also destabilizes that work's very being by emphasizing its constructedness.

This calling into question of a work's "essentially constructed and therefore fragile" truth is, for Derrida, the very quality of "parergonality."[22] The same can be said of the diptych's internal *parergon*, its hinge: a singular line caught between two planes, it is the fragile center upon which the diptych's truth, as a diptych, hinges. Its presence gives the form its form (its "truth"), yet, by drawing attention to its constructedness, the hinge threatens at the same time to dissolve the diptych's very form. Precisely by virtue of their symmetry, the two halves of a diptych forever threaten to annul each other or, as a result of the hinge's ontological porosity, to subsume one within the other. For a work to be a diptych, in other words, is for it to be always already aware of itself as a diptych and to incorporate the ethical limitations of the form—its inability to choose one side or truth over the other—into its constitution of itself as a visual or conceptual manifestation of paradox.

To summarize, then, two fundamental characteristics of the diptych emerge, both of which express the form's profound connection to paradox. The first is simultaneity—of opposed spatial or conceptual positions or states and as a process that simultaneously connects and separates two streams of time. The second is the parergonal hinge, defined as that element which, by simultaneously connecting and separating the diptych's two halves, gives rise to the form at the very same time as it puts it into question. In what follows, I am interested in mapping how these salient features of the diptych—its propensity to make paradox visible at a spatial, temporal, and narrative level—are transposed to the time-based medium of narrative film specifically.[23]

With *Grindhouse*, directors Robert Rodríguez and Quentin Tarantino completed their long-standing project of not only re-creating the experience of visiting a grindhouse theater in the 1970s or 1980s but also translating that experience into narrative form.[24] The three-hour-long film, which includes mock vintage logos and intermission title cards, as well as several fake trailers, presented theater audiences with two films-within-a-film that were shown back-to-back: Rodríguez's *Planet Terror*, a contagion horror and zombie movie set in Austin, Texas, followed by Tarantino's *Death Proof*, a mixture of slasher, car chase, and rape-revenge genre conventions, also set in Austin.[25]

21 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (1978; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9.

22 Derrida, 73.

23 I am not, in other words, interested in discussing here the wide array of filmic and video installations that use devices such as double projection and split screens even though these time-based works unquestionably have much in common with the visual diptych and can certainly be productively discussed in relation to the form.

24 This project first originated with the directors' collaboration on *From Dusk till Dawn* in 1996 and was continued independently by Tarantino in his two *Kill Bill* films, released in 2003 and 2004.

25 *Grindhouse* was theatrically released as the complete three-hour "experience" in Canada and the United States in 2007. For commercial reasons, however, *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* were then released separately in theaters and on DVD internationally, in the fall of 2007, before a "special edition" Blu-ray set, re-creating the original double bill, was released in 2010 in the United States (and also to DVD in Canada). See Joshua Zyber, "*Grindhouse*: 2-Disc Collector's Edition," *High-Def Digest*, http://bluray.highdefdigest.com/3723/grindhouse.html.

In the following section, I look at the relationship between the form of the diptych and the double-bill format, which is taken as both an economically and an educationally motivated film exhibition practice. In so doing, I also pay attention to products and practices derived from double bills—in particular, posters and a certain type of television programming—that would come to have a pronounced influence on Tarantino's oeuvre.

By attempting to turn films into objects for simultaneous contemplation, I argue, the double bill presented a response to cinema's problem of linearity, which makes comparison between films challenging, something that becomes especially problematic once cinema enters the museum and films are to be considered as museum objects. Although much has been written elsewhere about the simulacral, pastiche-like, and nostalgic features of *Grindhouse*'s engagement with material film and film exhibition history, reading *Grindhouse* as a diptych allows for me to foreground another, crucial aspect of the project.[26] Rather than merely attempting to imitate, re-create, or reinvent genre iconographies and film viewing experiences of the past, *Grindhouse* repurposes the formal structures of given genres and of certain film exhibition practices as well, in order to construct a cinematic diptych object. For *Grindhouse*, in other words, the double bill is not merely a gimmick but the main narrative driving force of the film.

Simultaneity. By the time the Hollywood studio system had become well established, in the early 1930s, "any two films were liable to be arbitrarily coupled together" within so-called double-bill presentations.[27] Simultaneously, and beginning as early as the 1920s, a second circuit of grind-house theaters had emerged, whose cheap double-feature presentations were associated, according to David Church, with "not only a specific site of exhibition but also films of dubious social worth."[28] Subsequently, in the poststudio era, Hollywood abandoned double features to focus on the production and distribution of blockbuster films, while "grind houses retained double and triple features, inadvertently enhancing the apparent cheapness of their product."[29] Within the studio system, it was far from uncommon for A- and B-status films to be mixed and matched at random, but in grind houses the film pairings became even more erratic. For instance, a former patron of the now-defunct Variety Photo Plays in Manhattan recalls of the theater's final years that "the shows—always double features—were absolutely random. A typical show would combine a kiddie movie about a pet bear

26 See, e.g., Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Going, Going, Grindhouse: Simulacral Cinematicity and Postcinematic Spectatorship," in *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 132–166; Angela Ndalianis, "Payback's a Bitch! *Death Proof*, *Planet Terror* and the Carnivalization of Grindhouse Cinema," in *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 107–142; Dominik Schrey, "Mediennostalgie und Cinephilie im *Grindhouse-Doublefeature*," in *Techniknostalgie und Retrotechnologie*, Karlsruher Studien-Technik und Kultur Band 2, ed. Andreas Böhn and Kurt Möser (Karlsruhe, Germany: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2010), 183–195.

27 Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 95.

28 David Church, "From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films," *Cinema Journal* 50 (Summer 2011): 3.

29 Church, 15.

cub and the trashiest low-budget porn available."[30] Such aleatory pairings, it turns out, captivated filmgoers' imaginations because rather than in spite of their randomness. Following the disappearance of grind-house theaters in the 1990s, memories of double bills, and of the thusly featured exploitation films, became cult objects imbued with nostalgia. This especially applied to double-bill poster artwork—film history's mass-produced visual diptychs—which in many cases constituted a particular pairing's sole remaining trace.[31]

As both directors have recounted in numerous interviews, the idea for *Grindhouse* was born when Rodríguez and Tarantino discovered they owned copies of the same vintage poster for a 1950s double bill that brought together *Dragstrip Girl* (Edward L. Cahn, 1957), a car flick, and *Rock All Night* (Roger Corman, 1957), a rock-and-roll movie.[32] On the spot, they decided they would codirect a single film in the form of a double feature and name it *Grindhouse*.[33] Thus, the underlying concept of *Grindhouse* is both based on and contained within a visual diptych composed of two film posters in one. As Rodríguez puts it, "The posters say it and then we deliver."[34] In *Grindhouse*'s most circulated poster, as in the original double-bill poster that first sparked the directors' imagination, the individual posters for *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* face each other symmetrically. In addition, however, the word "Grindhouse," written in large, dripping, blood-red letters, visually announces the film's overarching formal structure: just as the two films are united through the concept of the double bill, the individual posters for *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* are brought together under the umbrella of this singular caption. Formally, then, the double bill's two-in-one logic offers a conceptual representation of the paradox of Bergsonian simultaneity: a two that becomes a one yet always retains the possibility of separateness.

A particular feature of double-bill posters was that slogans placed a dual emphasis on both the economic advantage and the sensory overload that a specific double bill promised to filmgoers. This effect was achieved by incorporating frequent references to twoness, typically through word games such as "gruesome twosome," "double the horror / double the suspense," "See them together but don't see them alone!," and "Together'n Terrific!"[35] Because the two films of a double bill could, in reality, be accessed only sequentially, graphics had to be used to simulate the possibility of comparative viewing (as in a diptych) that would remain elusive during the actual

30 David Robertson qtd. in Jack Stevenson, "Grindhouse and Beyond," in *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema's First Century*, ed. John Cline and Robert G. Weiner (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 136.

31 See, e.g., Stephen Parmelee, "Remembrance of Films Past: Film Posters on Film," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 29 (June 2009): 181.

32 Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodríguez, "Exploitable Elements: Rodríguez and Tarantino Define the Grindhouse Experience," in *"Grindhouse": The Sleaze-Filled Saga of an Exploitation Double Feature*, ed. Kurt Volk (New York: Weinstein Books, 2007), 12–14.

33 Tarantino and Rodríguez, 12.

34 Tarantino and Rodríguez, 14.

35 All caption examples are taken from a digitized collection of double-bill posters found at Adrian Curry, "Movie Poster of the Week: The Double-Feature Combo Poster," Mubi.com, June 28, 2014, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/movie-poster-of-the-week-the-double-feature-combo-poster.

screening. In other words, by presenting two film posters side by side, double-bill posters sought, through graphic representation, to compensate film's linearity by both calling into being and spatially simulating the comparatist impulse behind double-feature presentations.

Similar to the visual diptychs of the medieval period or the Renaissance, double bills invited significant conceptual work from their viewers, who were required to keep the first film in mind while watching the second feature. This aspect acquires even more importance in relation to a second type of film exhibition practice, which I term the "cinephilic" approach to film curating, wherein specific film pairings create coherent wholes to be contemplated, studied, and, in some way perhaps, committed to memory. In *Le cinéma, un art moderne*, Dominique Païni argues that "projection is the paradigm for the hanging of exhibitions. This is how *cinémathèques* define themselves as museums of the cinema, museums for the cinema."[36] This definition metaphorically imbues cinephilic engagement with a spatial dimension. Païni suggests that, like paintings and other works of visual art, films in some way *want* to be considered side by side.[37] That is to say that, like static images, films, too, want to be viewed from a vantage point that privileges juxtaposition and comparison. In practice, however, this mode of side-by-side viewing most often adopts the shape of back-to-back presentations, with viewers effecting the work of comparison in their minds.

An important heir to this cinephilic tradition of "a posteriori interpretation" was television programmer Jerry Harvey, who presented an eclectic array of films on Z Channel, one of the first pay TV channels to emerge in the 1980s in Los Angeles.[38] As filmmaker Henry Jaglom puts it, Harvey offered viewers a "smorgasbord" of film: "[i]t was like having a film festival in your house every single night."[39] By intensifying the blending of high and low genres already present within the programming choices of Iris Barry and Henri Langlois, Harvey's idiosyncratic programming turned out to be even more radical than his predecessors', with European art films being shown routinely and unapologetically alongside exploitation movies and even soft-core porn.[40] From this perspective, Z Channel worked to unite both the products and

36 Dominique Païni, *Le cinéma, un art moderne* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1997), 155 (translation mine).

37 I borrow this formulation from the title of W. J. T. Mitchell's book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

38 "Was [Henri] Langlois aware that his propositions could only invite *a posteriori* interpretations?" Païni, *Le cinéma, un art moderne*, 173 (translation mine).

39 From an interview with Jaglom in the documentary *Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession* (Xan Cassavetes, 2004).

40 As documented extensively by John Cline and Robert Weiner, in the United States, grind-house and art-house cinema evolved in parallel. This parallelism did not stop at overlapping sites of exhibition, such as specific movie theaters or shared distribution networks; at a deeper level, the lack of distinction between genres—and, more generally, between high and low culture—that dominated programming in grind-house theaters would also become a fixture of cinephilic programming, most famously perhaps as part of Iris Barry's programming at New York City's Museum of Modern Art and that of Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque in Paris, where films of diverse provenance and budgets were often juxtaposed, albeit for educational rather than economic reasons. See John Cline and Robert G. Weiner, eds., *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema's First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); and Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). In one scene from *Z Channel*, several contributors fondly recall the 11 p.m. "Night Owl" showings of Euro soft core with Tarantino in particular, offering a lively evocation of Laura Antonelli in *Wifemistress* (*Mogliamante*; Marco Vicario, 1977).

the exhibition modes of art-house and grind-house culture, respectively, a process that was both made possible and reinforced by Harvey's use of the double bill as an exhibition mechanism.

In the way Harvey deployed it, the double-bill format became both a continuation and a simplification of Langlois's programming practice.[41] Indeed, eschewing the ternary dialectics favored by Langlois, Harvey's programming politics call to mind the binary dimension Pier Paolo Pasolini once attributed to his own films.[42] Harvey, in other words, sought to create cinematic diptych objects whose long-lasting impact lay in the irreconcilable tension they created. Incidentally, that impact would find itself reinforced through a concomitant innovation in recording and playback technology: home video. Unlike Langlois's triple bills, which were documented only in rare pieces of memorabilia, Harvey's film pairings came to be preserved, albeit tenuously, in numerous private videotape collections, sometimes in their complete form and sometimes with half of the double bill missing.[43]

Thus, in addition to leaving behind the films he had "midwifed," Harvey also participated in the ongoing establishment of the pairing of films as a cultural practice in its own right.[44] Not only would the creation of transient double-film diptychs for purposes of historical or aesthetic engagement continue to shape cinephilic culture; ultimately, it would also feed back into filmmaking. Interviewed by Xan Cassavetes for her documentary on Z Channel, Tarantino speaks as a representative of the younger generation of Harvey fans whose members came of age during or just after the network's heyday, and he gleefully describes borrowing video recordings of films aired on Z Channel from Lance Lawson, the manager at the video store where he worked in the 1980s. Thus, in addition to Tarantino's early moviegoing experiences and his oft-referenced stint working as a clerk at Video Archives in Manhattan Beach, the Z tapes had an equally significant, if lesser known, impact on his development as a cinephile and, subsequently, as a director.[45]

41 Langlois typically showed three films a night. For a detailed account of such programs, see Païni, *Le cinéma, un art moderne*, 178–179.

42 For the principle of ternary dialectics, see Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed., ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 133. Pasolini concisely sums up his own position as follows: "Thesis? Antithesis? Synthesis? These strike me as too easy. My dialectic is no longer ternary, it is binary. There are only irreconcilable oppositions." Pier Paolo Pasolini qtd. in Sergio Arecco, *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Rome: Partisan, 1972), 75 (translation mine).

43 In *Z Channel*, Tarantino vividly describes the frustrating experience of watching only half of an incompletely recorded Z Channel double bill.

44 The formulation is borrowed from writer and filmmaker F. X. Feeney, interviewed for *Z Channel*.

45 Tarantino's mother often took him to the cinema, where he saw "*The Wild Bunch* at age 6, *Carnal Knowledge* at age 8 and *Deliverance* at age 9." See Sebastian Haselbeck, "Biography," The Quentin Tarantino Archives: Since 1999, http://wiki.tarantino.info/index.php/Quentin_Tarantino. The connection between curatorial and cinephilic practices and their impact on Tarantino's oeuvre is made visible in the title and overarching argument of a book that was recently published in France: Philippe Ortoli, *Le musée imaginaire de Quentin Tarantino* (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2012). Z Channel's influence on the director remains visible in Tarantino's recently realized ambition of reviving an old LA theater that shows double bills exclusively. In 2010, Tarantino bought the New Beverly Cinema in Los Angeles, a former grind-house theater that had been specializing in cinephilic double-bill showings since Sherman Torgan bought it in 1978. Since 1981, Tarantino had been a long-standing patron of the theater, where he saw his first Godard films in a double bill he still recalls: *Le petit soldat* (*The Little Soldier*, 1963) and *Bande à part* (*Band of*

Z Channel's influence pervades all of Tarantino's films to some degree, but it is most obviously captured in three of the filmmaker's projects. The first is his collaboration with Rodríguez on *From Dusk till Dawn*, a film steeped in the psychopath film and road-movie genres until an abrupt narrative turn at the film's halfway mark introduces a major shift to contagion horror.[46] The second is the two-films-in-one opus *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004), which also relies extensively on the mixing of genre references and was often shown in theaters as a double bill upon the second installment's release. The third and most explicit site where this influence becomes visible is *Grindhouse*, where *From Dusk till Dawn*'s combination of genres is inverted as *Planet Terror*'s contagion horror precedes *Death Proof*'s take on the conventions, grossly speaking, of the psychopath-thriller movie. Beyond demonstrating obvious similarities with previous projects, moreover, *Grindhouse* achieves a greater level of sophistication through the way it integrates concerns of both film exhibition and narrative with double-bill (or diptych) logic.

At its most basic level, *Grindhouse* seeks to build a conceptual double-bill object whose physical space of experience is the contemporary film theater but whose existence, like that of all double bills, is fully located only within the spectator's mind. From this vantage point, the diegetic framing of the double bill is particularly noteworthy: in *Grindhouse*'s theatrical release in Canada and the United States, the first feature, *Planet Terror*, was preceded by a series of mock title cards, fake ads, and faux trailers for further exploitation films (all of them nonexistent until the release of the Rodríguez-directed spin-off *Machete* in 2010). The intermission between the two films similarly mobilized various vintage-style logos and trailers, and the full credits for the cast and crew of both films were not shown until after the end of *Death Proof*, which simultaneously signaled the end of the entire double bill. Although this diegetic framing was lost after the two films' initial international releases as separate DVDs, only to be reinstated later, there are two reasons it warrants mention in the present context. First, it underscores the experiential nature of the project, namely *Grindhouse*'s desire to convey diegetically to spectators the look and feel of attending a double-bill screening.[47] Second, acting as a parergonal frame, the add-ons lend the *Grindhouse*

Outsiders, 1964). See Samuel Blumenfeld, "Tarantino, homme cinéma," *M le magazine du Monde*, January 16, 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/01/04/tarantino-homme-cinema_1812352_3246.html.

46 For a longer discussion of genre in *From Dusk till Dawn* and *Grindhouse*, see Caroline Bem, "*Miles to Go before I Sleep*: Narrative Reconfigurations and Generic Border-Crossings in Recent American Cinema," in *(Re)discovering "America": Road Movies and Other Travel Narratives in North America*, ed. Wilfried Raussert and Graciela Martínez-Zalce (Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier; Tempe: Bilingual Press, Arizona State University, 2012), 155–170.

47 The project of making films that would provide spectators with an all-encompassing sensorial experience is not new for either director. In relation to *Kill Bill*, Tarantino spoke overtly of his interest in making films that would be more like amusement-park rides than movies, and he commended Rodríguez for having successfully achieved this in his own films. See Benjamin Secher, "Quentin Tarantino Interview: 'All My Movies Are Achingly Personal,'" *The Telegraph*, February 8, 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/7165045/Quentin-Tarantino-interview-All-my-movies-are-achingly-personal.html. In addition to the double bill's diegetic framing, a number of props, such as posters, and the now-defunct *Grindhouse* website, were key elements in the film's construction of itself as a multidimensional and multisensorial experience. As blogger Christ Thilk's comprehensive account makes clear, the website in particular was designed to immerse the user in the experience of entering an abandoned grind-house theater, almost like a virtual haunted house. Possible activities included shooting up the theater (a precursor to an iconic passage from Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds*) and compiling one's own *Grindhouse* trailer

double bill its conceptual and material body; at the same time, the intermission at the film's hinge effectively divides *Grindhouse* into two features of equal length. On a deeper level, a complex web that links recurring characters (played by the same actors) and actors (playing different characters), as well as locations in and around Austin, further unites the two halves of this conceptual diptych.

Finally, *Death Proof*, Tarantino's contribution to the project, introduces another layer of *mise en abyme* because it is itself organized as a double feature of sorts. In the following section, I examine one specific device—the double hinge at *Death Proof*'s halfway mark—to argue two points: first, that through its narrative structure, Tarantino's film serves to retrospectively ascertain and shed light on *Grindhouse*'s overarching narrative organization, and second, that it is this structure precisely that allows *Death Proof* to render accessible in narrative terms an ethical paradox.

Hinge. With each of its two halves rooted in different genre configurations, *Death Proof* presents two successive versions of the same story, two narrative iterations with diametrically opposed outcomes that culminate in a symmetrical inversion of winners and losers.[48] During a night out in Austin, Texas, three women meet Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell), who will crash his "death-proof" stunt car, a 1970 Chevy Nova, into their 1997 Honda Civic Hatchback at the end of the evening, killing the three of them as well as their fourth friend and another girl he had offered to drive home (see Figure 2).

Fourteen months later, a group of three "new" women—in many ways mirror images of the first—test-drive a white 1970 Dodge Challenger on the dirt roads of Tennessee with the aim of playing a game of ship's mast (see Figure 3).[49] Soon enough, Stuntman Mike, having survived the first crash, begins to chase after them in his new death-proof car, a 1969 Dodge Charger. He repeatedly attempts to crash their Challenger. But instead the women crash his Charger before they violently beat him to death with

Figure 2. Three members of the first group of women, *Death Proof* (Troublemaker Studios, 2007).

or movie poster from a limited range of elements. Chris Thilk, "Movie Marketing Madness: *Grindhouse*," *Chris Thilk* (blog), April 6, 2007, https://christhilk.wordpress.com/2007/04/06/movie-marketing-madness-grindhouse/.

48 Angela Ndalianis, for instance, has pointed out that a generic shift takes place halfway through the film, from slasher film to a combination of car chase, girl gang, and rape-revenge film. See Ndalianis, "Payback's a Bitch!," 133.

49 Structurally, the move of restarting the film's narrative with a new, "replacement group" of women is a central way in which *Death Proof* adopts a mirrored, diptych-like form. At the same time, nonnegligible differences exist between the women of both groups. Thus, the first group largely comprises white women in their early to midtwenties, while the second group is more diverse in terms of age and race, and features women with a wider range of backgrounds and skills than the first (two characters are stunt women, and one of them, Zoë Bell, who plays herself in the film, is in fact a real stunt woman whose work is featured in earlier Tarantino films, most notably as Uma Thurman's stunt double in *Kill Bill*). Ship's mast is a diegetic invention; in this game, which is played by stunt people, one person climbs onto the roof or hood of a speeding car, with only makeshift handles, made of belts tied to the doors of the car, to hold on to.

their bare fists. Immediately after Mike's demise, the film comes to an abrupt halt—almost always to the sound of satisfied cheering from theater audiences.[50] Where the first ending revels in each woman's individual death, the second shows each woman triumphantly hitting Stuntman Mike in turn. With its divided (and, as I will show, reversible) narrative structure, *Death Proof* thus acts as a blueprint for what happens to the diptych form when it crosses over from a visual or conceptual order into the domain of storytelling.

Figure 3. Three members of the second group of women, *Death Proof* (Troublemaker Studios, 2007).

The first part of the film's double hinge occurs just after the gruesome car crash that marks the ending of the film's first half. The setting for this scene is, surprisingly, the hospital where in *Planet Terror* the zombies first attacked. Even more surprising than the hospital's pristine appearance after having been ransacked in *Planet Terror* is the fact that two of that film's characters, Sheriff Earl McGraw (Michael Parks) and his son Edgar (James Parks), appear magically revived in this scene. As though *Planet Terror*'s zombie attack never occurred, they are discussing the medical condition of Stuntman Mike with Dr. Dakota Bloch (Marley Shelton), the sheriff's (still) estranged daughter from *Planet Terror*.[51]

The first hinge of *Death Proof* (the hospital sequence) offers a false sense of an ending for the *Grindhouse* diptych: once the characters of *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* are revealed to exist, in the words of Frank Kermode, "out of time, [even if] their acts have a before and an after," the two films can be understood to exist not solely within the conceptual structure of the double bill but within an overarching narrative temporal order as well.[52] Indeed, if characters show up twice, they do not simply bring with them a before and an after; they also demand that we pose the question of which is the before and which the after. A first answer is provided, intradiegetically, in *Death Proof*'s hospital scene, and it is further consolidated by recalling a fleeting moment from the beginning of *Planet Terror* when a short announcement coming from a car radio hails the passing of "our own Jungle Julia, in loving memory."[53] Here, a first interpretation suggests that in *Grindhouse*, the after takes place before the before. In other words, not

50 "The climactic car chase. The crowd just goes into an absolute frenzy once the 2nd half of the chase begins. They're yelling, laughing, and cheering like they haven't before. And once 'THE END' shows up on screen, mission accomplished as applause erupted in the theater." Posted anonymously in the "Crowd/Theater Reactions" section of the fan site Tarantino Archives, http://forum.tarantino.info/viewtopic.php?f=79&t=7754. These reactions are reminiscent of audience reactions to the final girl's revenge in slasher or rape-revenge films, where audience sympathies are reversed. See Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 23.

51 In *Planet Terror*, their family feud had been resolved before the two men died in the zombie attack and Dr. Bloch started a new life in Tulum, Mexico, along with the other survivors.

52 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967; Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2000), 72.

53 Jungle Julia is the name of one of the five women killed at the end of the first half of *Death Proof*.

only do the two halves of the *Grindhouse* double bill's overarching narrative, *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*, belong to the same *fabula*, but they are also presented in the reverse order of their actual narrative sequence. This realization, in turn, poses the question of the rapport between the two halves of *Death Proof*: Will the film's second part function as a continuation of the first, or could it also, under certain circumstances at least, be considered to precede it?[54]

Arguably, *Death Proof* offers only a false sense of resolution that echoes *Grindhouse*'s overt disruption of linearity. If the women appear to kill Stuntman Mike at the end of *Death Proof*, imparting a sense of telos to an anguished narrative, the film's replacement of one group of women by another, as well as Stuntman Mike's survival of the first half's car crash, puts into question the film's very adherence to the basic principles of mortality. In addition, one possible interpretation for the film's end-credit sequence that features a number of so-called China girls, the anonymous women portrayed in vintage-film color tests, is that these were Mike's victims or intended victims—past, present, and future.

As Sheriff McGraw notes during the hospital sequence, Mike sustained only minor injuries in the crash, and because he was sober at the time of the crash, the sheriff has no legal case against him. However, as McGraw explains to his son in a lengthy monologue, he has no illusions about Stuntman Mike: "I'd guesstimate it's a sex thing, only way I can figure it. High-velocity impact. Twisted metal. Bustin' glass. Four souls taken at exactly the same time. Probably the only way that diabolical degenerate can shoot his goo."[55] While he can't prove Stuntman Mike's guilt, Sheriff McGraw tells his son, "If [Mike] does it again, I can make goddamn sure he don't do it in Texas." After the sheriff has pronounced these last, fateful words, a cut to black precedes the appearance of a white caption—the words "Lebanon, Tennessee, albeit in *Death Proof*'s extended international version only—to the defiant sound of Willy DeVille's "It's So Easy" (1980), immediately followed by a second set of titles that add a crucial piece of information: "14 months later."[56]

To make clear how the fade to black at the midpoint of *Death Proof* functions as a hinge, I want to return, briefly, to Deleuze's writings on the diptych in cinema. Just

54 As one anonymous *JCMS* reviewer suggested, another reading of the announcement of Julia's death would suggest that the entirety of *Planet Terror*'s narrative takes place within a fourteen-month ellipsis between *Death Proof*'s two halves. Far from contradicting a reading of the two films through the interpretive lens of the diptych, the intriguing idea of a nested narrative structure wherein one diptych's half (*Planet Terror* as the first half of *Grindhouse*) is in fact located within the hinge of another diptych (*Death Proof*'s hinge) further confirms the centrality of hinges to the temporal and narrative organization of both *Grindhouse* and *Death Proof*.

55 With its divided plotline, in which the suddenly deceased main character is abruptly replaced with another halfway through the film, *Psycho* easily counts as an early example of a film diptych. Thus, it is not coincidental that McGraw's monologue calls to mind that of Norman Bates's psychiatrist at the end of Hitchcock's film. Indeed, without calling the film a diptych, both Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey have remarked on the bipartite structure of *Psycho*. See Peter Wollen, "Hybrid Plots in *Psycho*," in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 34; and Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 89.

56 In the *Grindhouse* version, a simple cut to black, without title cards, takes us directly to the airport scene, skipping over the first ten-minute scene of the film's second half. These are the most significant differences between the film's two versions, and while they do not fundamentally alter the film's overarching structure, they do obscure it somewhat, which is why I have chosen to focus the rest of my discussion on the extended version, in which they appear more clearly.

after his discussion of the ways in which the binary pairs of Garrel's films give rise to a cinema of the body, he digresses briefly on the topic of the use of black or white screens in experimental films, such as those of Stan Brakhage, which, he writes, have the function of assuming a "structural value."[57] At first, Deleuze suggests that these screens without images enter into a dialectical relationship with a film's images, but then he says something else, something more: "On the one hand, what is important is no longer the association of images . . . but the *interstice between* two images; on the other hand, the cut in a sequence of images is not now a rational cut which marks the end of one *or* the beginning of another, but a so-called irrational cut which belongs neither to one nor the other, and sets out to be valid for itself."[58] Through the emphasis it places on the interstitial space of the black or white screen *for itself*, this description contains the kernel of a theorization of the hinge in the cinematic diptych. The monochrome screen simultaneously connects and divides, and it is also an entity of its own, one that orients the film. It juxtaposes, and it presents an alternative to the teleology of beginnings and endings. Returning, in the same paragraph, to Garrel, Deleuze writes that the filmmaker made use of such "irrational cuts so that the series of anterior images has no end, while the series of subsequent images likewise has no beginning, the two series converging towards the white or black screen as their common limit [which also] becomes the medium for variations."[59] Most important, then, while in Garrel's films the "black or white screen no longer has only a structural value, but has a genetic one . . . the power of a constitution of bodies,"[60] the inscription onto *Death Proof*'s black screens of spatiotemporal indications (a place name, followed by a temporal indication) points to a restoration of the visual hinge's function as a marker of connection. These indications lend the film its overarching narrative framework: like the two halves of *Grindhouse*, the two halves of *Death Proof* now entertain a rapport of before and after. The fact that day follows night in *Death Proof*, as noted by Corinne Rondeau in the epigraph to this article, further plays on this question by asking which half follows which. To a certain extent, this question is settled by the film's succession of title cards. The indication "14 months later" not only marks the end of the film's first half; it also introduces a new beginning at the film's halfway mark, a restart so to speak. Yet by beginning in medias res—in the nonplace of a parking lot, to be precise—the second half, at the same time, lacks a true beginning. In other words, the black screen title cards' primary function is to indicate that the first half's ending was not one.

In addition, the spatiotemporal information imparted by the title cards is indispensable to the establishing of revenge as the film's underlying organizing principle. By citing explicitly the duration of the narrative ellipsis, the double caption placed at the center, or hinge, of the film reduces revenge to its two most basic features: first, a deferred temporality (contained in the indication "14 months later"), and second, occurrences of mirroring and repetition in which the actions of the second group of women reverse but also reenact, to a certain degree, those of Stuntman Mike in both

57 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 200.

58 Deleuze, 200 (my emphasis).

59 Deleuze, 200.

60 Deleuze, 200.

segments. As the psychosociologist Wolfgang Sofsky puts it, revenge is a "moment of duration," a necessarily deferred, and thus linear, temporal undertaking. This is what both defines it (revenge is not an immediate action; rather, it unfolds) and ensures its transmission, over time, from generation to generation.[61] Thus, the indication "14 months later" at the second hinge of the film is crucial: in the absence of a clearly marked social or familial connection between the two groups of women, it ensures, through its representation of duration, that the actions of the film's second half will be readily understandable, not only as immediate retaliation for Mike's attack on the second group of women in Tennessee but as revenge for the murders committed by Mike in the first half of the film, in Austin.

Paradox. While much has been written about the ways in which *Death Proof* overtly adopts the bipartite structure of the rape-revenge exploitation subgenre, few scholars agree in their interpretations of the film's deployment of the genre's structures: Are the women in the film's second half avenging only themselves, or are they also avenging the victims from the film's first half? In other words: Is the revenge operated in the film strictly talionic (an eye for an eye), or is it the result of collective solidarity? Moreover, because the film blatantly adopts the conventions of an exploitative genre, can it be described as feminist? In her survey of rape-revenge films, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas allots a few pages to a discussion of *Death Proof*.[62] Acknowledging the absence of a literal rape in the film, she underlines the symphorophilic importance, and resulting sexual significance, of the central car crash, which is also commented on diegetically by the film's characters.[63] In addition, she identifies overt references that are made to a number of rape-revenge movies throughout the film.[64] Ultimately, however, she sees *Death Proof* as part of a taxonomical subsection of rape revenge, which she defines as "pastiche and beyond," where it is filed away without further analysis.

Building on Heller-Nicholas's discussion of *Death Proof*, Claire Henry has thus far taken most seriously the idea of *Death Proof* as a rape-revenge film. Noting that "the splitting of *Death Proof* into two halves . . . exaggerates the two-part structure of rape-revenge films," she adds that, in Tarantino's film, "the victim-to-avenger transformation central to the genre is not embodied in one woman but transferred between two groups of women."[65] For Henry, *Death Proof* is invested in notions of "feminine agency, collectivism, and spatiality," and the transmission of the onus to avenge (from the first

61 Wolfgang Sofsky, "Wie gerecht ist die Rache?," *Psychologie heute* 29, no. 4 (2002): 58.

62 Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 30–31.

63 "Symphorophilia: (Sexology) A paraphilia in which sexuoerotism hinges on stage-managing and watching a disaster —e.g., fire or MVA." Definition from *Concise Dictionary of Modern Medicine* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), available at http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/symphorophilia.

64 Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, 158–159. Heller-Nicholas quotes an interview in which Tarantino overtly acknowledges the influence of *Fair Game* (Mario Andreacchio, 1986), in which a naked woman is tied to the front of a truck, and uses the phrase "human hood ornament" to describe the female character in that film.

65 Claire Henry, "Collective Revenge: Challenging the Individualist Victim-Avenger in *Death Proof*, *Sleepers*, and *Mystic River*," in *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 149. A few pages later, Henry argues in greater detail that the actual vengeance taking place, at the very end of *Death Proof*, is not done simply for the event that just occurred—Mike's pursuit of the Challenger with Zoë on the hood—but rather for the car crash that closed the first half of the film. See Henry, 154.

group to the second) is one of the central ways in which this feminine economy of solidarity is rendered manifest.[66] Such a position, however, is countered by Maxime Cervulle, who argues that, because the second group of women is unaware of the first group's fate, they cannot be seen as avenging them. According to Cervulle, the deaths of the first women symbolize the growing disappearance of feminine forms of solidarity, thereby attesting to what he terms the film's "depoliticizing" stance.[67] Thus, the film gives rise to a series of sometimes-competing feminist interpretations, from viewing the film as an allegory of feminist solidarity (with Henry) to viewing it as a bleak, depoliticized commentary on the end of second-wave feminism (with Cervulle).

More generally, because of the film's adoption of rape revenge's focus on sadism, it would be tempting to read *Death Proof* exclusively, as most scholars have, as a sadistic fantasy realized and then avenged following an equally sadistic, if *jouissive*, talionic logic.[68] Yet a diametrically opposed reading is equally possible: negating the feminist underpinnings attributed to *Death Proof* by the aforementioned scholars, Mike's actions can just as convincingly be interpreted as the manifestations of a masochistic fantasy that thoroughly instrumentalizes the women by voiding their revenge of all sense of agency. Here, it is useful to draw on Deleuze's writing on masochism to shed light on the differences between a sadistic and a masochistic logic.

Addressing a frequently held misconception about sadism and masochism, Deleuze points out that they are not the two complementary halves of a singular logic, as the compound term "sadomasochism" might suggest, but rather are two quite distinct, parallel logics. Where the sadist finds pleasure only with a victim who truly suffers from the torture inflicted upon her, the masochist seeks out a partner who can be taught to play the torturer's part according to her desires. In the fantasies of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, for instance, the male masochist carefully selects and trains the female torturer according to rules stipulated within so-called masochistic contracts.[69] One contract, for instance, which is reproduced alongside the central text of *Venus in Furs*, paradoxically stipulates that Fanny von Pistor "may" punish Sacher-Masoch in "whatever manner she pleases" before adding that she "must" wear furs "as often as possible, especially when she is behaving cruelly."[70] The prescriptive tone of the contract, whereby the masochistic "victim" outlines the precise details of the "aggressor's" actions, is the linchpin of masochism's kinship with paradox.

A pronounced undercurrent of sadomasochism runs through *Death Proof*, which features widely noted references to the dominatrix character of Tura Santana in *Faster,*

66 Henry, 147.

67 Maxime Cervulle, "Quentin Tarantino et le (post)féminisme: Politiques du genre dans *Boulevard de la mort," Nouvelles questions féministes* 28 (2009): 46.

68 Much has been written about the violent killing of Stuntman Mike by the women, especially the coup de grâce performed by Abernathy (Rosario Dawson) when she smashes Mike's skull with her foot. The idea that revenge implies a level of excess, and derives gratuitous joy from that excess, has received much attention, including from Robert Nozick when he proposes that "revenge involves a particular emotional tone, pleasure at the suffering of another, while retribution either need involve no emotional tone or involves another one, namely pleasure at justice being done." Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 367.

69 For examples of such contracts, see Gilles Deleuze and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty / Venus in Furs* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 277.

70 Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism.*

Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (Russ Meyer, 1965).[71] More generally, due to her cool and dominating demeanor, the central character of the first group of women in *Death Proof*, Jungle Julia (Sydney Tamiia Poitier) is not without semblance to the mistresses who populate Sacher-Masoch's imaginary. Consider the erotically charged scene early in the film's first half, in which Julia coolly presents her friend Arlene/Butterfly (Vanessa Ferlito) with the plan she has devised for the evening. Earlier that day, Julia announced the visit of her single friend Butterfly on her Austin radio show, encouraging male listeners who would run into them later that evening to approach Butterfly with the following lines: "So after they buy you a drink, when they raise their glass to toast, they look you dead in the eye and repeat this poem: 'The woods are lovely dark and deep / And I have promises to keep / And miles to go before I sleep / Did you hear me Butterfly? / Miles to go before you sleep.' And then, if they say that, you gotta give them a lap dance!"[72] Julia's delivery bears a menacing undertone as she outlines the rules of the sexual contract between Arlene/Butterfly—whose protests go unheard—and a still-unknown man who will, of course, turn out to be Stuntman Mike.

In his account of Freud's definition of sadism, Deleuze notes that it "would never occur to the sadist to find pleasure in other people's pain if he had not himself first undergone the masochistic experience of a link between pain and pleasure."[73] Stuntman Mike needs to make women suffer, and ultimately to kill them, in order to experience pleasure; but masochistically, he also wants to be made to suffer. At one moment during the final car chase, he exclaims, "Hey, ladies, *that* was fun!," implying that the stuntwomen presented him with a stimulating challenge.[74] Thus, the film's second half no longer represents only the women's revenge; it also—and equally validly—represents the acting out of Stuntman Mike's ultimate masochistic fantasy, with death as its end point.[75] Moreover, where the film's talionic dimension rested largely on a temporal ellipsis standing in for the duration of the generational transmission of revenge, I now propose that the first half of *Death Proof* also functions as the wait that builds anticipation for the finale of a masochistic fantasy—a fantasy in two segments that remains nonetheless rooted in the larger organizing structure of the revenge contract.

In his 1993 article "Don't Blame It on a Girl: Female Rape-Revenge Films," Peter Lehman investigates the precise "nature of the appeal of [rape-revenge] films for men."[76] As he suggests, although rape-revenge films are usually understood as primarily sadistic in their depictions of the rapes, their representations of the rapist's or rapists' sufferings are in fact "complicated by male masochistic pleasures," since

71 See, e.g., Angela Ndalianis, *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 129.

72 Film dialogue transcription. The dialogue is based on Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 224.

73 Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, 43.

74 Film dialogue transcription.

75 Another contract also published alongside *Venus in Furs*, which is addressed by the mistress to her male victim, includes the following stipulation: "And if you should escape, you hereby recognize that I have the power and the right to torture you to death by the most horrible methods imaginable." Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, 279.

76 Peter Lehman, "Don't Blame It on a Girl: Female Rape-Revenge Films," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 107.

"the punishment of the male is highly specularized."[77] In accordance with this observation, Stuntman Mike is explicitly identified as a masochistic subject in a scene in the middle of the film's first half when he joins the women on the porch of the Texas Chili Parlor. He has just shaken hands with Julia when he suddenly stops speaking, seized by what appears to be a powerful urge to sneeze. Shot from a high angle, Mike is shown leaning back against a post and writhing uncomfortably as he attempts to sneeze before a baffled Julia. Finally, unable to produce a sneeze, he apologizes and walks off, leaving Julia and her friends to sneer at him.[78] The contact with Jungle Julia's icy hand has literally caused Mike, who is incidentally wearing an Icy Hot logo on his jacket, to feel a chill. Moreover, in the screenplay, where the sneeze does not appear, the scene contains an exchange between Julia and Mike not included in the film that revolves fetishistically around Julia's feet. The dialogue ends when Mike tells Julia: "Well, we could fight about this. But as a rule, I usually pay women to beat the crap outta me."[79] Thus, the elusive sneeze acts as a veiled translation of the script's more explicit dialogue, positioning Stuntman Mike as a masochist who is unable to "shoot his goo," as the sheriff will later put it, unless a very specific set of conditions is in place.

Lehman's central thesis is that in rape-revenge films "the evil rapists supply a smokescreen which justifies the woman's revenge."[80] Taking Lehman's argument one step further, I want to suggest that, in *Death Proof*, the very fact of revenge functions itself as a smoke screen. As Theodor Reik argues, masochistic scenarios remaining at the level of fantasy or solitary enactment in front of a mirror are necessarily divided into two segments: a long-drawn-out phase during which anticipation is built through intricate narrative detail and a shorter moment when sexual gratification is obtained. More precisely, the masochist often imagines a long series of sacrifices and identifies with the victim who witnesses this series of sufferings while awaiting his or her turn. Similarly, the masochistic fantasy acted out with a partner is typically divided into two parts: the long-drawn-out expectation of the blow and the blow itself, which usually leads to climax.[81] Thus, masochism is characterized by a deferred temporality that bears a great deal of similarity to the temporality of revenge. Indeed, Reik expressly links the masochistic logic of delay to a revenge fantasy that relies on the repetition of the very situation that first gave rise to, and now consistently reactualizes and justifies, the subject's initial motivation for revenge.[82] However, while the deferred time of revenge is generally involuntary, the wait is an essential, constitutive element of masochistic pleasure: the masochist awaits pleasure as something that is always delayed and anticipates pain as a necessary condition for pleasure to occur.

77 Lehman, 104, 106.

78 This brings to mind Deleuze's remark, concerning Sacher-Masoch's heroines, that they are glacial and sneeze frequently, and that their furs thus retain, at least partially, the practical function of keeping them from catching a cold. Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, 53.

79 Quentin Tarantino, *Quentin Tarantino's "Death Proof": A Screenplay* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2007), 59.

80 Lehman, "Don't Blame It on a Girl," 113.

81 Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man* (New York City: Grove Press Books, 1941), 66.

82 Deleuze and Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism*, 255.

From the perspective of Stuntman Mike, whose initials are SM—as in "sadomasochism" and "Sacher-Masoch"—the first half of *Death Proof* thus functions as the imagined or anticipated segment of a masochistic fantasy (to be violated, dismembered, and killed), and the final segment of the second half (the film's last quarter) as the enacted segment (the shooting and actual blows received at the end), which follows a long, pleasurably excruciating wait spanning the entirety of *Death Proof*. Because it posits the women's loss of agency, however, this interpretation of the film stands in complete opposition to aforementioned readings that construct *Death Proof* as a feminist narrative of (largely successful) revenge.

Closing. This article outlines two of the diptych's possible applications within the analysis of narrative film. First, my discussion of *Grindhouse* contributes to the long history of exchanges between art history and film studies by highlighting how the ancient, primarily visual form of the diptych comes to be employed by cinema to interweave questions of media materiality and narrative structure. This reading also shows that using the diptych as an analytic tool offers a new lens through which these interconnected questions might be apprehended to further the discussion of overlaps in visual, material, and narrative forms within film studies. Second, in my analysis of *Death Proof*, I put forward the idea that the diptych's proclivity for paradox presents a particularly fruitful terrain for the narrative representation of both diametrically opposed but also internally reversible positions that are tied to specific ethical systems of thought—in the case of Tarantino's film, the juxtaposition of victim-avenger and attacker-masochist positions gives rise to a complex reading of the film.

In *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil uses "reading" to designate the totality of possible ways we judge a given situation or action. Extreme (passionate) or misinformed (public opinion) positions give rise to "wrong readings." In contrast, "with a higher quality of attention," Weil suggests, "our reading discovers gravity itself, and various systems of possible balance."[83] In other words, a just reading is the result of a careful teasing apart of the multiple, and often contradictory, layers of a given situation (superposed readings). True or pure evil, however, negates all multiplicity of readings. Indeed, for Weil, such "crimes [are] flat like dreams on both sides: on the side of the executioner and on the side of the victim."[84] Even though it depicts acts of unspeakable evil perpetrated by Mike, *Death Proof* eschews "flat" readings through its adoption of the diptych form. Instead, the film seeks to balance a multiplicity of contradictory layers of meaning: here, the diptych acts as a tool for reading, in Weil's sense, and the simultaneous contemplation of multiple layers that it affords can be conceptualized as a third space of sorts.

Since its inception in the writings of Homi K. Bhabha, the concept of third space has been deployed across postcolonial as well as gender and queer studies to "elude

83 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, with an introduction and postscript by Gustave Thibon (1947; London: Routledge, 2003), 136.

84 Weil, 17.

the politics of polarity."[85] Although at first the concept's reliance on hybridity would appear to contradict my definition of the diptych—at its most basic, hybridity is evocative of a construct or composite, of compromise, in short—one of Bhabha's short definitions of third space captures precisely what diptych narratives make possible: "[F]or me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' '"which *enables other positions to emerge*."[86] Rather than a new entity—one that would positively add to a given ethical situation and thus resolve it—the diptych posits simultaneity as a space (and a time) where as-well-as logic is itself the emergent third: a new possibility for ethical inquiry. In *Death Proof*, this is made manifest when a third "ethical" space arises from the direct confrontation between two standpoints held in unbridgeable opposition: the women's revenge is both their own and not their own. By requiring the viewer to constantly navigate the layers of responsibility and agency contained in each position (Mike's and that of the women), *Death Proof* stages a direct confrontation between two contradictory moral standpoints, and in lieu of resolution, it asks us, quite simply, to sit with both readings at once. The diptych thus introduces a *longue durée*, a suspended temporality that extends far beyond the film's time frame and where no sense of an ending is in sight. ✻

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85 Citation is from Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 39. The concept is extensively theorized at pages 36–39 and 217–219. See also Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207–221. More recently, the idea of third space has begun to receive more attention in media studies, as the publication of this volume attests: Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner, eds., *Communicating in the Third Space* (London: Routledge, 2008).

86 Rutherford, "Interview with Homi Bhabha," 211 (italics mine).