Representing the Aesthetics of Movement
In Screen and Print Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the production of bodily movement as a key formal and thematic concern in recent cultural productions. The spectacle of the body in motion has elicited extensive artistic meditation in current visual and literary texts that not only inscribe innovative expressions of movement but also cultivate new ideas about what it means to move. I suggest that the way in which one perceives and makes sense of movement, and the conception of what movement is as a phenomenon, is contingent on the narrative form and content of the apparatuses that are employed to represent this movement. In demonstrating this claim, I specifically select cultural productions that poignantly illuminate the act of moving as a creative and aesthetically inclined pursuit. While movement is a universal and often mundane condition of human existence, there are narrative sites that seek to transcend this purely functionalist perception of human movement, that glean and articulate something of the vitality, surging energy, gracefulness, and expressive craft of bodies in motion.

The study of movement has become a key focal point in recent critical scholarship, particularly in light of the emergence of “mobilities studies” across the social sciences. “Mobilities studies” presents a critical paradigm that scrutinises the various ways in which experiences of movement inform the social, commercial, work-related, and leisurely dimensions of contemporary society. In doing so, it takes a keen interest in how movement underlies social procedures, institutions, and relations of power. Departing from this line of enquiry, this thesis is less concerned with how movement functions in a social sense than in movement’s aesthetic function: what compels my attention so forcefully are the mechanics through which movement is textually produced via the narrative media that form the foci of my chapters. Indeed, this premise of textuality, the set of mechanisms pertaining to a narrative form and the content shaped by this form, comprises the core of the definition of “movement” offered in my analysis. That is, movement not only refers to the physical actions of a body but also, in conjunction with this, the textual rearticulation of this motion through the cogs and conventions of a given medium. Movement not only takes place in physical space but also in the spaces of visual and textual representation.

The chapters of this thesis attend to four modalities of textual production. Chapter One scrutinises how movement is constructed in Mike Christie’s documentary film Jump
London, which looks at the recent popular urban sport of parkour. Parkour comprises a practice of moving through urban spaces that is fast, dexterous, and that resourcefully makes use of the surrounding architecture to help facilitate these moves. This chapter argues that the particular brand of agile and exciting movement that the documentary privileges emerges from the choreography of the performer’s actions in front of the camera, as well as an equally industrious cinematic apparatus that frame and reassemble this action in visually dynamic ways. Chapter Two considers how movement is composed within the still images of superhero comics. My analysis suggests that the still frames in these comics engineer a type of movement that takes place both within the contents of the images and across the sequential form that comprise the comics medium.

Chapter Three engages with the work of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist whose video installations produce a sensuous narration of movement, one that not only titillates viewers’ vision but also stimulates their auditory and tactile sensibilities. This analysis specifically focuses on the exhibition of her work at the Hayward Gallery in London, and considers how Rist’s images of gleeful and vivacious movement are combined with her luscious installation settings to generate sensual environments that enable the viewer to not only see movement but, in a reading that appeals to theories of hapticity, to also feel the textural qualities of movement passing. Chapter Four turns away from visual media to examine how movement is framed within the linguistic economy of words in Don DeLillo’s novel Cosmopolis. It suggests that the sparseness and thriftiness DeLillo’s language in the novel lends expression to the cultural logic of speed at the turn of the millennium, one in which the instantaneity of advanced information-communication technologies radically accelerate human material existence. In scrutinising the ways in which DeLillo pulls together and prises apart the activity of bodies and information, this chapter examines how the faculty of bodily movement is conditioned, called into question, and ultimately reaffirmed within this culture of technological speed.
DECLARATION

CANDIDATE’S DECLARATION: This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
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INTRODUCTION

The Aesthetics of Movement

One of the most captivating moments in Martin Campbell’s film Casino Royale (2006), the twenty-first offering in the James Bond franchise, is the chase sequence that comprises one of the opening scenes of the film. Set in Madagascar, Bond (Daniel Craig) tracks and pursues a bomb-maker, Mollaka (Sébastien Foucan), through an industrial construction site. Weaving and ducking through the machinery and concrete rubble of the industrial setting, the duo spectacularly take their chase onto the steel girders of a building before making their way up to the overhanging tower of a crane where they engage in a skyline scuffle. Jumping from this lofty height, Bond’s pursuit of the villain resumes in a multi-storied concrete block that is in the midst of construction. Working their way down the various levels of this site, Bond and Mollaka resourcefully and efficiently improvise their way through the crowded space of workers and machinery, vaulting over objects that mar their path, deftly sliding through apertures in the floors, and haphazardly leaping from storey to storey down the length of the building. What particularly catches the eye throughout this extended set-piece is the way in which the respective movements of the two protagonists are staged. Bond’s movements are clumsy and awkward as he stumbles his way through the obstacle-laden setting while Mollaka’s motion is executed with lithe fluency. While Mollaka springs lightly from one structure to another with a feline flexibility, Bond’s heavy frame topples and blunders through the architecture. This contrast is best captured in one telling moment when the two characters are faced with a barrier: while Mollaka nimbly catapults himself through an opening at the top of the wall by using an overhanging bar to propel himself through this hole, Bond, lacking such dexterity, smashes through the barrier and demolishes the wall (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2). Whereas the villain skilfully negotiates the hindrance posed by ambient objects through the range and inventiveness of his moves, Bond crudely tumbles through this space. Viewed together, the contrasting actions of Bond and his nemesis provide an energetic and visually stimulating duet of bodily motion, bringing to the fore the act and form of movement as the centrepiece of the action sequence.

In this thesis, I examine the representation of bodily movement as a key formal and thematic concern in recent cultural productions. This enquiry begins with the striking scene from Campbell’s film because it captures in miniature an interest in showcasing motion as an aesthetic form, a preoccupation shared by the texts studied in the following chapters. What is engrossing about the above set-piece is that the act of moving is staged as the central element of the sequence, the series of moves offered not as a means to an end but an entertaining and engaging spectacle in itself. Standing at a lengthy eight minutes of screen time, the crucial importance of the scene lies less in the outcome of the chase than in using the pursuit as an occasion to exhibit the elaborate array of
moves performed by the two actors. That is, movement is eloquently expressed as a primary dimension of the text. As this thesis proceeds to demonstrate, *Casino Royale*’s brief excursion into staging bodily motion as a central narrative feature signals a similar interest in movement in other cultural narratives and media. What makes this sequence a perfect prelude to the texts examined in this thesis is not only its preoccupation with exhibiting movements that are crafty and expressive in their design, but equally importantly, the use of its narrative apparatus to inscribe this expression. Bond and Mollaka’s kinetic feats display visual excitement and energy not only because of the way in which the moves themselves are executed but, simultaneously, because of the cinematic devices used by the filmmaker to re-phrase these actions. The use of multiple camera angles and positions ensures that the viewer is afforded a dramatic and lively perspective of the exploits, while the rapid cutting from shot to shot enhances the pace and explosiveness of the duo’s activity. Consequently, the exuberance and skilful finesse of movement are qualities that stem as much from the content of bodily motion as from the filmic strategies employed to frame and re-assemble this motion. Taking this insight as one that illuminates the wider conceits of my study, this thesis scrutinises recent visual and literary texts that privilege movement as a core enterprise of their work, analysing how both the narrative content and formal aspects of these texts come together in composing inventive, powerful, visually and textually elegant scenarios of motion.

In the course of this thesis, the term “movement” is used to specifically refer to bodily motion, the physical actions and exertions entailed in moving from one point to another, and its articulation through the conventions of a given narrative medium. The specification of my interest in bodily action is a necessary one in light of the current era in which everything – from bodies to inanimate objects, from heavy machines and transport networks to immaterial information and images – is adjudged to be increasingly on the move. There is, in fact, a growing trend in critical scholarship to interrogate these diverse systems of movement. It is a trend based on the assertion that there is a need, according to John Urry, to examine how “social relations necessitate the intermittent and intersecting movements of people, objects, information and images that

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move across distances.” While this scholarship will be accounted for in detail further on, what is to be noted here is that movement has become a key focal point in recent academic discourse, encompassing a multiplicity of meanings and phenomena. Consequently, my enquiry narrows the terrain and focuses on movement as it is represented in its embodied human form precisely because it is this mode that has been narrated so imaginatively and diversely in recent cultural productions. As the chapters in this thesis demonstrate, the body in motion has elicited artistic meditation in current visual and literary texts that, through their narrative content and form, not only inscribe innovative expressions of movement but also cultivate new ideas and meanings about what it means to move. It is because of this primary importance that cultural texts play in forging new perceptions of motion that, in addition to specifying “movement” as a bodily pursuit, my definition also introduces this dimension of textuality as a crucial element. That is, “movement” not only refers to the physical actions of a body but also, in conjunction with this, the rearticulation of this motion through the cogs and conventions of a narrative medium. Movement is as much a physical phenomenon as it is a textual one. It is the contention of this thesis that movement not only takes place in physical space but also in the spaces of visual and textual representation.

Given the diversity of movement as a phenomenon, this thesis specifically selects cultural productions that privilege the act of moving as an aesthetic pursuit. While movement is a universal and often mundane condition of human existence, there are cultural sites that seek to transcend this purely functionalist perception of human movement, that glean and bring out something of the creativity, surging energy, gracefulness, and choreographic craft of bodies in motion. It is the receptiveness to these qualities of motion that brings together the individual texts studied in the chapters, and that contribute to the modality of aesthetic movement that is key to my enquiry. It is in this respect that the earlier chase sequence between Bond and Mollaka exemplifies a perfect prologue to the discussion of movement that follows. The pair’s frantic dash through the construction site not only exhibits bodies moving but, more importantly, bodies moving in a way that heightens the pleasure of watching movement unfold. Commenting on the choreography of this scene in a DVD special feature that looks at the making of this sequence, actor Daniel Craig remarks, “it’s about making it as

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exciting to watch as possible.” Accordingly, Bond and Mollaka’s moves step beyond a purely functional disposition and assemble a performance that exhibits movement as a source of resourceful improvisation, guile, and excitement. In their own unique ways, the texts employed in my analysis harness this same conviction in this creative expressiveness of movement, as something more than a quotidian form. This thesis examines the aesthetic production of moving bodies in four narrative forms: documentary film, comics, video installation, and prose fiction. The range of media that is present in this selection, encompassing both visual and textual works, will permit an examination of this thesis’s contention, namely that how one sees, perceives, and understands movement as a bodily phenomenon is crucially shaped by the narrative apparatus inscribing that action.

Moving Away From the Mobilities Turn
The study of movement has become a fertile ground in recent critical scholarship, particularly amidst the emergence of a “mobilities turn” within the social sciences. While this mobilities criticism is largely divergent from my own interest in movement, it is nevertheless crucial to map out some key points of this paradigm as it constitutes the premiere research currently being done on movement-related theory. As one of the first exponents of this theoretical turn, John Urry and Mimi Sheller declare the need for a “new mobilities paradigm”, defining this endeavour as one that is concerned with how the diverse mobilities of people, technologies, information, objects, and money inform the fundamental processes of social life. With the emergence of globalised economies as well as developments in systems of transportation and sophisticated communication technologies, people and things are now on the move to a greater degree than ever before, and in more complex ways. Urry and Sheller voice a need for critical analysis to interrogate how such strands of movement circulate in and organise everyday social life. This mobilities paradigm finds one of its first significant launch pads in Urry’s ground-breaking work, Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century. In this volume, he extensively maps out the need to refashion the discipline of sociology, and its examination of social structures and procedures, so that it is centered around an interrogation of mobilities. As he confirms, “mobilities, as both metaphor and as process, are at the heart of social life and thus should be central to sociological

For Urry, if sociology is to come to terms with the current global era, it must abandon its traditional focus on the study of society as a set of rigid and bounded institutions and shift attention to the examination of physical, virtual, and imaginative movements.

What commences as a manifesto for a theoretical and methodological shift in the discipline of sociology spreads to a more expansive attempt to reorient the entire field of the social sciences towards the analysis of mobility. In a later collaborative work, Urry and Sheller further underline this mobilities turn as a departure from what they contend as the “static” methods of enquiry within the social sciences, which have in the past failed to see social operations in terms of movement. As the two theorists lament,

Social science has thus been static in its theory and research. It has not sufficiently examined how, enhanced by various objects and technologies, people move. But also it has not seen how images and communications are also intermittently on the move and those actual and potential movements organise and structure social life.

Consequently, a major aim of the mobilities paradigm is to transform the theoretical outlook and methodology of social science as a discipline, to shift the field from the analysis of sedentary and bounded institutions to an interrogation of how networks of movement inform the social, commercial, work-related, and leisurely dimensions of contemporary society. As Urry and Sheller affirm, this model seeks to “redirect research away from static structures of the modern world to see how social entities comprise people, machines, and information/images in systems of movement.”

At its core, then, mobilities studies situate the phenomenon of movement as a quintessential condition of the current modernity, one that is rife with the flow of people, goods, machines, information, images, capital, and so on. Its analytical objective is based on identifying the many forms of mobilities and the roles they play in the regulation of contemporary life.

In the wake of Urry and Sheller’s call for this theoretical shift across the entire terrain of social science, mobilities studies is a burgeoning field that has since encompassed a

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whole repertoire of disciplines and subject matters. Scholars in the field have addressed mobility in its manifold forms: these range from experiences of car travel to international and interstate air travel, from motorcycling sub-cultures to walking and hiking practices, from leisurely canoe rides to practices of commuting and public transportation. Equally diversely, these works deal with the issue of mobility from an array of multiple perspectives and approaches. These critical frameworks include the study of job-related mobilities, cultures of tourism and other leisurely forms of mobility, the experiences and encounters involved in the “automobilities” of car travel, the “aeromobilities” of air-travel and aviation, mobile communications, the gendered aspects and politics of mobility, the ethics of mobility and its implications for social justice and exclusion, amongst many more outlets of analysis. Without wanting to homogenise what is a polyvalent field, these multiple strands of mobilities discourse nevertheless all share a fundamental concern with how modes of movement and the institutions, infrastructures, cultural conventions and practices governing these movements organise and shape our contemporary existence at every level.

While mobilities theory offers a wealth of insight into the breadth, diversity, and social implications of moving forms in the current modernity, it is one that lies on an alternative course from my objectives in this thesis and one from which my line of enquiry departs. Perhaps a good starting point to address the incongruence between my study and the mobilities model is the tension surrounding the respective terms movement and mobility. There has so far been some slippage between the two terms in

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10 See Kevin Hannam and Anya Diekmann (ed.), Beyond Backpacker Tourism: Mobilities and Experiences (Bristol; Buffalo; Toronto: Channel View, 2010); Pau Obrador Pons, Mike Crang and Penny Travlou (ed.), Cultures of Mass Tourism: Doing the Mediterranean in the Age of Banal Mobilities (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
this introduction; however, for the purposes of this thesis, I want to treat these two expressions as separate entities, each pertaining to separate ideas, objectives, and disciplines. Indeed, this tension is one that is noted by a mobilities scholar, Tim Cresswell, who favours the term “mobility”, arguing that it carries a certain cognisance to the wider social effects and forces surrounding the condition of moving. For Cresswell, the process of movement is never just a brute and neutral act; rather, it operates within and exposes systems of power and meaning. In other words, the act of moving is ideologically loaded and implicated within matrices of power and agency. The condition of moving is one that is always embedded within broader social meanings and networks. It is on this premise that Cresswell introduces a wilful split between the expressions “movement” and “mobility”, where the latter is used to designate these wider social implications and ideologies that underpin the procedure of moving. As he clarifies,

I want to make an analytical distinction here between movement and mobility. For the purposes of my argument, let us say that movement can be thought of as abstracted mobility (mobility abstracted from contexts of power). […] Movement is the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies, and social implications of that movement are considered.¹⁶

In other words, if “movement” designates the blunt act divorced from any reflection of its social resonance, “mobility” initiates a more extensive consideration of the social forces and effects underpinning this action. For Cresswell, the intervention that “mobility” poses as a term is necessary because it looks beyond the mere fact of moving and incorporates the careful scrutiny of “how the fact of movement […] is made meaningful”¹⁷ and how it functions in a social and systemic sense.

Contrary to Cresswell’s position, this thesis employs “movement” as the more preferable term in order to draw a line between my own interest in movement and the agendas and motives that constitute mobilities studies. While the mobilities scholars are, above all, concerned with movement as a social phenomenon, the discussions that underpin this thesis is more inclined towards the analysis of movement as an aesthetic process and production. That is to say, I am less concerned with how movement informs social procedures, institutions, and relations of power, than in how movement is made

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.
to look, how it is designed, and the mechanics through which it is textually produced via the media that form the foci of my chapters. The very act of movement has choreography, form, and expressiveness, and these qualities merit their own study away from the socially oriented discourse that the mobilities paradigm brings. This difference between my approach and mobilities studies derives, in part, from the different disciplinary fields that circumscribe the two modes of enquiry. Situated within the domain of visual and literary studies, one that focuses on how movement is represented and textualised, the outlook of my thesis departs from the mobilities paradigm that has firm roots within the social sciences. In separating movement from mobility and privileging the former, I am not implying that movement is socially meaningless or that its circulation in a social sense is unimportant. Rather, I am trying to place some analytical and theoretical distance between the study of movement in this thesis and the connotations, objectives, frameworks that “mobility” brings as an emerging paradigm across the social sciences. Consequently, in situating “movement” as the favoured expression, it is the visual and textual poetry of bodily motion to which I lend scrutiny rather than the role that movement plays in constructing social relations, identities, and conditions of living.

In moving away from the term “mobility”, I am also distancing myself from the loaded connotations that surround the term in alluding to a plethora of mobile phenomena. An overriding concern of mobilities theory lies in exhaustively cataloguing how movement informs every aspect of our social and material existence. Consequently, there is a tendency for movement to become an all-pervasive discourse in mobilities studies. In seeking to address how mobile forms – that of our bodies, objects, information, images, machines, and so on – underpins almost all of what we do, the question of movement runs the risk of assuming the meaning of anything and everything. The physical exertion of a body running, the delivery of an object through the post, the sending of an email, the motion of an automobile all become subsumed under the one term “mobility”. Of course, mobilities scholars take great care in categorising and differentiating between these different modes and experiences of mobile being.18 Nevertheless, in expansively opening the terrain of study to encompass mobile entities in all their diverse manifestations, movement as an object of analysis becomes a many-headed hydra whose ambitious scope amasses a dizzying array of phenomena. My

18 For example, Urry differentiates very clearly between forms of corporeal mobility, the mobilities of objects, the type of imaginative mobility that media such as television and radio instigate, and the virtual mobility that is possible across cyberspace. See Urry, Sociology Beyond Societies, pp. 49-76.
enquiry adopts a more modest, though no less significant, project in narrowing its attention to narratives of human movement. By anchoring my analysis specifically to recent cultural productions in which bodily motion is captured as a creative, vibrant, and vital endeavour, this thesis brings an individual clarity and focus that is sometimes lost amidst the proliferating and exhaustive agenda employed by mobilities studies.

By shifting the study of movement towards the examination of its aesthetic qualities, my discussion moves away from the more functionalist tone that is prevalent in much of mobilities theory. Focusing on the way in which patterns of movement are inherent in fundamental sectors of contemporary life, mobilities studies adopt a predominantly utilitarian approach to movement. That is, its objective is primarily confined to how practices and cultures of movement govern and organise the different aspects of our social existence. The significance of movement is imputed to how it informs and what it reveals about the day-to-day dimensions of our social existence. As Urry flags, the crux of this theoretical paradigm lies in interrogating “the complex interdependencies between, and social consequences of, these diverse mobilities.” 19 This preoccupation with the functional effects of movement in shaping social trends and practices contrasts with my interest in movement’s poetic function: that is, movement comprises a pursuit that not only marks a basic element of everyday life but one that seeks to be visually and artistically stimulating at the same time. The texts in this thesis bring together powerful, sensual, pictorially and textually evocative expressions of motion. These narratives articulate movements that are not only quotidian expressions of everyday living but also aspire towards the extraordinary and the eloquent in their composition. The texts analysed here deploy both narrative content and form to produce something of the vitality, creativity, and energy of the moving body.

Indeed, it is this consideration of textual form and content as key concepts in the theorisation of movement that further sets my research apart from its mobilities counterpart. In sitrating each set of texts – documentary film, comics, video installation, and prose novel – at the forefront of my analysis, these apparatuses are afforded an agency as crucial cogs in the theoretical discourse of movement that they do not acquire in the recesses of mobilities theory. This premise of textuality, the set of mechanisms pertaining to a narrative form and the content shaped by this form, not only comprises the method of this thesis but also the very foundation of its argument. That is, my

19 Ibid., p. 1.
enquiry not only employs these various texts as methodological tools to examine movement; it further meditates on what this intervention of the apparatus does to the depicted movement and how it makes movement intelligible in new ways that cannot be tapped into without the narrative apparatus. This thesis argues, then, that the very question of what movement is as a phenomenon is contingent on the very form of the medium that generates the movement, on the very intercessions of textual form. It is this pivotal role that narrative texts, both visual and literary, play in shaping ideas about what it means to move that separates this study from the analytical terrain mapped out by the mobilities scholars.

The Textuality of Movement in Lenticular Imaging

To further specify the decisive role that textual apparatuses play in theorising movement, and to get to the core of what I mean by the textuality of movement, it may be helpful to recruit another visual narrative, one that offers a markedly different prospect to the Casino Royale set-piece. This example finds its source in a novelty bookmark this author came across in a gift store. The particular efficacy of this bookmark in the service of this discussion lies in the image imprinted on its surface that relays an optical illusion of a moving tiger. The novelty of the item derives from the way in which the image of the tiger is brought into motion as the user continuously tilts the bookmark up and down. That is, turning the bookmark on its vertical axis triggers the illusion and the tiger subsequently becomes animated, bounding forward in a furious sweep of movement (see Figures 0.3 and 0.4). The bookmark is a product of Emotion Gallery, a gift manufacturing company that specialises in merchandising stationary that are adorned with similar spectacles of animals in motion. In a vindication of this illusion of vivid movement, the bookmarks are promoted with the following description on the company’s website: “The wildlife and your favourite pets live in your hands!”

What is compelling about this item is the way in which the apparatus of the image, both in its production and reception by the viewer, generates the very movement that one sees.

To further elucidate this point, it maybe helpful to provide a brief explanation of how the novelty works. The optical illusion that one witnesses on the bookmark makes use of lenticular imagery. It is a technology that produces printed images with the ability to

appear to change or move as the image is viewed from different angles. The illusion is instigated by the use of lenticular lenses, an array of cylindrical magnifying lenses designed so that different images are magnified when a designated object such as the bookmark is viewed from slightly different angles. Using lenticular printing, the bookmark brings together multiple images, each depicting a successive instant of the tiger’s movement, and combines them with lenticular lenses. As users revolve the artefact at speed, what we are effectively seeing in rapid succession is the successive instants of the tiger’s motion that, as a consequence of the specific optical technology involved, creates an illusion of movement. In this respect, the lenticular image operates

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22 Ibid.
according to a similar principle to a flicker book, a book composed of a series of still
images that, when flicked in rapid succession, conveys an impression of motion. There
is a similar exposure to a myriad of images in quick succession to generate the illusion
of motion. However, in the lenticular illusion, movement is created not by turning the
pages of a book, but by the successive magnification of images according to the
perspective from which the bookmark is viewed.

This lenticular image provides a vital extension of the point posed earlier that
movement comprises a textual phenomenon. What I mean by this idea of the *textuality
of movement* is that the texts considered in this thesis do not merely present scenarios of
movement as part of the content of their images or prose. More acutely, these texts
bring movement into being through their respective form, utilising their set of narrative
mechanics to *make movement possible*. Consequently, when talking about the
*representation of movement*, I am not merely designating the fact that these narratives
locate movement as the thematic subject matter of their work. While this thematic
dimension is of course important, this thesis is arguing for how the procedure of re-
presenting movement via a particular narrative technology *engineers* a schema of
movement that takes place within the spaces of representation, a movement that is a
different prospect altogether to movement in its purely physical, non-mediated form.

A closer study of the lenticular bookmark might allow us to more fully underline this
claim. What the viewer beholds in the image is not only a representation of a tiger’s
motion but also, more importantly, the very *means of producing* this motion. The
narrative instrument brings the tiger’s movement into play. The technology of lenticular
printing is key here as it brings together, within the one object, an ensemble of
photographic prints that each depicts successive instances of the tiger’s leap. Different
prints of the tiger’s sprint are magnified via the lenticular lens as the viewer varies the
angle from which he views the object. The magnification of consecutive prints in quick
succession consequently animates the tiger into the impression of movement that the
viewer beholds. This movement that the viewer registers is precisely what I mean when
I allude to the textuality of movement, a construction of movement borne out of the
design and optical apparatus of lenticular imaging coupled with the viewer’s reception
of this image. There is a register of movement occurring here, away from the original
physical movement of the animal that is referred to, a movement that takes place in the
visual spaces and planes of the artefact, as a result of the organisation and manipulation
of the images according to the mechanisms of lenticular printing. It is this recognition of the textual medium as an agent that activates movement and brings it into play, rather than as a passive and neutral surface or forum onto which movement is simply printed, that I wish to retain in how I treat and define narrative forms in the ensuing chapters. Movement is not only a subject of the texts I analyse; movement is a condition of the image, a condition of prose, one that is generated by their organisation and manipulation within a given medium.

**Futurist Art: Foregrounding Movement as Aesthetic Construction**

The especial interest that this enquiry takes in the aesthetic dimensions of movement is further elucidated in a detour through the terrain of early twentieth-century Futurist artwork. I find Futurist art to be a useful reference point here because it foregrounds movement as an aesthetic construction, one that employs the conventions of its form to bring out something of the exhilarating, colourful, and energetic qualities of motion. An avant-garde literary and artistic movement headed by Italian writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Futurism embraced movement, particularly the rapidity of speed, as the underlying essence of contemporary life. In “The Futurist Manifesto”, Marinetti glorifies the experience and expression of movement in all sectors of the creative arts, scornful towards what he contends as the “pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber” of traditional art and literature. Mesmerised by the fast pace of contemporary metropolitan life, by new sensations of movement brought about by the velocity of machines and motorised vehicles that were becoming commonplace at the turn of the century, the Futurists were drawn to the idea that dynamic movement – the dizzying rush of speed – comprised the definitive experience of modern life. In this respect, it exemplifies something of a historical precedent to mobilities studies, sharing with it a similar designation of movement as the basic underlying principle of contemporary modernity. However, whereas the mobilities paradigm is concerned with movement’s social function and significance, Futurist discourse rallies around a more flamboyant interest in the aestheticised spectacle of movement. Futurist painting, in particular, was decisive in establishing an iconography of motion that brings to the fore movement’s fierce vitality and energised nature. Reacting against classical art and its perceived lack of attention to the kineticism of its subjects, the Futurists were critical that preceding traditions of art were overly occupied with statuesque poses rather than the depiction of

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dynamic processes. In a declaration made to the public, the Futurist painters condemned this tradition:

They obstinately continue to paint objects motionless, frozen, and all the static aspects of Nature […] petrifying their art with an obstinate attachment to the past, which to our eyes remains totally incomprehensible. We, on the contrary, with points of view pertaining essentially to the Future, seek for a style of motion, a thing which has never been attempted before us.24

In seeking to forge this “style of motion”, Futurist painting shows a pronounced intent on not simply illustrating movement, but identifying a mode of depiction that stresses the qualities of liveliness and vivacity in movement.

This preoccupation with movement as an aesthetic concern, one that is embedded in issues of representation, is evident in the work of Umberto Boccioni, one of a select core of artists who pioneered the principles of Futurist painting. One of his iconic pieces, *Dynamism of a Human Body* (1913) (see Figure 0.3), provides a suggestive example of the type of iconography and design of motion that Futurist painting sought to implement. Here, what the viewer witnesses is a body that is in the midst of, and is disassembled as a consequence of, its whirlwind motion. The angular assortment of planes and laceration of lines that interpenetrate each other attest to the swiftness of motion, one so rapid and charged that it disperses the very features of the arms, legs, and torso. In a similar vein, the vivid streaks of colour, luminescent and piercing, attribute intensity to the action. Boccioni’s image clearly embraces the idea of movement as vibrant spectacle, using the medium of paint to evoke the sheer dynamism of motion unfolding. While one cannot make out a unitary and clearly defined figure, the painting showcases with a glaring clarity the fierce momentum of movement as it takes shape. The ensemble of spherical shapes designate bundles of muscles whose protrusion in the image points to the heaving power of the body as it moves, while the blazing lashes of colour further amplify this feeling of physical exuberance. Boccioni’s painting blends line, colour, and light to codify a rendition of movement that is suffused with a palpable sense of excitement. *Dynamism of a Human Body* reveals an attempt to use the technical properties of painting to communicate an idea and impression of energetic and surging motion.

It is this treatment of movement as a subject of aesthetic enterprise that makes Futurist painting an integral touchstone for the texts examined in the chapters, sources whose representation of movement hones in on a similar endeavour. As Boccioni’s painting demonstrates, the significance of movement as a phenomenon is based primarily on aesthetic grounds: movement is, above all, a matter of line, colour, shape, and light. It is not movement’s social function and agency that compels the Futurists’ attention but rather its visual design and form, and the technical ability of painting to produce on canvass the irrepressible energy of movement. This focus on movement as an aesthetic process is what I want to keep at the forefront of my analysis in this thesis. In shaping an enquiry that situates aesthetics as a central dimension of movement, my analysis takes a keen interest in textual productions that step beyond a purely functionalist conception of movement and glean something of its creativity, expressive craft, and eloquence. Furthermore, the particular aesthetic qualities and meanings that these texts attach to movement shift with, and are contingent on, the individual narrative media that I deal with in each chapter. As Boccioni’s painting highlights, the impression of surging

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vitality attributed to movement is one that is generated by the particular technical attributes that painting as a representational form offers. Consequently, this thesis sets up the question of movement’s aesthetics not as a homogeneous and uniform term but as one that is intimately linked with the conditions and mechanisms of narrative form. The aesthetic meanings and discourses associated with movement are dependent on, and vary across, the specific media that feature in the following chapters and the distinct reading practices that these media foster.

While acknowledging the usefulness of Futurism in identifying aesthetics as a key feature of movement, my analysis certainly does not position the ensemble of texts as somehow derivative of Futurist ideologies, or as successors to its work. Indeed, Futurism’s interest in movement often hinges on a fanatic fervour, recklessly fetishizing experiences and spectacles that evoke the dizzying rush of speed, a viewpoint that this thesis and the texts that it examines do not participate in. Nevertheless, what I do find valuable is Futurist art’s tendency to pinpoint movement as an object of aesthetic production and scrutiny, and its use of a representational apparatus to produce these moving forms, characteristics that inform the narrative texts examined in this thesis.

**Flânerie and the Moving Gaze**

Alongside Futurism, another historical precedent that perhaps needs to be given some thought when accounting for previous movement-related ideas and cultures is the nineteenth-century *flâneur*. The flâneur designates the urban stroller paradigmatic of nineteenth-century modernity who wanders through the city, using these perambulations to observe and take pleasure in the sights of urban activity and life that emerged with the rise of metropolitan culture. While the flâneur has taken on a multiplicity of incarnations, roles, and meanings within the array of literature that surrounds it, the figure finds one of its earliest and extensive treatments in the essays and poetry of Charles Baudelaire and it is Baudelaire’s definition to which I focus my attention. Originating from the arcades and boulevards of the Parisian metropolis, the flâneur is perhaps most emphatically defined in Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life” in which he establishes, “For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” 26 The primary modus operandi

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of the flâneur, then, was to move through the hub of metropolitan crowds, all the while remaining a keen spectator of the people, streets, and arcades that he walked through. For Baudelaire, the emergence of metropolitan culture during the nineteenth century, bringing with it new visual stimuli and attractions, encouraged the type of aesthetically-oriented walking and looking that the flâneur embodied. Flânerie supplies a useful reference here as it offers a markedly different tradition of critical discourse on movement, one that through its very difference helps to further underline the focus of my thesis in the bodily phenomenon of movement. This interest in the bodily dimensions of moving is something that is largely eschewed in the literature on this urban figure. For all of its surface interest in the activity of roaming through the city, the critical paradigm signalled by the flâneur offers less a theorisation of movement per se than about the nature of and the politics surrounding the act of the gaze exercised by the nineteenth-century stroller. While this urban rambler partakes in a kinetic perambulation through the metropolis in a manner that might recall the texts that are analysed in this thesis, the interest in bodily activity is secondary to the scrutiny of what is glimpsed during the practice of flânerie.

Indeed, the capacity to observe and contemplate the city’s sights is a crucial feature of the flâneur and the very reason why he moves in the first place. The importance placed on this visual pursuit is prominent in Baudelaire’s description of the flâneur’s daily program:

So out he goes and watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty. He marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom. He gazes upon the landscapes of the great city – landscapes of stone, caressed by the mist or buffeted by the sun. He delights in fine carriages and proud horses, the dazzling smartness of the grooms, the expertness of the footmen, the sinuous gait of the women, the beauty of the children, happy to be alive and nicely dressed – in a word, he delights in universal life.27

Baudelaire’s vignette provides not so much an account of the body’s roaming, kinetic ramble through the city as a catalogue of the spectacles that are seen while the subject moves. There is an overwhelming emphasis placed on the flâneur’s visual engagement with the city, on what filters through the watchful eye of the flâneur as he passes through its recesses and corridors. Baudelaire’s musings on the flâneur in “The Painter

27 Ibid., p. 10.
of Modern Life” are peppered with allusions to his watchful perceptiveness, whose “eagle eye”\(^{28}\) takes in everything from slight variations in fashion to the physiognomies of people and streets alike. Movement is consequently relegated to the background as an occasion for the gaze, merely incidental to the primary enterprise of the eye. As a social and literary paradigm, the flâneur is conceptualised by Baudelaire as a meandering spectator whose wanderings are primarily directed towards, and subsumed under, the panoply of visual delights offered by the metropolitan landscape.

However, it is precisely this emphasis upon its visual function that distances flanerie away from the analytical terrain of this thesis. Flanerie, both the literary paradigm as well as the critical scholarship it has elicited, is primarily interested in the visual dimension of urban movement, more invested in the notion of a moving gaze than a moving body.\(^{29}\) This privileged position that spectatorship occupies is something that is acknowledged by other critics. For instance, Keith Tester remarks, “flânerie can, after Baudelaire, be understood as the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity.”\(^{30}\) In a more explicit association between flanerie and visuality, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson tellingly remarks,

Good legs […] are essential equipment. But the most essential appendage is the eye. The flâneur’s field of action is encompassed by his field of vision, in the Paris of the arcades, the city of restaurants and boulevards and gardens, of crowds jostling in public places.\(^{31}\)

If, as Ferguson suggests, the eye is the all-important appendage in literary accounts of the flâneur, the figure consequently comprises a more suitable framework for assessing the politics and conditions of the gaze, the relations of power and agency activated by the gesture of looking and being looked, rather than a rallying point for theorising the

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 10.
\(^{29}\) There is, however, a sector of feminist scholarship that does take into account the gendered bodily presence of the flâneur in addition to the interest in the gaze. These works examine women’s experiences of movement throughout late nineteenth-century modernity in a way that considers how these experiences of movement encode and produce female bodies. See Deborah Epstein Nord, Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Wendy Parkins, Mobility and Modernity in Women’s Novels, 1850s-1930s: Women Moving Dangerously (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Deborah Parsons, Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity”, Theory, Culture and Society 2, 3 (1985): 37-46.
moving body. Brian Mazlish phrases this most eloquently when he reflects, “Baudelaire’s flâneur in the end turns out curiously to be a kind of perambulating Panopticon. His task may not be to discipline and punish; but it is to be an aristocratic critic and judge, writing feuilletons about a salon of capitalist scenes.”

Mazlish’s observation prompts a firm conviction that the analytical utility of the flâneur is best served towards probing urban practices of looking in nineteenth-century culture and the identities and hierarchies that this mode of mobile looking afforded, than towards examining the representation of the moving body.

This thesis posits a substantial departure from the analytical tradition that surrounds the flâneur precisely because of its emphasis on the embodied status of the moving body as a crucial aspect of what movement is. If my enquiry argues on the one hand that movement is a textual process, engineered by the mechanisms of narrative media, equally important is the assertion that this movement is also a corporeal phenomenon.

That is, what the textual apparatus circumscribes and lends form to is the physical and material body in dynamic action and navigation. As the above scholarly discussions of the flâneur indicate, movement is registered less on the account of an exertive body than on a mobile and somewhat disembodied gaze. In directing too overt an attention to the field of vision, the motor activity of the body recedes to the background. This is not to suggest that movement’s ability to stimulate new and interesting modes of visual perception comprises a less valid field of study; rather, it is to emphasize that my research objective lies in scrutinising how texts construct the moving bodily entity as a whole rather than the visual faculties and practices of this body. Contrary to the gazing flâneur, I want to refrain from looking outwards and, as it were, flip the lens back inwards onto the bodily figure of the moving subject. In doing so, I want to direct attention not to what is glimpsed during the act of moving but to what the moving body itself might look like, how this corpus of flesh and muscle amidst movement is made to appear through the respective contraptions of film, comics, video art, and prose. It is the production of movement as, above all, a clearly discernible and legible moving body that comes to the fore in each of these texts.

In foregrounding the body as a crucial category in the study of movement, this thesis treats the body as a gendered and historically specific entity, one whose construction and representation is contingent on the individual narratives that are examined in the

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chapters. The thesis is not expressly concerned with a gendered reading of the body or with other social considerations of our corporeal existence that are essential to the field of “body theory”. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the “body” is itself a representational category that is under scrutiny, one that is subject to the formulations of form and content within the given narrative texts. In doing so, my analysis does not work from a model of “the body” *a priori*. Rather, the discussion of movement in this study talks about the *making of specific bodies* via specific narrative media. In these textual scenarios of movement, the body itself is something that is being “made” and created as part of the process and mechanisms of representation, and it is this consideration that sets apart my enquiry from the critical tradition surrounding the flâneur.

**Critical Moves: An Itinerary of the Chapters**

In mounting an argument about the textuality of movement, what compels my attention so powerfully are the four texts themselves that this analysis brings together. The textual productions analysed here possess theoretical agency and sophistication *in their own right* where ideas of movement are concerned. As part of its methodological approach, then, my writing extends primacy to these works as the underlying foundation of critical and interpretive practice. It is a view that finds solidarity in film scholar Laura U. Marks who insightfully reminds her readers in her own analysis,

> Of course, what pulls this writing most forcefully is the films and videos themselves. The works I examine in this book are themselves works of theory, many explicitly so. They are not waiting to have theory “done to” them; they are not illustrations of theory but theoretical essays in their own right. […] As much as possible I engage with these films and videos as I engage with theoretical writings. I rely on them to draw out and critique the ideas with which I am working.33

As Marks emphatically affirms, narrative texts comprise sources of theory in and of themselves; they are not something that require legitimisation by “higher” theoretical or philosophical discourses. This is not to deny that how one reads artistic texts can be enriched and illuminated in new light by forays into critical theory; rather, it is a firm reminder that artistic texts do not exist as an umbilical cord via which to neatly and readily channel and validate exterior theoretical systems. Keeping this in mind, it is the collection of film, comics, video installations, and a novel examined here that operates

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as the spine of this thesis and incites new ways of perceiving and theorising what movement is, propping up the critical and theoretical frameworks this thesis employs to make sense of movement.

The diverse range of narrative forms that this research addresses permits me to attend to a variety of textual economies and nuances of movement. Chapter One, for instance, builds upon my fascination with the Casino Royale action scene and looks more extensively into how movement is constructed within the moving image medium that is film. As a medium composed of frames that are moved at a rate that they create a seamless reproduction of movement, film can at times be readily taken for granted as the means of conveying motion par excellence. This chapter, however, seeks to look beyond this idea that film comprises a natural way of communicating motion by looking closely at the ways in which the images of the medium are manipulated by the filmmaker to phrase movement in specific ways. To do so, I focus upon Mike Christie’s documentary film Jump London (2003). Christie’s film allows a more expansive exploration of the ideas mapped out in the Casino Royale scene because it scrutinises the athletic practice of parkour that also features in the Bond sequence. The elaborate pattern of moves that Mollaka uses to escape from Bond exemplifies this urban phenomenon of parkour, one that forms the subject of the documentary. Founded by Sébastien Foucan, who incidentally plays the role of Mollaka, parkour designates a recently emerging urban sport that implements a way of imaginatively and agilely moving through urban spaces, making use of the surrounding street architecture to facilitate these moves. The practice exemplifies a type of street acrobatics, making use of walls, stairways, poles, balconies and other urban landmarks to run, leap, and roll through the city. This chapter, however, is less interested in the urban sport per se than in its cinematic inscription. Instilling Jump London as its focal point, this chapter probes how the lens of the film reassembles the movement of parkour. By using Christie’s work as a case study, it enables me to hone in on the premise of textuality and specify how the agile movement inherent in parkour is not only generated by what the performers are doing, but also by the dynamic camera activity that is used to film their actions as well as the post-production editing processes that reassemble this activity. By engaging with the images of film, I demonstrate that movement emerges as a product of the choreography of bodily action in front of the camera as well as an equally industrious cinematic apparatus that reorganises images of this activity and redistributes them accordingly to the viewer.
Moving from film to comics, Chapter Two turns towards the textual production of movement in the form of still images. As a medium that communicates narrative as a series of frozen instances, comics arguably present a less obvious choice of artform when discussing the production of moving entities. Nevertheless, by focusing on a recent work of superhero comics, this chapter argues that the still frames in these comics engineer a type of movement that takes place both within and across the sequential images that comprise comics. The contents of each image and the nature of the transitions that occur between successive frames are key in generating this movement, calibrating the range, scale, and pace at which movement “occurs”. Furthermore, choosing comics as a textual source allows this enquiry to address what the quality of stillness brings to the narration of movement, to push at what it “does” with moving bodies that moving images do not. The value of still images lies in their ability to hold onto the concrete forms of bodily motion as it takes place, sculpting and retaining this figure in a way that is not readily possible amidst the rush of cinematic images. This chapter subsequently permits me to grapple with and affirm the crucial role that the form of still images play in the aesthetic imagination of movement, that far from antagonising or detracting from the ability to express motion, the still frame activates its own articulation of movement.

Chapter Three scrutinises the production of movement in Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist’s video installations from her 2011 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London. Combining video imagery and large-scale installation environments, the medium of video installation comprises a compelling case for studying movement because it not only entails scrutinising the composition of an image but also demands attentiveness to how the spatial conditions exterior to the image inform the way in which one perceives the motion on screen. In examining both the contents of her images as well as the vibrant installation environments in which she displays these images, this chapter suggests that Rist creates sensuous narratives of movement that engage the sensory faculties of sight, sound, and touch. That is, Rist produces images of movement that not only operate as a strictly visual spectacle but also appeals to and engages one’s auditory and tactile sensibilities. Rist’s pieces consequently form a crucial selection in this thesis because they push beyond a purely visual apprehension of movement, opening up our vocabulary for talking about movement in a way that incorporates other senses. By

34 This exhibition, titled Eyeball Massage, featured a retrospective of Pipilotti Rist’s major works spanning her entire career, and was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in London from September 2011 to January 2012.
engaging with the specific context in which her work is exhibited at the Hayward Gallery, this chapter suggests that making movement in Rist’s video installations entails an interplay of images, sounds, and textures.

Chapter Four directs its attention away from image-based narratives to examine how movement takes shape in the medium of language in Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* (2003). DeLillo’s novel marks something of a departure from the previous texts explored in this thesis because it imagines forms of movement that take place away from, and subsequently question, the endeavour and function of bodily exertion. *Cosmopolis* permits an examination of the new meanings that movement accrues in light of the current late-capitalist, technologically advanced society, one where moving phenomena not only exemplify bodily activity but also the electronic and immaterial movement of information travelling at speed. This chapter argues that, in the novel, movement assumes a new aesthetic and abstract form in the velocity of electronic information and, one that increasingly displaces the physical agency of bodies and their movements. Furthermore, the selection of a prose-based narrative enables me to examine how the textual arena of words engineers these new conceptualisations of movement. It is the form and composition of DeLillo’s language that activates these new imaginings of movement and that brings about the displacement of the body. *Cosmopolis*, then, offers a timely meditation on the status and function of bodily movement in the current cultural context and how the linguistic milieu of words foreground these concerns.

Collectively, there is a deliberate focus here on narratives that have been produced within a late twentieth-century to early twenty-first-century context. One reason behind this interest in recent cultural productions is due to the fact that there are now newly emerging cultural expressions of bodily movement, and within a range of media, perhaps to a greater extent than ever before. For example, the practice of parkour as an organised discipline has only been established and popularised within the last ten years. Similarly, while spectacles of superheroes moving at speed have been around for decades, they have arguably reached a new depth of aesthetic interest recently, not only in the annals of comic books but also in the proliferation of film and television series over the last fifteen years. In addition to this, issues surrounding the compromised status of human movement in the midst of high-speed information technologies that DeLillo grapples with comprise a subject matter that is specifically relevant to this current era.
Secondly, the current context not only introduces innovative articulations of movement but, equally importantly, presents a technical maturation of the media that this thesis deals with. While film and prose have a longer and more extensive history of technical and stylistic development, a medium such as video installation poses a much more recent artform and has only come into its own in the last twenty-five years. Furthermore, while the medium of comics has a longer history than video art, spanning back to the early twentieth century, a lot of the stylistic innovation within, and critical scholarship surrounding, superhero comics has taken place over the last two decades. Consequently, with the more recent history of some of the representational forms examined here, and of the critical discussions surrounding these media, the current timeframe presents an ideal moment to be engaging in these debates and addressing these apparatuses in their matured state.

Equally crucially, the decision to examine the production of movement *across multiple narrative forms* poses an effort to show the far-reaching applications of the ideas presented here and their versatility in informing a number of reading positions. By employing a diverse range of texts, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that how one perceives and defines movement as a phenomenon is intimately linked with the specific modes of readership that are activated by these texts. Working across media permits this enquiry to negotiate multiple reading positions, from cinematic viewer to comics reader, and from art spectator to prose reader. Navigating these various modes of reception allows this analysis to foreground the very role and agency of the reader/viewer/spectator/reader in the making of movement. It permits this thesis to demonstrate how the reader/viewer/spectator plays a definitive role in the production of movement. In effect, examining the textual production and reception of movement across a spectrum of multiple reading methods reinstates the necessity of textuality itself as a vital keystone in how we talk about and imagine movement.
CHAPTER ONE

Tracing the Visual Aesthetics of Parkour in Mike Christie’s 

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**Introduction**

This chapter commences by moving through the streets and skylines of London, tracing the course of three individuals in Mike Christie’s documentary film *Jump London*. First broadcast in September 2003 on UK television, Christie’s film explores the journey of three young Frenchmen – Sébastien Foucan, Johann Vigroux, and Jerome Ben Aoues – who navigate the streets, rooftops, and iconic landmarks of London through an exhibition of bodily movements that constitute the discipline of parkour. Co-founded by Sébastien Foucan and David Belle, parkour is a recent urban practice that involves a type of “free-running”, a way of moving through urban spaces that incorporates a repertoire of high-speed runs, leaps, rolls, twists, and flips. Throughout *Jump London*, the protagonists scale the walls of buildings, jump from rooftop to rooftop, and leap from substantial heights, performing the discipline in its most spectacular, energetic, and dangerous form. While Christie’s film explores in detail the genesis of this urban phenomenon as well as its ideological underpinnings, the central thrust of the film lies in its portrayal of the three protagonists’ ambitious project: to execute a day-long exhibition of parkour through the various elements of London’s cityscape. This itinerary takes them from street-level bustle to the removed abodes of London’s skyline, from the nondescript recesses of London’s suburbs to its grand iconic monuments, using sites such as the Royal Albert Hall, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, Tate Modern, National Gallery, and Trafalgar Square, amongst others, as stepping stones upon which to stage their performance. Christie’s film takes viewers through the preparation and training of the protagonists, their daylong expedition across London, and their commentary on the emergence of parkour as both a physical and ideological practice that prescribes how bodies should move within the city. Their endeavours at the summits of London’s monuments turn bodily movement itself into a site of spectacle. This chapter examines how these movements come to be shaped at the intersection of bodily choreography and the filmic apparatus that frames and informs this

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choreography. Movement takes place as much within the physical spaces of London as the visual spaces of the cinematic frame. In arguing this, my analysis scrutinises ideas posed by dance theory, bodily geometry, and action cinema as key frameworks that prop up and bring to the fore how the aesthetic production of movement in *Jump London* takes shape as a collusion of bodily action and cinema.

It is important to clarify from the outset that my preoccupation lies with the *individual* narrative and mechanics of Christie’s documentary film and not with the *general* conceits of the parkour discipline as a whole. Consequently, it may be first helpful to map out the aesthetic vision that underlies the practice of parkour in order to provide a contextual backdrop to the film and to define my own point of departure from current discourses on the urban phenomenon. Parkour, as an organised discipline, emerged as a result of Foucan’s childhood games exploring and playing with the architecture around the Parisian suburb of Lisses. The objective of parkour lies in using a set of highly-rehearsed moves in order to move promptly from one location to another, using these moves to negotiate the intervening architectural spaces between the two destinations. What distinguishes the practice is precisely this athletic and pragmatic manoeuvring of architecture: instead of evading the debris of street furniture, practitioners actively seek to incorporate these structures into the very itinerary of their journey. Walls, fences, stairways, balconies, and rooftops become surfaces to run across, leap off, and jump over as the practitioner attempts to implement a more direct and corporeally-engaged utilisation of street architecture. For example, in Figure 1.1, the parkour athlete catapults himself over the stone column and clings onto the opposite column, before sidling horizontally across to the top of the staircase. This action foregoes the more ordinary course of walking around the stone column and using the staircase, activating a robust and athletic manoeuvring of the spatial structures. In another routine, Figure 1.2 depicts a practitioner jumping from one balcony to another, using the intervening wall as a surface off which to kick and propel himself towards the next balcony. Similar to the previous manoeuvre, this action forfeits the lengthier act of having to use the interior spaces of the architecture by implementing a swifter navigation of space. In a playful variation of its usual function, the wall of the building becomes a surface or foothold off which to propel the body. As these images reveal, parkour’s aesthetic enterprise revolves around an interrogation of the ways in which architecture is utilised and perceived, prescribing a mode of moving that challenges normative functions of city spaces and the behaviour of bodies in these environments.
This ability of parkour to reappropriate the material dimensions and social perceptions of urban space is something that is well documented within the current scholarship on the practice. Numerous critics have examined at length how the deft movements of the
parkour athlete reproduce the physical and social elements of the urban sites that are traversed. Their fascination with parkour lies in the creative ways in which the discipline makes use of architecture in a manner that subverts its original functions. One such critic, Sophie Fuggle, affirms that parkour “involves a questioning of architectural spaces, suggesting ways in which such spaces might be traversed and ‘used’ in ways other than those intended by architects and town planners.” For Fuggle, parkour’s efficacy lies in the way it allows us to re-read the material spaces of the city and to imagine new patterns of behaviour within these sites. Similarly, Jimena Ortuzar suggests that the practice entails a different way of looking at the world. Where we see buildings, parkouristes see railings, ledges, fences, doors, walls, etc. In other words, they see the city not as a totality but as fragments that can be recomposed through movement.

Like Fuggle, Ortuzar’s interest is drawn to the ability of parkour’s movement to recodify the way one perceives the city and the ideological meanings that we assign to these spaces. Alternatively, in his ethnographic study of the urban sport, Stephen John Saville provides a compelling account of how the physical manoeuvres of parkour reconfigure our emotional response to the built spaces. Saville’s focus lies in examining how the process of trying, experimenting, learning, and failing the moves conditions particular emotional responses to the architecture and restructures the way one relates to the built environment.

This burgeoning scholarship is important for establishing a critical lexicon around what is a very recent phenomenon, and lays a foundation upon which later scholarship can develop. However, its premises largely gravitate around the question of how parkour redefines our relationship with the built environment and the way in which the practice enacts, to borrow Ortuzar’s phrase, “a process of editing the space of the city.” Unlike this scholarship, my chapter is not concerned with parkour in and of itself as a primary locus of study; neither is it preoccupied with the social meanings and discourses that the

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discipline engenders about the city. Rather, the chapter offers a different course by honing in on the bodily movement of parkour as it is produced via the medium of film. In recalling the two previous images, my enquiry does not lie in how the depicted actions might subvert the intended functions of architecture. Instead, what pulls my attention are the ways in which the bodily action of parkour is visually constructed on a choreographic and cinematic level: the editing of scenes and the pace at which they are relayed to the viewer, the proportions and scale of the body in relation to the cinematic frame, the angles employed by the camera, and the structural organisation of the sequences in relation to one another. I scrutinise how the bodily movements of parkour are made to look through the formal mechanisms of film. The term “representation” here is therefore not only offered in terms of the performative content of the athlete’s actions, but the process of their reproduction by a filmic lens. While previous scholarship stresses the way in which parkour permits a re-reading of urban space, I shift emphasis to how bodily action within *Jump London* allows us to rethink the visual space of cinematic images and the aesthetic production of movement via this cinematic form.

In this enquiry of how movement is produced as an aesthetic enterprise within the filmic medium, it is particularly apposite that parkour is a discipline that privileges qualities of bodily eloquence and grace within the choreography of movement. That is, the practitioner not only seeks to be pragmatic when moving between two destinations but also to execute this efficiency with a simultaneous display of visual finesse. Jerome Ben Aoues, one of the three protagonists, emphasises this stylistic element of performing parkour during an interview in the documentary:

> The movement has to be elegant – that’s what will make it prettier. Length and distance only add to the beauty of the move. If you manage to pass over the fence elegantly, that’s [what makes it] beautiful, rather than saying “I jumped the lot.” What’s the point of that?

Aoues’ comment reveals that parkour is not only concerned with what movement does or achieves but what these movements look like. Style is aligned with utility and its performance across London is choreographed so as to exhibit a graceful and elegant unfolding of the body through the city. It is my contention that this preoccupation with

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6 See also Oli Mould, “Parkour, the City, the Event”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27 (2009): 738-50. Mould’s article proposes how parkour transforms the city into an arena of contest between capitalist practices and ideologies, on the one hand, and the subversive practices of parkour that disrupt these norms.
movement’s appearance – its visual aesthetics – constitutes more than just a stylistic preference within the discipline; it marks a crucial and original entry point into the critical enquiry of bodily movement in parkour. My analysis is concerned with the visual composition of movement as it is produced within a cinematic medium.

In elucidating the visual poetics of bodily movement within *Jump London*, this chapter will draw upon dance studies as a vital interdisciplinary point of reference. While the poetics of movement’s visual composition largely evades the domain of mobilities studies and parkour scholarship, this enquiry lies at the forefront of dance criticism. As dance scholar Jane C. Desmond astutely reflects, dance studies allow for a method of analysis that is particularly attentive to visual, rhythmic, and kinetic sensibilities:

> While most scholars have spent years developing analytic skills for reading and understanding verbal forms of communication, rarely have we worked equally hard to develop an ability to analyse visual, rhythmic, or gestural forms. As cultural critics, we must become movement literate. Here is where skills drawn from the dance field become indispensable.  

Desmond’s observation emphasises movement not simply in terms of a functional and goal-oriented activity, but a visible form whose choreography is key to the production of narrative meaning. To become movement literate is to be receptive to the visual literacy of movement. This attention to the visual configuration of bodily action within dance studies is a crucial methodology that this chapter transfers to the analysis of bodily activity created by *Jump London*.

In lending focus to the visual aesthetics of movement, this chapter is particularly interested in the ways that movement is visually encoded within the narrative medium of film. As stated earlier, I am not concerned with the general poetics of the parkour discipline as a whole; rather, I am specifically drawn to the mechanics of its representation within film. I stress here the need to not only interrogate the physical, actual movement of bodies but also the movement of bodies within spaces of representation. In foregrounding the role of representation as a key methodology in the analysis of movement, the nucleus of the chapter not only revolves around how bodily action looks but how it looks on screen, how movement is made to appear through the composition and arrangement of film images and sequences. In *Jump London*, the

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parkour sequences exhibit an eloquent choreography of bodily movement: the decision to stage three protagonists all moving simultaneously lends itself to a synchronised aesthetic, permitting viewers to witness the harmonious progression of the bodies in concert with each other. However, it is not solely the performance itself that harnesses this visual eloquence. Camerawork and editing further embellishes this choreography, using close-ups, dynamic angles, and rapid cuts to optimise the visual finesse of their feats. What viewers are offered, then, are images of graceful arcs and elaborate trajectories, a kinetic synchrony of bodies traced by the protagonists as they move through London. In sifting through these images, I not only examine the choreography of the body in relation to the urban spaces of London; equally importantly, I examine how the body on screen is choreographed in relation to the visual spaces that constitute film. Consequently, when viewing *Jump London*, movement is not only defined as something that occurs through the spaces of London’s streets but, at the same time, as something that traverses and takes place within the cinematic spaces of film. The chapter combs through the ways in which the moving body is visually inscribed not only in relation to the urban environment but also in relation to the visual environment of the cinematic frame. The protagonists’ trajectory through the city and their trajectory through the visual spaces of film form a point of confluence in this chapter, and this intersection between narrative content and form is where my argument takes shape.

In a chapter that is concerned with the choreography of movement’s appearance, the consideration of how movement looks within what is a moving image medium is an apposite and necessary one. My analysis of the visual landscapes of *Jump London* draws upon and unravels the symbiosis between the moving body of the parkour practitioner and the moving images that are employed to convey this bodily kinesis. In foregrounding the movement that is implicit within the filmic medium itself, my discussion of Christie’s film brings into focus the rhythmic components of its composition: namely, the pace, tempo, and momentum of the images and sequences that are relayed to viewers. In this respect, I appropriate the methodology of film theorist Yvette Bíro who contends that the rhythm of the film, marked by the flow and tempo of images, is just as vital as the film’s narrative content when communicating meaning:

Similar to music, film develops its themes in time, and the slow or rushing flow of these rhythms adds as much to the exposition of ideas as the content of the story itself. Hence, the
expressive power of rhythm demands as much complexity as any other component of the work.⁸

This idea of rhythm is particularly relevant to *Jump London*, where the use of fast-paced editing, mobile camera work, and the frequency of action-packed scenes all contribute to a pulsating filmic rhythm based on speed. The chapter develops a concept of speed as a quality that not only underlies the bodily velocity of the protagonists but also the velocity of the images that constellate the rhythm of the film. There is a mindfulness of *moving bodies*, on the one hand, and the *moving images* that frame these bodies on the other. My analysis brings these two adjacent strands together, probing how this junction between bodily movement and cinematic image articulates a definition of movement that takes shape as a collaborative product of narrative form and content.

**Jumping, Obstacles, Rooftops: Unravelling the Visual Motifs of *Jump London***

One of the most enigmatic scenes in *Jump London* is played out in the exposition of the documentary, in which viewers catch the first glimpse of the documentary’s three protagonists. Within this scene, the three traceurs stand poised on a rooftop of a building in suburban London. Bracing themselves, they suddenly sprint to the edge of the rooftop and leap into the air towards the rooftop of an adjacent building. The moment of this leap is displayed in slow motion as if to accentuate the dramatic tension caused by the jump. Furthermore, in a gesture clearly intended to foreshadow the symbolic resonance of this particular moment within the film, the scene depicting the traceurs’ leap into the air is replayed three more times, each time from a different camera angle, as if screening it once is not enough to capture the scale and significance of the action. Perhaps most significantly, the instance in which the traceurs presumably land on the rooftop of the neighbouring building is not depicted. That is, the final replay of the jump freezes to a still-image just before the trio lands on their intended target (see Figure 1.3). Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues are left suspended in mid-air, their bodies forming a graceful arc, amidst the very action of jumping between two rooftops.

What is foregrounded in this scene is the very act of the jump itself: as the timeliness of the frozen frame above suggests, it is the image of the body *in flight* that the scene seeks

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to imprint on the viewer’s imagination. By staging this set-piece, the film privileges from the very beginning an image that apparently aestheticizes the flight of the traceur, and the sense of lift and weightlessness that accompanies this action. What is particularly striking about these sequences is not simply the ambitious and dangerous nature of the jump itself, but the way in which this action is embellished by the numerous filmic devices. The use of slow motion offers viewers the time to absorb the scale and drama of the jump, evoking suspense by prolonging the mid-air suspension of the bodies. At the same time, the consecutive replays serve to underscore the monumentality of this moment within the course of the film, instilling an introductory prelude to the larger heroics that will take place later. The importance of this scene in shedding light on the wider conceits of the film also lies in the way it exposes the gendered aspects of the film’s documentation of movement, one that expressly privileges the male body. In *Jump London*, the spectacle of movement is exclusively produced as a masculine enterprise with the three male traceurs homogenising the cinematic spaces of action. Although this enquiry is not concerned with the representation of gender as a primary focus of interrogation, my analysis throughout the chapter nevertheless takes into consideration how the cinematic constructions of movement throughout the film selectively privileges moving *male* bodies while
denying, as the above image testifies, female bodies the same arena of expression and agency.

Perhaps what is most significant in this sequence, however, is the still image that freezes the trio’s jump: this manoeuvre lends viewers a pause in which to appreciate the synchronisation of the three bodies as they suspend mid-air to form a shapely parabola, emphasising the grace and poise of the traceurs’ bodies. This intercession of the filmic still, the only one within the film, strikes a distinct contrast with the flow of images that precede this pause. In her analysis of dance choreography, Liz Aggiss discusses the tension between movement and stasis, articulating how moments of stillness within a dance serve to foreground a particular movement phrase during the performance. As Aggiss notes,

>a[n] important feature in the sequences is the use of movement gaps, the visual equivalent to rests or silences in music. The use of static pauses can here frame a movement to give it more emphasis, or a group of movements can be isolated to form motifs. This focus on movement silences also helps to define in time the ends of movements.⁹

The movement gap becomes an effective rest point that isolates and accentuates a given phrase of movement. While Aggiss is referring to the choreographic use of stillness to lend emphasis to movement within dance, a similar emphasis is at work in the transition between the stream of “moving” images and the still-frame. The insertion of the filmic still permits a momentary respite from the velocity of images and allows this singular image to linger in viewers’ minds. By bringing the movement to a pause, the depicted action of jumping is framed as a visual motif. As the still image reveals, the sequence marks an emblematic moment in the film – the first section of this chapter will elucidate this visual motif of the jump within the documentary and how bodies in flight comprise a visual strategy for constructing a discourse of “free” and “authentic” movement.

In capturing the motion of the protagonists mid-jump, the still-frame pays homage to an elementary manoeuvre within parkour. A highly agile sport whose objective is to move swiftly and directly between successive destinations, jumping provides a vital means of negotiating the walls, staircases, benches, and other structures that the traceur encounters in his path. It is unsurprising that many of the names of parkour manoeuvres

– wall jump, gap jump, cat leap, monkey vault, swing – allude to differing variations of aerial movements. The action of jumping is thus ingrained within the vocabulary of the practice, a vocabulary that the documentary mimics in its very title, *Jump London*. However, I want to expose this dual resonance of the title and the expository scene as more than just a reminder of the literal jumps that form a part of the discipline’s corporeal practice. Jumping is at the same time *ideologically* charged, a visual insignia evoked by the documentary to codify a notion of movement that is free from what the film perceives as the physical and social constraints of city life. Although jumping is a commonplace activity within the sport, its specific selection as a central motif within the documentary merits scrutiny.

As a physical action, jumping constitutes an altogether different set of dynamics and expectations to, for example, walking. It brings to mind a greater degree of energy and agility, a form of moving that is less meandering. In light of the plethora of literature on the walking practices of *flânerie* within nineteenth-century culture, walking is traditionally perceived as a more leisurely, rambling pursuit. To walk through the city in the manner of a *flâneur* is to move at a slow and leisurely tempo, to find a space for reflection and quietly observe the city’s spectacles. By contrast, jumping exudes a greater sense of urgency and risk and presupposes the overcoming of an obstacle to a greater degree than the act of walking: that is, jumping suggests an act of manoeuvring across, over, or onto an imagined impediment. Consequently, the act of jumping sets up a type of “escape” principle from a presumed obstacle, a means of evading any potential constraints that limit the body’s capacity to move. Jumping, then, comprises not only a fundamental physical action within the film but, as metaphor, becomes a rhetorical strategy through which the film invests bodily movement with ideals of social transgression and escape. This is depicted most clearly in the scene that follows the sequence of the protagonists’ rooftop leap. The elegant still-image of the trio suspended in mid-air subsides to an explosive shot of Foucan leaping from the balcony of an apartment building. In a fast and furious dash through the suburban landscape, the sequence shows Foucan jumping over a parked motorcycle, scampering up walls, propelling himself from wall to wall, and springing lithely from balconies. If the grand jump in the previous scene establishes an iconic prelude for the action in the film, the current sequence exhibits a series of consecutive leaps in which Foucan evades the

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10 This sequence featuring Foucan is extracted from a television commercial advertising Nike and is embedded in the documentary here as an exposition of what parkour looks like as a phenomenon.
objects – motorcycle, stairways, walls – that obstruct his path. Foucan’s jumps compose a visual vocabulary that connotes the apparent freedom of the urban subject to move, unconstrained by the regulation of roads and architectural structures that direct and regulate human movement within the city. Furthermore, the voiceover that accompanies Foucan’s solo dash consolidates this visual content. As the female narrator informs viewers,

Free-running is a new urban sport and was created by Sébastien Foucan, borne out of the childhood games of him and his friends. [...] It’s a discipline. It’s about clearing all obstacles in your path and, for its founders and those they inspire, it’s about being free in towns and cities designed to contain them.

Here, jumping is no longer simply a physical action; rather, it is ideologically loaded, a means of “clearing obstacles” and “being free” in a restrictive urban environment. The narrator’s monologue serves to encode Foucan’s actions as a liberating act, one that dissipates the restrictions that city architecture imposes on movement. In executing his agile and deft movements, Foucan is depicted as impervious to every object that threatens to obstruct his path. Thus, these repeated feats of jumping comprise a visual rallying point around which the film sets up its notion of a liberated body.

Another effect of these images of bodily flight is their simultaneous tendency to encode the street furniture and debris as “obstacles” that the traceur must evade in his path. If jumping constitutes a visual cue through which the film promotes a “free” urban existence, its potency derives from another adjacent motif that props up the jump in the first place: the “obstacle”. That the city is framed as a space littered with obstacles that need to be “overcome” reveals less about any intrinsic properties of city architecture than it does about the documentary’s interests in attaching movement to an idealised notion of urban liberation. The “obstacle” is not a pre-given, inherent quality of city architecture but rather a term that the film consciously imbues into its imagery so as to fortify its valorisation of the “emancipated” body that transcends the restrictions of city life.

The notion of the obstacle is deeply embedded within the rhetoric of the female narrator from the very beginning. To recall the earlier words of the narrator, she describes that the practice is about “clearing all obstacles in your path” and “being free in towns and
cities designed to contain [city inhabitants].” Buildings are here reduced to the primary function of “containing” and encumbering the body. This linguistic encoding is consolidated by the previously mentioned scene featuring Foucan, where each jump he performs transforms the walls, platforms, benches, and stairways into a tapestry of obstacles that hinder the body’s capacity to move with uninterrupted motion. This encoding of the urban landscape as an obstacle-laden space is further reinforced by the film’s tendency to execute shots of walls and buildings from the vantage point of low camera angles. That is, the camera is positioned in such a way as to be looking up at an angle of elevation when recording footages of buildings, walls, balconies, and stairways. Such camerawork creates the effect of rendering these structures more looming and overbearing than they would ordinarily appear, as the viewer is positioned to look up and contemplate these structures at steep angles. For example, in Figure 1.4, the low position of the camera forces the viewer to contemplate the steel railing at a steep incline, making the structure appear to be more of a towering impediment than it actually is when viewed from a frontal perspective. This disposition of the camera serves to create an imposing impression of the depicted structure. Subsequently, viewers are inclined to see domineering barriers and formidable enclosures when, normally, they would see what are ordinary and unavoidable facets of the urban streetscape. It is not
just the narrative action that works to assemble an iconography of obstacles. The camerawork and the point of view it prescribes are equally efficacious in transforming aspects of city architecture into a visual panoply of towering barriers that threaten to restrict human movement. Framing the architecture in this manner, through the use of steep camera angles, attributes a dramatic and dangerous quality to the movements performed. What may be an ordinary manoeuvre from a flat perspective becomes a risky and spectacular bodily feat from a viewing position looking skywards. Through the manipulation of camera angles, a simple act of jumping over a structure is amplified to an iconic vision of a freely moving body, one immune to the various supposed encumbrances posed by the city.

The film’s construction of a free movement that is impervious to the restricted spaces of the city is further instilled through a third visual cue: the elevated space of the rooftop where the protagonists’ iconic opening jump takes place. As viewers come to realise during the film, this opening rooftop jump comprises the first act in what will become a series of acrobatics across the summits of London’s rooftops, balconies, and skylines. For Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues, to “jump” London is precisely to traverse the city at the level of its most elevated vantage points. This decision to showcase the traceurs’ movements at such dizzying heights presents a peculiar choice by the protagonists and film stunt team precisely because parkour is most commonly and traditionally practised at ground or near-ground level. While the discipline incorporates a whole series of airborne manoeuvres, such moves are often executed at low heights rather than at lofty pinnacles. As Sophie Fuggle points out in her study of parkour,

the media’s focus on the more dramatic and extreme aspects of parkour has been misleading and is perhaps responsible for restricting its appeal to the wider population. Much of parkour occurs at ground level where obstacles include more surmountable objects such as park benches, rather than a series of jumps from rooftop to rooftop.11

Consequently, the decision to elevate Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues to the heights of London’s skyline presents a particular choreographic gesture that is intended to further accentuate the qualities of fluid and uninterrupted movement that the film champions. The consistent use of elevated locales to stage the protagonists’ performance speaks to an agenda that seeks to remove the body from the congestion of busy city streets,

relocating the body in a space that does not have to conform to the rigid regulation that occurs at street level. This idealisation of the rooftop space as one that offers a respite from the impediments of street-level architecture is underscored within the very opening lines of the documentary, where the female narrator invites viewers to

> [i]Imagine living in a city where you didn’t have to rely on overcrowded trains, gridlocked roads and packed pavements. Imagine having superhero abilities, able to leap from rooftop to rooftop as if nothing, not even buildings could stop you. This is parkour, the anarchic new sport of free-running.

Here, the rooftop is encoded as a site of emancipation from the urban congestion of human and vehicular traffic that typifies city life, from the ordered matrix of roads, footpaths and street signs that govern ground-level activity. It is further telling that this monologue is accompanied by a series of images whose scenographic space is crammed with the vehicles and pedestrians of a busy London street. The rooftop spaces enable a reprieve from this visual clutter, and are encoded as an ideal site within which the film can stage its narrative of fluent and uninterrupted movement. If the images of jumping compose an iconography of freely moving bodies that are idealised within the film, the spaces of London’s skyline comprise an apposite setting that embellishes this aesthetic of kinetic fluency.

**Pirouettes and Parabolas: Tracing the Shapely Contours of Movement**

As these various images of flight indicate, what the film privileges are the visual fluency and gracefulness of bodily movement, qualities that are also at the forefront of the discipline of dance. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned that the visual choreography of the traceurs shares an affiliation with that of dance performance. This section delves into insights from the field of dance theory to articulate how the film privileges the visual poetics of movement, in the visible spatial patterns and configurations that moving bodies create. *Jump London* accentuates the visual designs of movement, foregrounding eloquent geometric formations of motion and inscribing an iconography of urban movement that *looks* different to more ordinary forms of urban moving. In doing so, I consider the contributions of cinematic form in establishing this visual eloquence and the bodily geometries highlighted by the traceurs’ moves: the shapely designs of movement are activated by the collaboration between the performing body and cinematic medium.
The decision to use dance as a framework for making sense of movement in *Jump London* is prompted by one crucial moment in the film when the motion of the traceur is momentarily aligned with dance. During a segment in which the protagonists perform a routine on the roof of the City of London School, one scene momentarily captures a shot of a ballerina practising in a studio. The scene presents a frontal shot of this solitary female dancer performing a series of gyrating and twisting motions in this studio. While she goes through her repertoire of movements, viewers see Johann’s figure flash past outside the studio in the background: Johann dashes horizontally from the right side of the screen and, in playful mimicry of the ballerina, performs a semi-pirouette mid-air before disappearing beyond the left side of the screen (see Figure 1.5). The motions of the dancer and traceur are in concert with one another and, when placed side by side in the same frame, highlight a shared preoccupation with staging movement as a visually pleasing form. The twirling motions of the female dancer are complimented by the aerial gyrations of Johann’s manoeuvre, pronouncing a sense of symphony between the two sets of moves. There is also a contrast and tension drawn here between the ballerina and Johann that I want to attend to later in this section, as it has implications for the way in which the film specifically privileges male bodies in its production of movement. Firstly, however, I want to examine the way in which this
scene draws an affinity between dance and the exploits of the traceurs and the effects that this comparison has in staging the choreographic contours of movement.

What is particularly potent about this scene is the decision to stage a ballerina as a visual counterpoint to the traceur’s motion. The instilling of ballet, out of all the dance disciplines, into the narrative marks a conscious choice to transfer the aesthetic faculties of the discipline to the bodily action enacted by Foucan and his protégées. Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull insightfully argues that as a dance form, ballet shows a pronounced concern with the visual design of individual bodies within a space, more so than other dance disciplines. Commenting on ballet training, Bull notes,

the ballet student begins to dance by learning positions, shapes, and separate “steps”, all of which centrally concern space and its visual organisation. Ballet training, while attending to the feel and the flow of movement, emphasizes sight as the primary process of artistic conception, perception, and kinaesthetic awareness.\(^{12}\)

As Bull persuasively articulates, ballet, in its performance and reception, foregrounds the faculty of sight more than other dance forms precisely because its technique primarily revolves around the visible spatial patterns and shapes charted by a performer’s body. This is not to suggest that the technical aspects of ballet can be reduced to this singular visual faculty, but rather to point out that both dancer and spectator are acutely aware of the visual design and articulation of the body while moving. Consequently, the ballerina registers a suggestive presence here, directing attention to the visual organisation of the body as a central dimension of human movement.

In commenting on the way in which ballet visually choreographs the body, Susan Leigh Foster highlights the discipline’s attention to the traces that a body makes in space during movement, to the contours of its undulations in space.\(^{13}\) This act of tracing, the ballerina’s ability to leave residues of pleasing shapes and lines in space, is prominent in the above scene. What is most notable is the choreographic effort placed on the actions of her arms and hands. As her lower body twists, her arms and hands do not remain

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stationary but, extended to their limit, delineate circular patterns through the air. In a complimentary manoeuvre, her legs too stretch out to trace arcs within the space of the frame. Here, both arms and legs are engaged in a practice that impresses upon the viewer the lines and contours of her movement. This conception of movement as a means of tracing spatial patterns is one that is also intimate to the practice of parkour. In fact, it is embedded within the very nomenclature used to describe practitioners. Those who practise the discipline are called traceurs, a term that derives from the French verb tracer: “to trace”. Like the ballerina, then, the aesthetic enterprise of the traceur involves moving in a way that traces eloquent trajectories in space. Similar to ballet, bodily action in Jump London stages an aesthetic based on acute geometry whereby the body becomes a sculptor of lines and patterns. By positing the ballerina as a visual counterpoint to the traceur, the above scene foregrounds an attention to the formations of the body in space that characterises both modes of moving. The performance of the ballerina within this scene operates as a crucial interlude, a model that encapsulates and anticipates the endeavour of the traceurs in their own exhibition of formal geometric features.

The choreography of the protagonists’ routines demonstrates this emphasis on staging the body as a configuration of geometric shapes. Figures 1.6 and 1.7 below capture Foucan’s motion during various points of a manoeuvre. While the first image presents Foucan’s body in a diagonal configuration mid-leap, the latter forms a semi-square where Foucan’s body is aligned in a perpendicular position to the wall. By contrast, Figures 1.8 and 1.9 are less angular and assume a choreographic shape more in line with a parabola. In the former, Foucan’s body assumes a graceful curvature in full flight, his arms and legs tracing spherical shapes in the air as he completes his jump. In the latter image, Aoues’ figure spirals through the air, arms and legs twisting and contorting in various configurations. As these images indicate, the traceur’s movements create eloquent patterns in space and viewers are invited to derive visual pleasure from watching these shapes unfold. This invitation to scrutinise the visual imprints forged by their motion is further reified during an interview sequence in which Darcy Bussell, a performer in The Royal Ballet Company, reflects.

People have to watch people being physical. People just can’t believe that that’s possible, that a body can move like that or be that supple or be that strong at the same time. […] I love watching
somebody move across a stage, across a space, and the shapes they make. I think that’s fascinating. (My emphasis)

The choice of interview subject here is particularly fitting, further consolidating the technical isomorphism between ballet and parkour that the earlier scene establishes. Furthermore, by commenting on the pleasure of watching the shapes a body makes during movement, Bussell’s words prescribe attentiveness to the geometries forged by the bodies of Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues. The disposition of the bodies on screen entices the viewer to note the shapely contours of the traceurs’ movements.

However, while bodily choreography is key in creating these spatial patterns of motion, the technicalities of cinema are equally at service. In arguing this point, I find Sherril
Dodds’ study of cinematic representations of dance performance particularly persuasive. Dodds suggests that the spectacle of dance on screen comprises an entirely different visual prospect to its live counterpart as the cinematic apparatus plays a critical role in the visual construction of dance. As Dodds observes,

The presentation of a ‘live body’ is unavoidably transformed when it becomes a ‘screen body’. The distance between the camera and its subject matter, the angle and focus, the use of colour and lighting, and the style of editing all contribute to this modification.14

Dodds posits an important reminder that the camera assumes a pivotal element of the choreography of screen performance. This idea of the screened aspect of dance is similarly necessary when thinking about the organisation of movement in Jump London. While the traceurs’ ability to bend and distort their bodies to form graceful shapes is vital, cinematic devices also contribute to these geometric inscriptions of motion. Reassessing the quartet of images above, it is of particular importance that the bodies in question are situated at the centre of the frame, foregrounding their configurations as the focal point of viewer attention. The space of the cinematic frame is organised so that the body holds a preeminent position in each of the scenes. Furthermore, the camera angles employed here are all in a directly frontal position to the traceurs, ensuring that the shapes they make are maintained and not lost on the viewer. The camera, then, is essential in holding and emphasising the curvatures and lines of flight, framing them for viewer contemplation in a way that would arguably be less pronounced if one were to observe the traceurs’ manoeuvres as live performance. It is the intercession of the screen and the manner in which it frames the choreography of bodily moves that brings out the geometries of movement.

This idea of movement as a cinematic construction, one that is subject to the modifications of film, is equally at work in the earlier scene featuring Johann and the ballerina. As flagged earlier, I return to this scene to examine the way in which the movements of the ballerina and Johann operate as a screen presence and, in doing so, suggest that the film particularly privileges the male body in movement. The body in Jump London is not neutral, not least in terms of gender, and the ballet scene best highlights the gendered undercurrents that surround the film’s ideological discourse of movement. While the respective moves of the ballerina and Johann create a nice visual

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symphony in their weaving of geometry, there is also a significant contrast established between the two in terms of their location. The young woman in the scene is placed within the studio, her actions screened by the windows of the building, which draws a contrast to Johann’s figure who is situated outside the studio: while the female body is encased inside the City of London school, the male body of the traceur is free to roam the expanse of the city outside. Furthermore, the female body is not only constrained by the physical dimensions of the building but also by the dimensions of the cinematic frame. Although the ballerina is moving during the scene, her figure stays relatively stationary within the frame as she revolves around on the one spot. In stark comparison, the traceur is permitted an agile movement across the space of the image, streaking from right to left in a more expansive occupation of the frame. With the ballerina consigned to the periphery of the frame, it is the actions of the male traceur that takes command of the screen here. As Johann’s motion demonstrates, the male body is not only given agency to roam across London’s sites but, equally importantly, across the cinematic spaces of the screen. Consequently, the spectacle of movement that the film presents is one that specifically privileges the male body. The ballerina featured above comprises the only instance in the film where the female body is afforded any form of exertive motion and, even here, her arena and range of movement is limited both within the physical space of the setting and the visual space of the frame. The above scene thus serves a crucial function in not only demonstrating how movement is a screen presence but, in doing so, revealing an ideological agenda that homogenises the stage of movement to its three male leads. Bodily movement in Jump London expressly designates the male body in movement.

**The Lens of the Documentary: Shaping Authentic Movement**

The staging of elaborate spatial patterns is not the only trait that the film promotes when depicting motion. Equally essential to the film’s encoding of movement is an emphasis on the notion of authenticity, that what viewers are watching is undeniably based on real moves and endeavours. The spectacular athletic feats of the traceurs are firmly established as records of an effortful and actual practice. The task here is not only to stage the moves as an eye-pleasing endeavour, but to also frame this pursuit as contingent on very real circumstances and situations. It is towards this construction of the authenticity of movement where the documentary lens of the film particularly comes to the fore. This section hones in on the documentary features of Jump London and scrutinises their effects in shaping this ideology of authentic movement. The way in
which the film frames itself in the documentary mode crucially sets up the traceurs’ movements across London as real events that are spontaneous, based on disciplined training, and devoid of any Hollywood-esque special effects and embellishments. The nuts and bolts of the documentary genre employed here – the behind-the-scenes footage, the commentaries and interviews by “specialist” figures, the voice-over – are aimed towards consolidating this claim of legitimacy, that what viewers behold is based in a “raw” and genuine real. In discussing these documentary mechanisms, this section also attends to how some of these conventions work to further reveal the gender encodings that circumscribe the film’s narration of movement, where the terrain of action is primarily reserved for male bodies whilst the female body is denied the same platform of bodily expression.

In their comprehensive study of the documentary form, Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro make the case that “Documentary films and videos do not simply represent sociohistorical experience; they have to convince us that what we see on screen did happen.” As Spence and Navarro point out, there is a tendency among documentary narratives to privilege the notion that what is being presented before the viewer are records of actual events. Even if the subject matter of the documentary is scrutinised with scepticism and questioned, the very presentation and treatment of these subjects is presented as based in actuality. As a narrative mode, then, the documentary strives towards a tone of authenticity, claiming to reveal a “real” reality behind staged appearances, to go behind the scenes where no camera ordinarily goes and expose the events “as they really are.” This behind-the-scenes aesthetic that is typical of the documentary form, and its aim to reveal the hard facts, is exemplified within extensive footages of the protagonists’ training regimen that precede their London performance. During these footages, viewers witness the protagonists undergoing vigorous training in the gym, where their moves are first honed and conditioned before they can be practised on the streets. In one memorable scene, Foucan puts himself through the paces in a gym designed for practising parkour. Foucan catapults over safety mats, slides under wooden beams, and clings onto walls in order to condition his strength and endurance. What makes this scene especially compelling for the purposes of this discussion is the way in which the film apparatus is used. The shaky quality of the images suggests the use of a handheld camera, augmenting the sense of impromptu realism that this mode of

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camerawork ordinarily evokes. Furthermore, the footage here appears grainier and is of a lesser quality and resolution than the action sequences that feature in the rest of the film, which suggests that the training sequence is perhaps an amateur home video that is interwoven into the film. The technical imperfections of this footage work to heighten the sense that viewers are taken “behind the scenes” to witness Foucan’s practice in its raw, everyday actuality. This scene not only highlights the traceur’s strict regime of training and discipline but also, through the poor resolution of the footage, communicates a sense of rough authenticity that we are watching Foucan’s endeavours at their formative and unpolished stages.

Furthermore, this documentation of the traceurs’ preparation steps beyond the space of the gym and takes to the streets of London where the trio plan their moves on location, within the very monuments that will stage their performance. As the narrator informs viewers, “before any buildings will give permission for death-defying antics, the freerunners have to visit each location to work out their potential moves.” Similarly, Foucan too confirms that the performance of parkour is “all about experience. With practice, the eye comes to analyse [that] here is a good location, here is not, here is a location which is rich in obstacles.” Both the narrator and Foucan flag the need to choreograph their moves on site, familiarising themselves with the dimensions, surfaces, and scale of the buildings before the definitive performance. Accordingly, viewers witness scenes of the traceurs visiting the various locations that are to be incorporated into their performance. Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues go through the physical motions of their intended sequences, discussing how best to execute the potential moves and trajectories. The fact that these scenes are shot on location at the sites where the trio will undertake their venture permits the viewer intimate access to the action that will take place. In being taken through the preliminary steps of the project’s development, viewers are privy to a “behind the scenes” impression of how the performance of Jump London came to take shape. What is privileged in this footage is not simply the flawless and definitive spectacle of bodily movement, but also the preliminary efforts and planning involved in crafting this spectacle. According to Tara Magdalinski, this recognition of the effort behind a sporting spectacle constitutes a key marker of the value and authenticity with which this spectacle is imbued. In her study, Magdalinski makes an astute point when she states, “For many, sporting performances are only of value if they represent an expression of a body’s natural capacity and are the visible result of hard work,
discipline and sacrifice.” Magdalinski’s point saliently speaks to the ideological stance of *Jump London*: it is not enough that an athlete performs well; more importantly, this performance needs to testify to the preparatory procedures of commitment and discipline that precede the definitive performance. By lending these footages of training and planning a significant place in the film, the documentary form serves to identify the traceurs’ feats in London as the elaborate outcome of very real and sustained planning. In doing so, the movements of the protagonists are afforded a status of professional legitimacy.

Another convention of the documentary form that heightens the authenticity of the traceurs’ task is the interview. There is a recurring trend in the film to stage interview sequences that feature various technical experts as interview subjects. By embedding these commentaries that offer the professional analysis of experts, the interview serves to prop up the documentary status of the film and, in doing so, identifies authenticity and realness as central qualities of movement. The choice to employ renowned authorities in the field as interview subjects deepens the aura of professional legitimacy that surrounds this undertaking. Jason White, a high profile stunt co-ordinator who has previously worked on numerous Hollywood action films, provides one such source of technical expertise. White is given the task of overseeing and assessing every manoeuvre that the traceurs plan to make so that the routines can be performed with as minimal risk as possible. During the planning of one particularly dangerous jump on board the HMS Belfast, where Foucan aims to leap down the length of two stories, White voices his concern during an interview at the site:

> My first thought was, this is really quite high. It was more the height [that concerned me], for somebody to jump and land on their feet. I thought that for a stuntman, it would be really something [to accomplish this feat]. I didn’t really know much about these boys so I had doubts.

By strategically inserting the interview amongst the training footage, the film injects the traceurs’ project with a professional gravity, one that stresses the physical risks entailed in the manoeuvres. Viewers not only glimpse scenes of the traceurs going through their paces but are also offered technical assessments by leading authorities in the field that

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17 The film mentions that Jason White is a veteran stunt co-ordinator of Hollywood films such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), and *The Living Daylights* (1987), spanning a career in the industry from the 1980s to the present day.
lend official sanction to their tasks. By instilling pockets of commentary during the sequences of action, the interview instils a timely interim that allows the viewer to verify the authenticity of this content. In addition to this, the fact that White’s role as “Stunt Co-ordinator” is boldly headlined during the interview is not a mere informative gesture but one that, more importantly, establishes his technical credentials and competence in overseeing these routines. The anxiety that White expresses, as someone who is an expert in the field, makes more palpable the very real danger that the traceurs face. Furthermore, White’s interview takes place on location, on board the HMS Belfast where he inspects all of the proposed moves. This location permits viewers a more intimate sense of access to the procedures of preparation and the impression of authentic reception that this access brings. The intercession of White’s interview in this footage, then, emphatically draws viewer attention to the seriousness of the traceurs’ performance and the dangerously real circumstances that surround this operation.

White is not the only technical expert that attests to the reality and gravity of the performance. In a further interview, Clem Leneghan, the Health and Safety Consultant of the team, similarly comments:

> When I first saw them doing one of their jumps for real, as opposed to on videotape, I had my heart in my throat. [...] Because no matter what safety measures you put in place and how much planning goes into it, you still think this is inherently dangerous. It’s still a dangerous thing to do. But you realise that the guys that are doing it are extremely competent. Physically they’re built for it, they’re very light, they’re very strong. They’ve had years of training and experience and that gave me a lot more confidence. [...] Because I realised they actually have much more competence than even a lot of gymnasts [and] stunt-people perhaps in this country that don’t specialise in this kind of work.

Leneghan’s comments consolidate the discourse of authentic practice that was highlighted in White’s interview. Viewers are reminded that, despite all the preparation invested into co-ordinating and planning the manoeuvres, what is taking place is still an unpredictable and contingent exercise that is culpable to injuries. More tellingly, by citing the years of training acquired by the traceurs, Leneghan stresses the professional competence that underlies this project. The protagonists are moulded as the equivalent of professional gymnasts and stuntmen rather than amateur street performers. Leneghan’s testimony of witnessing the traceurs “for real, as opposed to on videotape” particularly draws attention to the authenticity of the performance. By expressing
amazement at the “heart-in-throat” realness of their moves, Leneghan’s comment heightens awareness of the documentary status of the film, encouraging the notion that what viewers see is not a special-effects fabrication but a documentation of actual feats. Although viewers, unlike Leneghan, witness the events unfold on screen, there is an investment in the idea that Jump London, in its role as a documentary text, provides a cinematically “true” and genuine documentation of the events. While the viewer may not be privy to the same first-hand spectatorship that Leneghan enjoys, the film, with its commentaries by experts and “behind the scenes” footages, nevertheless identifies itself as suppling an authentic cinematic depiction of real events.

Another important documentary convention used by the film is the narrative voice-over, one that not only participates in this authentication process but also further exposes the way in which Jump London excludes female bodies from its documentation of movement. The film intriguingly employs a female voice to provide an ongoing commentary on the traceurs’ exploits. Earlier, I discussed how the scene featuring the ballerina is constructed in a way so as to limit the movements of the female body in both the physical site as well as the cinematic space of the screen. The female voice-over reinforces this prescription of gender roles by eradicating the female body altogether and registering a disembodied voice whose primary function is to explicate the actions and spectacle of the male body. In providing intermittent pockets of commentary that help to explain the traceurs’ feats and objectives, the female voice-over plays a crucial role in authenticating the sheen of reality that underlies the action set-pieces. The voice-over instils a type of meta-commentary on the event, an act of verbal testimony that appeals to a notion that this is taking place for real. However, this verbal act of validation by a female voice is also loaded with implications about gender positions. The choice to utilise a female commentator further perpetuates the ideological codes established in the ballerina sequence and removes the female away from the terrain of any meaningful movement. While the male bodies of the traceurs occupy the spaces of exertive movement, both physical and cinematic, the female is deprived of the same bodily presence and agency. Instead, she functions as a removed spectator and commentator whose primary role is to validate the feats of the male body. In ascribing the voice-over as a female, the film restricts its discourse of authentic movement to the roaming male body whilst denying the female this same arena of bodily expression.
Jumping London: Action Filmmaking and Cinematic Movement

The climactic spectacle of the film – Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues’ daylong performance upon the London landmarks – marks the centrepiece of the film’s examination of movement. In scrutinising this central segment, this section draws upon the formal mechanisms of action filmmaking as a crucial framework for thinking about how movement is cinematically assembled throughout this extensive finale. *Jump London* borrows from the conventions of action cinema when constructing its parkour scenes and this renders the genre a useful reference when discussing the composition of this climax. With its propensity to edit and cut shots in a way that optimises the pace with which bodies are made to move on screen, action cinema also poses a particularly fruitful form for underlining this chapter’s argument that movement comprises a synthesis between bodily exploit and the formal organisation of images that frame this content. In his insightful study of the genre, Mark Gallagher examines how the manner in which the filmmaker edits sequences helps to create fast-paced visual spectacles. 18

Taking this into consideration, this section scrutinises the agency of cinematic editing – the assembling, sequencing, and cutting of images – in making movement. In doing so, it proposes that the qualities of speedy and breathless motion in this finale is generated as much by fast-moving *images* as fast-moving *bodies*. It is not enough that the traceurs physically move at high speeds; the images employed to depict this content need to be edited and delivered in a manner that further increases the velocity of this action. During the sixteen-minute segment, it is the synthesis between high-octane bodily action and the brisk editing of shots and sequences that *together* construct an impression of fast movement. *Jump London’s* finale consequently strikes at the core of this chapter’s proposal that movement is a screen entity, as much a physical venture of the body as it is a cinematic venture of images that frame this body.

A crucial dimension of this action climax is its structural significance in relation to earlier sequences within the overall trajectory of the film. Spanning an extensive sixteen-minutes of action footage in which Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues perform upon each of the monuments, this segment is not isolated in its delivery of action scenes. Rather, it exists as a point of culmination in a *series of action set-pieces* that are delivered at regular interims throughout the film. That is, the narrative trail of the film is structured in a way so that viewers witness continuous spurts of action, rather than a

long period of inactivity and idleness followed by a burst of action in the finale. Although the sixteen-minute streak of breathless spectacle is undoubtedly the focal point of the film’s spectacle, the very reason why all the preliminary scenes exist, the fact that it is preceded by episodic parcels of action ensure that the spectacle of fast moving bodies is maintained throughout the whole course of the film. Commenting on the tendency of action cinema to deliver relentless action, Gallagher notes that such narratives

often function simply to advance the protagonists from one dangerous predicament to another. These narratives generate suspense not by prolonging viewers’ anticipation of upcoming action sequences, but by delivering a continuous flow of action as the narrative itself.¹⁹

Gallagher astutely points out the way in which the frequent delivery of action scenes dictates the structure of action cinema. In *Jump London*, this structure has the effect of augmenting the pace and urgency of the movements on screen. The accumulation of fast and furious action scenes throughout the course of the film lends an extra thrust and relentless energy to the traceurs’ feats because viewers see the protagonists engaging in continuous episodes of movement. The amount of time that is permitted to lapse between successive action sequences is negligible and this enables a persistent exhibition of high-adrenaline parkour moves that sustains the impression of breakneck motion. Footages of interviews and dialogue are consistently interspersed with these agile scenes, preventing the film from dwelling too long on any period of inaction whilst privileging the marvel of speedy movements. Consequently, the construction of movement as an inexorable and vibrant endeavour through London is informed by a narrative structure that relays an action-packed itinerary. The qualities of speed and energy that the traceurs exude is not only apparent in the nature of their actions but is also generated by the structural passage of the film and its frequent delivery of action sequences. Cinema intercedes here to help propel the performance of the protagonists’ bodies and the rapidity of their movement.

The role that cinema plays in producing a movement based on breathless, non-stop action is further evident in the manner in which the sixteen-minute climax is edited. The entire segment is edited in such a way that creates an impression of relentless and indefatigable movement, a method that adheres to the principles of what action film

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¹⁹ Ibid., p. 55.
choreographer Chris Reid calls the “Perpetual Motion Technique.” In his analysis of the ways in which fight scenes are choreographed and edited in Hong Kong action cinema of the late 1970s and 1980s, Reid explains that such a technique entails “the maintenance of continuous body motion throughout the entire fight sequence to give the impression of nonstop action.” Perpetual movement throughout the fight scene constitutes the norm in Hong Kong action films of the period, a method that, as Reid argues throughout his article, marks a stylistic contrast to Hollywood action cinema’s more static modes of staging fight sequences. Instead of the statuesque poses favoured by these Hollywood heroes, the method that Reid identifies in the Hong Kong paradigm choreographs fights so as to privilege bodies in continuous motion. Jump London makes use of this convention, editing scenes of the traceurs’ exploits into an inexorable display of movement. The segment is put together in a manner that depicts the protagonists as perpetually in motion, running and jumping through London for the whole sixteen minutes of screen time. Viewers are never permitted to see footages of the trio taking periods of rest during their daylong endeavour; neither are they privy to footages of the traceurs as they are transported from one site to another. A glimpse at the short special feature, “The Making of Jump London,” reveals a far less streamline progression. Watching this feature, one witnesses footages of the traceurs during filming as they idly stand around while the cameras and other technical equipment are set up. They similarly expose the repetitive retakes of routines as the director seeks the best possible version of the action, and capture instances in which the traceurs take momentary rests. What one witnesses in this special feature is a far more stop-start and repetitive process than the flawless final version that one witnesses in the documentary. While this featurette admittedly undercuts the claims of authentic and natural movement forwarded by the documentary that I discussed earlier, I treat it as a feature that is external to the documentary text and that subsequently leaves the set of ideologies espoused by the text intact. Moreover, I refer to the featurette here as it more emphatically demonstrates the crucial function that editing plays in selecting what scenes the viewer is allowed to witness whilst excluding others, in order to embed an ideology of indefatigable moving bodies. The fact that these interims of inactivity are elided from the final cut points to an editing process that deliberately strives to construct an impression of nonstop action. Without these stationary intervals, what viewers witness is a prompt succession of

21 Ibid., pp. 34-35.
22 Ibid., pp. 31-35.
scenes as the protagonists move neatly and seamlessly from site to site. In cutting immediately from one set-piece to another, the film makes it appear as though Foucan and his protégés have navigated the whole of London in a singular start-to-finish dash, creating an impression of bodies that stride ever forward with inexhaustible energy. This mode of editing shows, then, that the discourse of fast-paced movement carefully honed in *Jump London* stems as much from how the traceurs are moving as from the cinematic procedure of organising these footages.

Editing also works to establish a visual difference between the movements of the traceurs and the motion of the London pedestrians that they encounter, imbuing the former with a natural speed and craft while attributing freneticism and lifelessness to the latter. As Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues make their way across London, this footage occasionally cuts to scenes of commuters, passers-by, and vehicles that form the daily hubbub of London’s city life. Intriguingly, while the trio’s endeavours are projected at the usual twenty-four frames per second, the motion of these urban subjects is depicted using time-lapse photography (see Figure 1.10). The use of time-lapse photography creates a “fast-forward” effect: the events are not relayed to the viewer in their actual duration but are edited as a series of accelerated sequences so that they appear to be unfolding at a much faster pace than they would in actuality. As Figure 1.10 shows, time-lapse photography transforms the motions of the London populace into a chaotic dash, registering them as hurried and indistinct blurs. The time-lapse images perform a type of vandalism on the screen with their harsh horizontal lines and vertigo inducing blurs, with the effect that the movement of the pedestrians appear skewed, sprawling, and shapeless. It marks a distinct departure from the clear and shapely contours of the traceurs’ movements. This editing is clearly intended to foreground the apparent rush and hectic nature of pedestrian actions and underscore, by comparison, the graceful dynamism of the traceurs. The respective modes of editing employed here exemplify cinematic manoeuvres that privilege the more “natural” motions of parkour, using the tools of film to encode a way of moving that sets itself apart from the vertiginous rush of city living.

The characteristics of rapid and energetic movement that the segment exhibits is further activated through the brisk and quick editing that is used when composing the action sequences. The use of multiple cameras to film the action, and the tendency to employ
rapid cuts between different shots of the action, speaks to a screen presence that is as lively and robust as the bodies that it seeks to depict. This dynamic editing optimises the bodily agility that is evident in the protagonists’ enterprise. Consequently, the articulation of movement is here exposed as a dyadic process between bodily action and cinematic action, where the traceurs’ physical movement is formally reorganised via the lens of film in a way that amplifies the qualities of that movement. In *Jump London*, the construction of high action sequences rarely uses prolonged and lingering shots as this mode of editing offers a one-dimensional and stationary framework for the action. Rather, the convention is to utilise a rapid-fire of brief shots that each depict the moves from different camera vantage points. The oscillation between different shots subjects the viewer to, what Gallagher calls, “snapshot-like moments of activity”\(^{23}\) that enhance the pace and urgency of the scene. This style of filming and editing resembles what Reid refers to as the “Many Shot, one Strike, Quick Edit” method (MSSQUE for short), which uses differently positioned cameras to simultaneously film the one action scene. As Reid explains, the “MSSQUE sections are shot by first filming one or a series of several techniques from three or four different cameras simultaneously. These shots are [subsequently] edited together to give the illusion of speed.”\(^{24}\) *Jump London* makes use


\(^{24}\) Reid, “Fighting Without Fighting: Film Action Fight Choreography”, p. 33.
of this technique when filming and editing the traceurs’ exploits. One example particularly comes to mind when Foucan executes a manoeuvre across the rooftop of Carlton House Terrace in The Mall. On this occasion, several cameras are used to film Foucan’s jumps from multiple positions. The action of Foucan leaping across the rooftop is not depicted via a single shot but through multiple shots that are each captured by different cameras. Consequently, the final footage that viewers see entails frequent shifts in camera angles and cuts between different vantage points (see Figures 1.11 - 1.14). As these frames demonstrate, viewers first see Foucan’s activity from an elevated position, looking down diagonally at his figure. This aerial shot then subsides to a ground-level vantage point, enabling viewers to look up at his rooftop prowess. After a brief interim, this changes to a side-profile view of his jump, which then

![Figure 1.11](Jump London)

![Figure 1.12](Jump London)

![Figure 1.13](Jump London)

![Figure 1.14](Jump London)
ultimately cuts to a frontal angle as Foucan completes his manoeuvre. This rapid peddling back and forth between various frames helps to raise the tempo of the scene, as it delivers a volley of fleeting shots that make Foucan’s moves appear faster than if they were to be captured as a single shot. It allows viewers to witness the action from a multitude of positions and angles, ensuring that they do not stay restricted to the one static viewing perspective. Delivered as a constellation of quickly delivered shots, movement, as a screen presence, is forwarded as a visually energetic and heterogeneous spectacle. This sequence consequently demonstrates that movement in Jump London is not only a physical exploit, contingent on the exertions of the body, but at the same time, a screen phenomenon whose attributes of speed and energy are activated by the cinematic play and composition of images.

In addition to the traits of agility and speed, the scale of movement comprises an equally important dimension, one that is emphasised through the way in which the spatial dimensions of the buildings are noticeably foregrounded during these scenes. The scale of the traceurs’ movements is established throughout by combining the action sequences with extended location shots of the London monuments that underscore the magnitude of their feats. As the trio perform their routines at each landmark, the camera often displays a tendency to oscillate between focusing on close-ups of the moves and panning out to wider shots that frame the sites in their looming totality. A prominent example can be observed when Foucan executes a routine on top of Royal Albert Hall. Before viewers even see Foucan’s solo performance on the building’s rooftop, an extended shot of the towering monument is made to linger for several seconds, underscoring the height and immensity of what Foucan is about to embark upon. When Foucan proceeds to go through his paces, running along the circular outer edges of the Hall’s pinnacle, the scene cuts between the focused close-ups that document Foucan’s run and the more panoramic shot of the monument from ground-level, lending a sense of proportion to his exploits. In continually shifting between proximate shots of the movements and the wider tracking shots of the locations, viewers are reminded of the enormous proportions of the buildings that provide the setting for these actions. This visual rally between movement and setting privileges a form of moving that is immense and grandiose, something that is further expressed by the spatial organisation of the cinematic frame.
The film arranges the scenographic space of the frames so that this formidable scale of movement is given full expression, allowing the bodies to be seen in proportion to the buildings that they manoeuvre. As Figures 1.15 to 1.18 demonstrate, the relative spatial proportions of body and building are constructed in a way that makes viewers aware of the real spatial dimensions of the objects displayed. Distributing the cinematic space of the frame in this manner accentuates the full scale of movement so that the feats look colossal and daring. Gallagher’s analysis of Jackie Chan’s Hong Kong action films is particularly insightful in coming to terms with how Jump London apportions its visual space to create an impression of large-scale movement. Gallagher astutely observes that, unlike traditional Hollywood action cinema, Jackie Chan’s films attempt to portray the body in its natural scale, without the embellishments of camera position that make the action heroes appear larger than they actually are:
Hollywood action films put individual characters at the center of large-scale action, magnifying the protagonist to mythic proportions. In comparison, Chan’s films [...] depict large events in relation to human dimensions.25

Unlike his Hollywood counterparts whose larger-than-life torsos occupy the full frame of the camera, their rippling bodies magnified to towering proportions, Chan’s figure is often dwarfed by the surrounding scenographic space. The distribution of space in this manner enables the surrounding infrastructures to tower over Chan’s figure. This subsequently has the effect of rendering Chan’s exploits in leaping from buildings and other stuntwork all the more impressive because their real proportions are underlined. A similar aesthetic is at work in Jump London. Like the petite stature of Chan’s figure, the bodies of the traceurs are not permitted to dominate the scenographic space of the screen. There are seldom any embellishments of camera positioning that make their bodies appear larger than they actually are in relation to the buildings. Instead, the space of the frame is set up in a way that allows the buildings to dominate the minute bodies. The spatial dimensions of the image are here proportioned so that it is the magnitude and extent of the traceurs’ impressive actions, rather than the scale of their anatomies, that are emphasised.

The organisation of the cinematic frame in this manner, staging an expansive scenographic space beside a diminutive body, not only creates the scale of their movement; it also enhances the extent of the body’s movements within and across the space of the frame itself. That is, the body is not merely moving across the actual London locations that are depicted on screen. It simultaneously moves horizontally and vertically across the very space of the screen, affirming that movement in Jump London occurs not only in relation to the physical ambience of the settings but also in relation to the ambience of the cinematic frame. The sequence of images above, in which Vigroux executes a series of jumps across the numerous balconies of the Royal National Theatre, offers a perfect exposure of how both physical action and cinematic apparatus come together to generate forms of moving that exude vigour and vitality. Tracing the course of Figures 1.19 to 1.22, what is preeminent during this sequence is not only Vigroux’s extensive movement across the façade of the National Theatre, but also his agility around the screen. Vigroux’s body starts its routine at the upper right corner of the screen. Jumping diagonally across the face of the screen, his figure manoeuvres towards

25 Gallagher, Action Figures, p. 177.
the bottom left corner in the latter two images. As the frames demonstrate, Vigroux moves both laterally across and vertically down the length of the frame. Similar to his earlier actions in the ballerina scene, Vigroux is not only industrious across the material site of the National Theatre but is also equally active around the cinematic site of the

frame. In depicting the protagonists’ bodies so that they appear as slight figures, this orchestration of space enhances the degree of agility that is possible within the screen. Vigroux’s acrobatics upon the National Theatre, one of the final routines of the sixteen-minute segment, provides a lasting indicator that the articulation of movement in Jump London entails a collaborative synthesis between body and screen, as much a product of what Foucan and his protégées do across London as what they are made to do within the spaces of cinema.
Conclusion: Reinstating the Cinematic Apparatus

After the sixteen-minute showpiece, the concluding part of the film focuses on the future of parkour as an urban sport and the practical issues surrounding its development into an officially regulated and sanctioned athletic discipline. The chapter does not address this content because its preoccupation with the wider concerns and discourses surrounding parkour lies outside my specific interests in its filmic representation. As my analysis has hopefully demonstrated, the focus of my critique is not parkour per se as a physical, social, and ideological phenomenon; rather, it is the cinematic production of the traceurs’ movements in the individual context of the documentary to which my critique lends scrutiny.

However, there is one scene in this concluding part of the film to which I want to draw attention for the purposes of reflecting upon and reaffirming the main conceits that underpin this chapter. The scene in question features a brief interview of Foucan as he looks back on his London venture. What is most striking about this scene is the visual sequence that accompanies Foucan’s commentary: while he talks, the film tracks back to the footage discussed earlier in Figure 1.3 that depicts a jump performed by the trio between two adjacent rooftops. However, there is one key difference between the footage alluded to in Figure 1.3 and the one that is summoned in this scene. While Figure 1.3 simply captures the traceurs’ bodies as they make the leap, the footage that is used during Foucan’s interview not only showcases the traceurs but also includes within its frame a camera apparatus that is used during the filming of the sequence (see Figure 1.23). As the Figure below shows, the camera is visible on the right side of the screen as it films the trio completing their jump. What Figure 1.23 is showing is not only a performance of movement but, more acutely, a performance of movement during the process of its construction via the apparatus of film.

One effect of this intrusion of the camera within the frame is the way in which it reinstates the documentary status of the film and the discourse of authenticity that comes with this status. That is, it foregrounds the process of filming movement that is behind the making of the documentary. By exposing the procedures of a camera whilst it is in the act of recording the traceurs’ jump, this footage privileges the idea that the camera is documenting actual feats as they occur. There is a meta-commentary on the procedure of filming and documentation, one that sets up the camera to have a direct and intimate access to the events that unfold in the film and relay them “as they are.”
The presence of the camera points to a type of “behind the scenes” aesthetic, an exposure of what takes place beyond the frame of the screen, that sets up the jump as taking place in very real circumstances. Furthermore, the interview in which this footage is embedded further cements the apparent authenticity of what viewers are seeing. Commenting on their undertaking, Foucan reflects,

After the jump, [...] you feel a surge. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s the happiness of creating something, achieving something, and doing it well. There is a sense of accomplishment. You succeeded in everything you planned. Once you get up, well it feels great. I’ve done it, and you can see it on my face.

In retrospectively assessing their exploits, Foucan’s role as interview subject offers another testament to a “behind the scenes” presence that vindicates the real-ness of their feats. Viewers receive not only visual evidence of the fidelity of the camera but, along with this, a verbal testimony that confirms what we have seen as a real and successful undertaking. This sequence consequently provides a fitting microcosm of Jump London’s agenda in encoding the traceurs’ movements as circumscribed by authentic documentation, one that is grounded in a contingent real.
The second effect of the camera’s presence in the scene above is that it acknowledges the cinematic apparatus itself as intrinsic to the process of creating movement. The frame not only pays attention to what the three bodies are doing but also, equally importantly, to what the camera is “doing” in assembling this action. The camera is just as much an agent in the frame as the three bodies, and it is this collaborative interplay between body and film apparatus that forms the crux of what this chapter wants to say about movement. The visually eloquent geometries of movement that Foucan, Vigroux, and Aoues exhibit incorporate both the skilfulness of bodily choreography and the coordination of filmic space and angles that accentuate these patterns and trajectories. Similarly, the specific brand of fast, energetic, and trail-blazing movements showcased throughout the film are as much a product of the rapidity of the traceurs’ manoeuvres as the quick-fire editing and manipulation of sequences. In cementing this isomorphism between bodily expression and filmic articulation, *Jump London* offers a narration of movement that not only takes place across the iconic locales of London but also within the equally iconic screen spaces of cinema.
CHAPTER TWO

Still Moving: Space, Time, and Bodies in Superhero Comics

To be a superhero, you’ve got to be able to move. Superhero narratives are sagas of propulsion, thrust, and movement through the city.

- Scott Bukatman

Introduction

One of the more compelling pages from Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale’s graphic novel, *Batman: Haunted Knight* (1996), displays images of Batman as he dramatically falls down the length of a skyscraper. The superhero’s fall is illustrated across a quartet of images, each frame catching Batman in successive stages of flight (see Figure 2.1). What is particularly striking about these images is their ability to communicate the urgency and momentum of Batman’s plummeting descent through a skilful deployment of the medium’s form. The writer and artist make full use of the resources of the medium to present a scenario of dynamic action. In choosing to break down the drop to a series of four panels, instead of depicting it through a single image, the artist Tim Sale positions the reader to focus four separate times on the action. With each successive panel, the reader accrues a feel for the hurtling momentum of Batman’s downward spiral that would be less apparent if the same scenario were to be captured in a single panel. In another clever manipulation of form, Sale organises the panels so that they proceed along a vertical axis, rather than arranging them horizontally from left to right. This orients the action downwards and further emphasises the plunging verticality of the superhero’s fall. The organisation of the frames in this manner allows Batman to drop from panel to panel and enables the reader to follow the downward trajectory of the action, one that is further underlined by the vertical motion lines scattered across the panels. Furthermore, the contribution of writer Jeph Loeb in this scene is noticeable by its very absence: by withholding text across the page, Loeb allows the course of action to progress more promptly and with a greater degree of urgency. The reader does not have to pause to read any script and the full visual impact of the images is allowed to

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proceed. Taken as a whole, the page demonstrates an adroit use of the mechanics of comics to assemble an illustration of movement that crackles with momentum and force. Batman’s movement as he hurtles headlong to the ground is invigorated by the manner in which Sale and Loeb break down the narrative into multiple frames, their effective use of vertical panels to accentuate the line of movement, and their intuitive understanding of staging action that is unencumbered by text. The superhero here is brought into motion by the skilful utilisation of the comics form.

Figure 2.1
Batman: Haunted Knight

Taking this brief analysis as a blueprint of my enquiry, this chapter examines the graphic construction of bodily movement within recent superhero comics. Replete with colourful images of bodies in the midst of dramatic action and bodies that move in

3 Ibid., p. 41.
visually extravagant ways, superhero comics offer a reservoir of narratives that lend themselves to studying the production of movement as an aesthetic form. The frames discussed above provide one indicator that the artistic vision of superhero comics firmly gravitates around the display of kinetic bodies engrossed in agile and charged activity. To reaffirm Scott Bukatman’s assessment of these vibrant pages in the epigraph: superhero comics are sagas of propulsion, thrust, and movement. The task of this chapter, however, lies in pushing Bukatman’s observation and interrogating precisely how these qualities of propulsion and thrust are activated via the graphic techniques of the comics medium by the artist and writer. This chapter begins with the ensemble of frames above because they illustrate the crucial role that the visual grammar of comics plays in infusing the images with energetic movement. If the above scenario were depicted as a single image, devoid of the technical embellishments unique to comics that are present in the figure above, it would not be sufficient to communicate the same urgency and drama. Rather, it is when the narrative is manifested within the sequential structure of comics, when it is subjected to the technical aspects of composition and spatial layout intrinsic to comics, that the scenario becomes the hurtling, action-packed narrative evident in the figure above. This chapter argues that the specific physics of motion in superhero comics – the direction, degree of scale, and velocity with which motion takes place – is contingent on the mechanics of the comics medium. In doing so, it suggests that the particular mode of exuberant and powerful movements inherent in superhero comics is created by the organisation of space, the manipulation of time, and the stillness of the images within and across the comics frames. Superhero narratives may be teeming with kinetic bodies but it is their unique construction via the space, time, and stillness of the comics form through which such kinetic feats are activated.

In examining how superhero comics go about producing movement, this chapter also seeks to clarify precisely the nature of what that movement is. The activity of moving takes on a particular charge for superheroes and, as such, these comics register a specific vision of movement. As the images of Batman in the figure above attest, the superhero’s motion does not resemble an everyday, quotidian endeavour. Rather, Batman’s movements explode towards the reader with a visual excitement that identifies the act of moving as more than just an ordinary and utilitarian pursuit. They exemplify a tendency in superhero comics to exhibit movement as an exuberant, exaggerated, and powerful spectacle. Consequently, in the ensuing analysis, I want to take Bukatman’s terms of “propulsion” and “thrust” from the epigraph as crucial
descriptors of the particular inflection that movement acquires within superhero comics, one that is vivacious and kinetically charged. The terms appositely speak to the physical force and drive underlying the images of motion that will form the focus of my analysis. Subsequently, this chapter not only invests a keen interest in the mechanics of how movement takes shape in comics. Equally importantly, it specifies how these formal devices especially attend to and privilege a regime of movement that is characterised by visual thrills and action-packed dynamism.

This chapter specifically attends to Batman as a case study for identifying these traits of superhero movement. Batman poses an especially compelling example for this enquiry because he lends expression to the particular force and power that is typical of superhero motion. He provides a somewhat unusual selection given that he is a figure not obviously renowned for feats of movement in the way that, for example, Spiderman is as a precursor to, or superheroic version of, the parkour athletes. However, it is precisely for this reason that this chapter focuses on Batman as he permits this firm distinction from the notions of movement that underpin Chapter One. Batman is less renowned for his acrobatic skills and nimble scaling and climbing of buildings and this makes representations of Batman an altogether different spectacle of movement to the type offered by the traceurs. Lacking the nimble agility and deftness of motion, Batman instead brings to the fore the sheer physical menace and forcefulness of movement that is privileged in the genre of superhero comics.

Before specifying the grounds on which I will be approaching superhero comics, it is important to first pause and define the term “comics” and how it will be received in the context of the chapter. The term “comics” is understood as a medium in and of itself, a representational apparatus that possesses its own distinct aesthetic vision and set of critical scholarship that is separate from the traditions of other media. While this may be voicing the obvious, this point nevertheless requires foregrounding because the medium is prone to being scrutinised through the conventions of other media such as literary prose and film, as will be addressed in detail further on. In stressing that comics require their own analytical criteria and methodology, I follow the pioneering steps of numerous critics who helped to establish the terrain of comics scholarship. One such critic is Scott McCloud who pushes for a critical stance that views comics as a medium in its own right, as important as other visual media such as cinema, photography, and
In advocating this treatment of comics as a sophisticated and unique medium, McCloud recognises a need to approach comic books on their own terms and through their own lexicon, rather than through the bypass of other narrative forms. Like McCloud, Robert C. Harvey is another critic who acknowledges the need to carve an analytical inroad that specifically caters for the comics form, rather than borrowing the terms of other narrative modes to make sense of the medium. Harvey is particularly suspicious of approaches that adopt the tools of literary and film theory and inject them wholesale into comics analysis. While literary and film scholarship comprise useful resources, they are also limited when faced with the unique structure and composition of comics. As Harvey points out,

neither can wholly embrace the unique aspect of comics’ static blending of word and picture for narrative purposes. For that, we need a vocabulary and a critical perspective forged expressly in the image of the form.  

In sharing Harvey’s viewpoint, this chapter’s examination of texts carefully sets up the particular vocabulary of comics as vital tools in activating movement. In doing so, my analysis draws upon the insights forged by key critics within the field and their form-based methods of analysing comics. For instance, Harvey’s work in *The Art of the Comic Book* privileges form as a primary consideration when reading comics and adheres to the type of panel-by-panel close analysis that this chapter seeks to implement. Furthermore, McCloud’s discussion of how space and time operates in the comics medium forms a crucial point of reference for my analysis of how movement is produced within comics. While my study pushes McCloud’s insight further by arguing how the spatial and temporal coordinates of comics work to create the specific mechanics of movement, something that McCloud’s enquiry does not address, his careful explanation of these formal features nevertheless provides an essential foundation from which my argument can build. Collectively, these scholars form an important framework for developing a method of criticism that is expressly moulded according to the literacy of comics.

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6 See the various chapters by Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*.
7 See McCloud, *Understanding Comics*. 

The decision to focus on the specific genre of superhero comics, in lieu of other equally prominent genres, is partly due to its definitive role in the aesthetic development of the medium. In his extensive study of the history of comics, Robert C. Harvey insightfully mentions that, as the most popular and widely read comics genre, superhero comics were tantamount in pushing the limits of the medium to new levels of technical expertise. As Harvey explains,

Superheroes and comic books were made for each other. In symbiotic reciprocity, they contributed to each other’s success. Superheroes in comics sparked a demand for comics – and that demand created the need for original superhero material, written and drawn expressly for the medium."8

The genre of superhero narratives helped to push the formal possibilities of the medium, especially where the graphic rendering of movement and dynamic action were concerned."9 The high-octane nature of superhero narratives, with its emphasis on fast-moving bodies and action-packed images, were definitive in enhancing the medium’s range of techniques for illustrating motion. This pivotal role that the genre played in expanding the medium’s technologies of producing motion comprises a major reason for its selection as a pertinent locus of study.

It is this interest in movement that necessitates the mode of form-intensive analysis employed in this chapter. The manner in which the artist and writer organise the space of the page, and how they execute the timing of the sequences, are key factors in the way the medium creates motion and subsequently need to be privileged within the analysis. The construction of movement in superhero comics is contingent on the coordinates of space and time by which the artist and writer arrange their narrative. This emphasis on the mechanics of the medium marks a departure from the trend in superhero comics scholarship to employ a more theme-based analysis. One such example is Mila Bongco’s Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books. In her examination, Bongco’s interest lies in the broader

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8 Harvey, The Art of the Comic Book, p. 35.
9 Jack Kirby, an American comic book artist responsible for creating iconic superhero series such as The Fantastic Four and The X-Men, was a crucial influence in pioneering a graphic style and method of drawing motion, exaggerating and foregrounding characters’ movements as a central element of the comics page. For a compelling discussion of Kirby’s landmark contributions in establishing an array of techniques for illustrating movement in comics, see Harvey, The Art of the Comic Book, pp. 33-40.
thematic and narrative trends that underpin the genre. As she makes clear at the beginning of her critique,

The aim of the analysis is to study the central core of repeated patterns and reinstated meanings gleaned from a wide variety of superhero texts and evaluate the comicbook form within a cultural perspective. Some central points are: what are the defining traits of a superhero; what kinds of superheroes are popular during the important stages in the genre’s development; what social realities are most reflected in this type of narrative; who are its producers and readers and how do they participate in shaping the genre; what social trends affect the genre most; in which direction does the genre seem to be headed?10

As this summary reveals, Bongco is primarily concerned with establishing the thematic traits and parameters of the superhero narrative and tracing the overall development of the genre. What follows is an extensive account of the prominent narrative arcs, characters, and themes across a multitude of superhero comics.11 Bongco’s approach serves an important function in gleaning the popular tropes and patterns of superhero comics. Her objective in mapping out the features of the genre entails the type of content-focused, sweeping survey that characterises her analysis. However, my interest in the technical production of movement in comics necessitates a more form-intensive analysis that examines the frame-to-frame intricacies of the text. In talking about the graphic production of movement, there is a need to minutely scrutinise how the superhero’s feats are set up within, and across, a given ensemble of frames. Consequently, this chapter takes an especial interest in form not only to suggest an alternative approach to the type of theme-based scholarship that Bongco presents, but also because the specific topic at hand, movement, expressly requires this form-based enquiry.

Another consideration that perhaps requires a more forceful foregrounding in the current literature on superhero comics is how the medium of the comic book registers a highly individual and unique forum in which to narrate superheroes and their exploits, one that is distinct from their manifestation in other media. The superhero genre is not exclusive to the medium of comics and is increasingly ever-present in the artistic annals of film, television series, animation, and video games. In his appraisal of the genre, Scott Bukatman alludes to this increasing pervasiveness of superhero narratives in

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11 Ibid., pp. 85-119.
popular culture. He writes, “The superhero, a popular icon since the 1930s, has become newly, and increasingly, ubiquitous.” With this increasing ubiquity of superhero narratives, and their penetration into a whole array of aesthetic forms, any criticism that deals with the superhero genre needs to specify how this genre is circumscribed and informed by the mechanisms of the medium in which it functions. In sifting primarily through plot devices, characterisation, and themes, Bongco’s methodology entertains a different agenda to my own, one less concerned with how the formal framework of a comics page provides a specific artillery of techniques for narrating superheroes. What my study offers, in addition, is an interrogation of how form circumscribes and shapes a specific communication of narrative content, a consideration in comics criticism that is arguably now more necessary given the recent proliferation of superhero films in Hollywood cinema. While comics and films may at times adopt the visual techniques of the other, they nevertheless remain two distinct media and any critical engagements with superhero narratives require a degree of attentiveness to what each form offers to the genre.

This preference to not scrutinise the specificities of narrative form is perhaps typified by Danny Fingeroth’s proposition that the construction of superheroes fundamentally remains the same regardless of the medium in which they surface. When posing the question as to whether a superhero remains the same entity outside the confines of a comic book, Fingeroth argues,

Batman in the comics and Batman in the movies and Batman in a cartoon series are the same basic character, the same representation of an aspect of the human condition. Batman is a dark

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14 There are numerous instances in which comics and film mutually appropriate the respective techniques and jargon of the other. For example, the term “camera angle” is often used in comics criticism to refer to the way in which artists illustrate action from different perspectives, borrowing a convention that stems from cinema. Similarly, the extensive use of storyboarding in the planning and production of film sequences strikes an affinity with the type of panel-to-panel narration that one finds in comics. In Ang Lee’s *Marvel*-inspired film, *Hulk* (2003), the director’s use of split screens evokes the structural layout of comic books where pages are divided into multiple panels. In a more explicit case of symbiosis between the two media, Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller’s *Sin City* (2005) uses the original graphic novels as storyboards for the film. Numerous frames in the film are exact reproductions of specific panels from the graphic novels as Rodriguez and Miller replicate the look and feel of comics on the cinematic screen. For a compelling discussion of the interrelations and cross-overs between comics and film, see M. Keith Booker, “May Contain Graphic Material”: *Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Film* (Westport: Praeger, 2007).
avenger of the night, traumatized by violent childhood loss into an obsessed hunter of criminals, avenging his parents’ murder again and again with his defeat of every criminal he pursues. […] That’s Batman, no matter where he appears. The emphasis on whatever aspect – camp, as in the 1960s TV series; noir-inflected drama, as in the 1990s animated series; future techno-drama, as in the Batman Beyond series – is more a function of the times and the creative team behind a particular incarnation. But the basic mythos is always the same.15

Fingeroth’s point that Batman’s character and mythology remain the same irrespective of the medium is a valid one. Nevertheless, the impact that narrative form has on the construction and representation of Batman also poses a necessary consideration, especially when examining media as diverse as comics, film, and animation. Narratological content does not exist as a neutral entity that is divorced from the influence of formal elements. While Batman narratives might be able to rely on a shared mythos and point of genesis, seeing a superhero’s actions illustrated upon a comics page is not the same as witnessing it unfold across the frames of cinematic images or an animated sequence. Because Fingeroth’s objective focuses primarily on the content of Batman narratives, such as characterisation, story arcs, and thematic premises, his critique touches less upon the contributions of form in the service of storytelling. Adopting a method that largely employs a thematic approach is certainly useful for mapping out the general terrain, outlook, and ideologies of a given text. However, the analysis of movement requires another approach, one that attends to the nuts and bolts of the comics medium.

Geoff Klock’s analysis of superheroes in How to Read Superhero Comics and Why presents an interesting case amongst the body of superhero literature. While Klock’s work largely relies upon literary theory to make sense of key superhero texts, Klock is aware of the limitations that underlie his method and carefully reminds the reader of this approach at the beginning of his critique:

If this book does draw attention to the “writer” more than the “artist,” then, this is because of a bias that connects the narrative with the writer and because more often than not this book analyses the more abstract “story,” only occasionally providing detailed commentary on specific images.16

Klock displays here a refreshing admission that his methodology draws more upon a literary framework than comics theory, that it situates its analysis in the more generalised domain of narrative content rather than a close scrutiny of the visual grammar of the text. His analysis of individual texts is detailed and draws upon specific incidents to back up these claims. However, while Klock makes good use of literary analysis to make sense of comics, the unwillingness to account for the visual and spatial dimensions of what is a visual medium compromises one’s capacity to engage wholly with the text. Furthermore, the privileging of the role of the “writer” over the “artist” displays a bias that, although is admittedly recognised by Klock, nevertheless associates the idea of narrative as primarily stemming from the written text. In reaction to this stance, my analysis locates narrative agency in the images as much as the text. The role the artist contributes is as potent a resonance as that of the writer. Consequently, in the course of my analysis, I refer to both the “artist” and the “writer” so as to acknowledge their specific contributions to the narrative. While the task of the writer is informed by the artist, and the endeavour of the artist is similarly shaped by the background narrative that the writer provides, each auteur nevertheless possesses his own discrete craft that the other cannot perform. Thus, while the roles of artist and writer are collaborative and function in relation to each other, my analysis distinguishes between their respective contributions to the making of movement in order to specify how both the visual and textual elements of the comics form crucially determine the mechanics of movement.

In addressing the unique qualities that comics offer in the visual articulation of movement, the latter section of the chapter hones in on the stillness of the medium as a key quality in the reader’s perception of, and response to, the movement on page. The stillness of comics composes movement in a way that enables the reader to retain the definite postures and bodily states of motion. To open up a theory of the comics still image and its capacity to evoke its own unique visual regime of movement, one that is based on holding the action still and concretising its postures, this chapter calls upon the critical framework of early twentieth century modernist art that had a similar preoccupation with illustrating motion in still form. Futurist artwork, in particular, grappled with the matter of how motion might best be evoked within the template of a still image. Enraptured with the rush of urban activity and newfound experiences of speed that emerged as a result of developments in technology, the Futurists deliberated

For an example, see his analysis of Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* in Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, pp. 25-52.
over ways in which this dynamic motion might be imprinted upon the surface of the canvass. Drawing upon this artistic framework marks a useful exercise because the stillness of the comics is an aspect of the medium that does not always receive the extensive and sustained scrutiny that it merits within the critical literature on the medium. Superhero scholarship, in particular, has been prone to a lack of attention to the stillness of comics, taking it for granted as a natural and transparent condition of the medium and failing to consider what the gesture of bringing the frame to a standstill does to the narration of superheroes. My particular fascination lies with the possibility that the still image holds and brings out the moving body’s form, the corporeal configurations that the body assumes in the act of motion. As the earlier figure demonstrates, the stillness of the page allows us to see Batman’s movement in a way that fastens onto and emphasises the concrete states his body occupies while moving. This retention of bodily pose and figure comprises, I argue, the essence of what superhero movement is as a representational phenomenon. Operating within a genre that privileges a pin-up of flexed muscles and exaggerated physiques in every panel, what defines superhero movement is precisely this insistence on ripped and muscular anatomies. The Futurist artwork provides a crucial perspective into this relation between form and motion that the still image embraces, a perspective that contributes to comics theory. Using this artistic discourse as a point of debate, this chapter culminates with the argument that in holding movement still, superhero comics articulate a conception of movement based on its array of spectacular and overstated bodily forms.


This first segment of the chapter focuses on a selection of frames from Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale’s DC title Batman: Haunted Knight (1996). The work marks one of the earliest collaborations between the Eisner Award winning duo. The decision to narrow the plane of analysis to an assortment of frames is to permit the type of close scrutiny that these frames demand. Each page crafted by Loeb and Sale features an array of different dimensions that any attempt to gloss over these elements would miss the

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18 A notable exception is Harvey’s analysis in his chapter “Only in the Comics: Why Cartooning is Not the Same as Filmmaking”, The Art of the Comic Book, pp. 173-91. In this chapter, Harvey’s discussion takes into consideration how the static nature of comics frames offers a mode of narration that differs from and exceeds the capabilities of film, enabling the viewer the time to linger on and to hold on to visual information that is routinely lost amidst the stream of cinematic images.

19 The Eisner Award marks one of the most prestigious awards in the comics industry and recognises creative achievement in American comics books. Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale won the award in 1998 in the “Best Limited Series” category for their collaboration on Batman: The Long Halloween.
technical and stylistic meticulousness of their work. This close-reading approach enables attention to the details of narrative form that is less pronounced in the aforementioned scholarship. In this respect, my analysis is particularly informed by Harvey’s work, which orients its discussion of the genre around a series of individual pages, dissecting the action panel by panel rather than presenting a generalised survey of the text.

Haunted Knight narrates Batman’s various exploits as he pursues and combats an assortment of villains, setting up its story around the illustration of spectacular action. It is these moments of high action to which my analysis is primarily drawn because they concretise the particular brand of physically vigorous and visually striking bodily motion that superhero comics promote. Loeb and Sale’s orchestration of the techniques that are at the disposal of the medium are vital in creating these energetic movements.

One such technical aspect that the writer and artist manipulate is the visual space of the medium. The space of the comics page is more than just a neutral arena and setting for the narrative. Rather, the way in which it is set out intimately informs the content of the stories that are told and, consequently, merits careful consideration. The stillness of the medium means that the reader’s ability to see how space is organised and distributed in comics, and the capacity to engage with the entire compositional elements of a given frame, is heightened. The stillness of comics allows the reader to take in at leisure the entire spatial dimensions of the image, enabling a systematic breakdown of, and perceptiveness to, the ways in which the visual space of each frame is arranged. This section argues that, in comics, bringing movement into play is a process that is contingent on the manner in which the artist and writer coordinate the visual space of their pages.

**The Design of the Panel**

The proportions and design of the panels provide one key indicator of how writer and artist deploy space in the service of the story. In comics, panels provide a rudimentary container for the images, framing each discrete parcel of the narrative and delineating their parameters. However, the function of panels encompasses more than just a simple framing device. In his analysis, McCloud points out that our attention as readers is often fixated on the content *within* a panel that we tend to overlook the presence and agency of the panel *itself*. As McCloud protests, “For just as the body’s largest organ – our skin
— is seldom thought of as an organ, so too is the panel itself overlooked as comics’ most important icon.”²⁰ By counteracting the transparency with which panels are sometimes treated, this section pays attention to the spatial dimensions of panels — their shape and size — and the inflections they have on the narrative that is told. A panel not only lends contour to the images but also creates something of the action. In treating panels as something that is an active part of the action, I argue that the design of panels establishes the very mechanics of movement that is illustrated within them. This can be observed in Loeb and Sale’s work in the series of panels below (see Figure 2.2). The four panels depict Batman during an aerial manoeuvre as he swings from a rope and suspends off a building in mid-air. The drama of Batman’s aerial stunt is evident in the illustrations themselves, in which we witness Batman propelling himself to safety and subsequently hanging off his rope in a dangerous predicament, before being attacked by crows that are conjured by his nemesis Scarecrow. However, the contents within the panels only partially relate the precariousness of the superhero’s situation. The drama of this scenario is further amplified by Sale’s use of long vertical panels to frame the sequence. The elongation of these frames, spanning the entire length of the page, serves to underscore Batman’s downward trajectory and the distance that he has fallen. This cohesion between panel design and the direction of the action within is noted by Harvey when he suggests that the specific cut of panels can underscore “the thrust of the action in them.”²¹ Here, the vertical cut of the frames give full emphasis to the downward impetus of Batman’s fall.

The particular spatial location of the text within the panels also supplements this visual effect. Revealing Batman’s disjointed thoughts, the content of the text is less interesting than their relative position to the images. Loeb situates the text right at the bottom of the first panel and at the very top in the latter three panels, positioning them well away from Batman’s figure so as not to impede on the crux of the action. This mindfulness allows Sale’s artwork to take prominence and occupy the central points of attention in the panels. Furthermore, by placing the text at the very top of the panels and the figure of Batman at the bottom, Loeb establishes a reading trajectory that progresses from top to bottom, down the length of the panel. As our eyes wander down the panel, we accrue a feel for the plunging weight of the superhero as he hangs onto the safety of a rope at the bottom of the panel. This dipping verticality is what creates the very thrust of the move.

²⁰ McCloud, Understanding Comics, p. 98.
²¹ Harvey, The Art of the Comic Book, p. 159.
Here, the excitement and drama of Batman’s aerial descent not only stems from the images within the panels, but also emerges from the spatial proportions of the panels. It is the vertical spread of the panels that engineers the downward momentum of Batman’s fall and the sense of risk and danger that this move incites. Loeb and Sale’s panels consequently do more than merely box the action; they simultaneously set up the physical dimensions and trajectory of the actions involved.

Indeed, Sale shows a preference for using tall vertical panels to illustrate the narrative, particularly when they enhance the physical dynamics of the movement that he is trying to show. There is another similar scenario that demonstrates this trend in Sale’s careful attention to space when organising his pages. In Figure 2.3, Sale lays out four panels in which Batman engages in combat with numerous criminals. Each successive panel displays Batman violently striking out at his opponents, but the real impact and menace of his actions are magnified by the shape of the panels. In panels one and two respectively, Batman kicks out at one adversary before punching another. Here, the

**Figure 2.3**
*Batman: Haunted Knight*\(^{23}\)

brute force of Batman’s actions is given a further dimension by the orientation of the panels. The vertical panels that Sale employs mimic the line of each action. For example, in panel two, Batman’s enormous fist pummels down hard on the face of the criminal, the long panel encapsulating the downward force of the superhero’s strike. Situated at the bottom of this long panel, the criminal’s face encounters the full weight of Batman’s fist as it bears down upon its target. Following this, the third panel depicts Batman as he smashes a pole on the head of another assailant. Similar to the preceding frames, the long and narrow cut of the panel gives full expression to the descending impetus of Batman’s move as he swings the pole onto his attacker. The fourth panel, however, marks a departure from the three earlier frames with its markedly horizontal composition. Like its predecessors, though, it follows the line of action within. The criminal is flung through a window and the horizontal sweep of the panel lends dimension to the lateral flight of the figure as he hurtles across the panel. In all four frames, the violence of Batman’s acts are already signalled by the pained expressions on the face of his assailants as well as the blood that comes out of their mouths. However, by shaping themselves according to the line of movement within, Sale’s panel formations reinforce the physics of these actions. If the above scenario were to be depicted in more classically shaped square panels, the overall visual effect would be substantially different. By tailoring the geometry of the panel to accentuate the action within, Sale unleashes the very drive and ferocity of Batman’s moves. The fierceness and sheer force of Batman’s movements not only stem from the content of the images, but is also informed by the manner in which the artist sculpts the space of the panels.

The Space of the Text
The presence of text within comics panels comprises another spatial element that has significant influence on how readers perceive bodily action. While serving an important informational function in clarifying and supporting the images, texts also inhabit a graphic presence in their own right that works in tandem with the graphics of the illustrations. In this section, I want to examine how text contributes to the story through more than just a verbal elucidation of narrative, that it also conducts the story through its particular spatial bearings within the panel. This emphasis on the spatiality of the text is given particular importance by Gene Kannenberg Jr. in his investigation of the subject. Kannenberg insists that what the text looks like and where it appears in a panel
significantly determine how readers make sense of the story.\textsuperscript{24} The text’s importance lies not only in its verbal disclosure of the narrative but also in its visual appearance. In his role as writer, how and where Loeb assembles his text within a panel has crucial bearing on the bodily action that takes place within that frame.

In the images studied so far, text has either been wholly discarded or used sparingly. In Figure 2.3 for example, there is a complete absence of dialogue that privileges the lively action of the images. Without the visual attention that the presence of text induces within comics panels, the entire space of each panel is made available to the images, affording the depicted actions a deeper foregrounding. On the other hand, while text does appear in the earlier Figure 2.2, it is kept to a minimum. What is most conspicuous about the appearance of the text boxes here is the fact that they are situated on the peripheries of each panel so as not to intrude on the pictorial action. Located well away from Batman’s figure, this arrangement allows the superhero’s motion to take centre stage. The relative position between image and text are executed in such a way that gives full reign to Batman’s aerial manoeuvre. As the range and degree of Batman’s movement is extensive here, the text is removed to the edges to underscore the superhero’s agility. Both Figures 2.2 and 2.3 depict high action scenarios where the need to foreground bodily movement renders necessary the complete elision of text in the former, or its relegation to the periphery of the frame in the latter. The fact that they are textually lightweight allows the action in the panels to take command of the available visual space. The paucity of the text and its location on the outskirts of the frame create the requisite space for the motion to take shape. Because Batman’s figure is not stifled by a myriad of text, Sale is able to bring out the particular scale and explosive dynamism that is typical of movement in superhero comics.

The strategy of the writer in varying the space of the text to dictate the magnitude and extent of the action is further evident in another sequence. While text is kept to a minimum during action-packed frames, textual interludes are more prominent in panels where the degree of action and movement is less pronounced. One such example can be observed in Figure 2.4. During this sequence, readers witness Batman in conversation with Captain Gordon (far left) and District Attorney Harvey Dent (middle) about how best to detain the mobster Carmine Falcone. Unlike the previous Figures, this page

plays out a more text-heavy and subdued scene. The characters are not engaged in mobile combat but occupy near-stationary poses. Lacking the physical dynamism of the previous images, the primary drama here takes place within the textual content of what

Figure 2.4

Batman: The Long Halloween

the characters are saying. What compels reader attention is the dialogue between Batman, Gordon, and Dent. Whereas the line of action was marked by the agile figure of the superhero before, it is the text balloons that mark the line of action in these panels. Engrossed in the predicament of the protagonists, the reader’s eyes eagerly

follow each speech balloon across the panels. One’s attention to the content of the dialogue is rendered more acute by the fact that the characters barely move throughout the sequence, which limits the extent of pictorial stimuli. The prominence of the text is further cemented by the spatial positions they occupy in the panels. While they were placed at the outskirts in Figure 2.2, they occupy a much more central location in the current set of frames. The text balloons are also scattered across the domain of each panel, occupying a greater expanse of the visual field than before.

When commenting on the effect of text balloons on the narrative, David Carrier notes that the insertion of too many balloons in a picture can crowd the space of a panel:

> the specifically visual qualities of balloons also are important. Some are graceful, others chunky; insert too many balloons in the picture, and that space feels crowded. We readily compare and contrast the balloon with the depicted objects surrounding it, observing how its shape does or does not fit into the composition. The balloon thus is not just a neutral container but another element in the visual field.²⁶

Carrier astutely recognises that the spatial disposition of text balloons affects the other pictorial elements in a panel. His observation has resonance for Loeb and Sale’s frames, where the proliferation of text boxes has the visual effect of entrapping the figures of the characters as they become ensconced within a myriad of speech balloons. However, the fact that the balloons permeate the panels poses little problem to the narrative: due to the minimal action that takes place here, the figures of the characters require less visual space to operate. There is not the same need to make room for the illustration of bodily motion that was evident in the previous images. Subsequently, adjusting the magnitude and location of the text determines the particular degree of the action that is possible within a frame. While the earlier pages minimised text to open up the visual field for the illustration of movement, the proliferation of text in Figure 2.4 is possible precisely because of the dearth of action. In her study of the relationship between words and images in comics, Marion D. Perret makes a compelling point when she suggests, “Graphic liveliness […] does not come solely from physicality, but is intrinsic to the dialectic between word and image.”²⁷ As Perret stresses, the quality of lively action does not spring from the pictorial illustrations alone, but from the manner in which

²⁷ Marion D. Perret, “‘And Suit the Action to the Word’: How a Comics Panel Can Speak Shakespeare”, *The Language of Comics*, p. 123.
words are organised in relation to these figures. As Loeb and Sale’s work demonstrates, text possesses a graphic presence that has as much inflection on the story as the graphics of the pictures. In balancing the amount and location of the text to calibrate varying degrees of action, Loeb and Sale’s images reveal how the space of the text has a direct impact on the extent of bodily movement that is communicated within a panel. The particular qualities of scale and range that underlie a movement are modified by the strategic collaboration between the spatial properties of the text and that of the pictorial figures.

**Page Layout: Organising the Space of the Page**

The analysis so far has taken into account how artist and writer orchestrate the space of, and within, the panel to manipulate the extent of bodily action that is depicted within a frame. The focus now turns to the mode in which Loeb and Sale manage the overall space of the page in the service of illustrating movement. While the contents of what goes into individual panels are definitive to the story, equally essential is the manner in which comics bring these panels together in organising the entire terrain of the page: the layout. Sale’s page layouts are often done in such a way that they give emphasis to the tone and magnitude of the action. During more dialogue-heavy and subdued sequences, such as Figure 2.4, the page consists of an ordered succession of frames. Batman’s conversation with Gordon and Dent is divided into a neat order of four panels, where the consistency of each panel encapsulates the calm progression of the conversation. However, Sale’s layout does not always display the same ordered serenity. His distribution of panels across the page becomes more chaotic during bouts of explosive action. Figure 2.5 provides an instance of this more chaotic layout. The four frames display a thrilling tussle between Batman and his arch-nemesis, Mad Hatter, as they leap from a moving train (panel 1) and fall through the glass rooftop of an industrial warehouse (panels 2 and 3), before crash-landing at the bottom (panel 4). Viewed collectively, the panels here exemplify a much more disordered and pell-mell layout than the ensembles seen previously. In his discussion of layout, Harvey points out that the panels of traditional comics “march across the pages in hypnotically regular cadence – every panel the same size, all arranged in uniform tiers.”

Sale overthrows this monotonous ordering of panels and instead offers a disarray of frames that appositely channels the volatility of the scene. Sale’s messy panel organisation is what lends the scenario its overwhelming sense of chaos and bedlam, something that would elude a

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more uniform layout. By stacking the panels precariously on top of each other, Sale not only adds to the visual excitement of the narrative but also manages to communicate the very turbulence that presides over the scene. Another advantage of this unconventional layout is that it enables Sale to depict the trajectory of the characters’ fall from the train to the floor of the warehouse. The bodies of Batman and Hatter are situated at the upper left corner of the page in the first panel. As the action ensues and

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the pair plummets through the building, the arrangement of the panels allows the characters to similarly fall down the length of the page. This is a visual effect that would not be possible if Sale employed the more uniform three-by-three panel template, which would advance the action horizontally, tier by tier. Utilising his more unorthodox version, the artist is able to perpetuate the same direction of movement across the course of multiple panels and emulate the actual line of action.

In a further gesture that optimises the agility of the characters’ movement, scattering the panels also increases the movement of the characters across the space of the page. Instead of being constrained to the tidy order of a three-by-three panel system, the figures of Batman and Hatter pop up all over the page. Their extensive positions around the visual frame suggest an agile occupation of space. Sale’s dishevelled scattering of the panels allows Batman and Hatter to be active around the space of the page, visually underscoring the liveliness of the body’s movements and permitting the superhero a spatial dexterity around the page that cannot be emulated within a more ordered layout. Sale’s layout here demonstrates a skilful understanding of the medium’s spatiality to give expansive expression to the physical dynamics of the action. Layout is executed in order to create movement in a way that maximises the activity of the characters around the visual terrain of the page and visually underscores the relentless energy of their motion.

Sale tends to vary his layout to bring out the particular energy of a movement. By energy, I refer to the degree of physical vigour and veracity that characterises a particular motion. At times, he varies the layout within the course of a single page in order to capture changes in the energy of the action. One instance in which this takes place is Figure 2.6. The page is notable for the way it employs two contrasting modes of layout. The top half of the page utilises a stacking effect similar to the previous Figure 2.5, while the bottom half of the page phrases the sequence into two tiers of four panels. Each mode of layout is in concert with the intensity of physical activity that takes place within them. In the upper half, the two panels display Batman and Hatter continuing their fight in the warehouse, with Hatter wounding the superhero with a dagger in the

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30 In my discussion of parkour action scenes in Chapter One, I examined how the space of the cinematic frame was composed in a manner that maximised the movements of the traceur around the cinematic site of the frame itself. This arrangement allowed the figure of the traceur to extensively move laterally and vertically across the expanse of the image, exhibiting a nimble agility around the visual field of the screen. A similar aesthetic is at work here.
first frame and Batman subsequently kicking out at his nemesis in the second. Similar to the previous example, Sale’s more dishevelled style of panelling here, piling one on top of the other, serves to encapsulate the frenetic tone of the battle. Indeed, this layout creates the very sense of frantic commotion with which Batman and Hatter strike out at each other, something that is amplified by the large proportions of the two panels that lend room to the brute physicality of each blow. By contrast, the lower half of the page

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demonstrates a more subdued flow of events. The scuffle reaches a momentary impasse and the pair exchange dialogue during this brief interval. As Batman questions Hatter about the whereabouts of the missing children that he has kidnapped, Sale illustrates the conversation via a clean succession of eight panels. The uniformity with which these panels proceed, all of them in equal portion, appositely plays out the measured progression of the conversation. Punctuated with dialogue and bereft of large movements, Sale frames this quieter action with a more restrained layout. In contrast to the top two images, the eight panels below are comparatively smaller. Devoid of the physical exertions that are apparent in the top half, the images below require less room to illustrate their story. Taken collectively, the respective layouts in the two halves of the page lend expression to two differing tones of action: the upper design harnesses turbulent activity while its lower counterpart phrases a more moderate turn of events. Consequently, it is Sale’s versatility in page layouts that produce various extremities of movement. This tendency to alternate between different layouts is symptomatic of Sale’s artwork as a whole. Sale regularly alters the structural organisation of the panels in a way that impacts the scale and extremity of bodily movement within the panels. Layout thus comprises a key facet of the artist’s technical artillery for articulating movement: by altering the spatial orientation of the panels across the page, the artist is able to establish different gradations and intensities of motion.

**Measuring Time and Movement**

While creating movement in comics hinges on the artist and writer’s manipulation of the spatial elements of a comics page, how they establish and depict time is equally intrinsic to this process of generating movement. In comics, the superhero’s movement not only takes place across the space of the page; it also takes place according to a timeframe. This section of the chapter looks into the various mechanisms through which comics artists communicate time and duration within their work. In doing so, it makes the case that the movement that readers perceive is contingent on, and shifts according to, the artist’s construction of time. Although the discussion shifts the focus to the *temporality* of comics, it nevertheless keeps a simultaneous glance at the spatial qualities of the medium because the passage of time in comics is dependent on the way in which an artist organises space. This reliance on the spatial units of comics to convey time is mentioned by McCloud: “In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive
time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same.” What McCloud is referring to here is that in comics, artists relay the passing of time through the spatial register of the panels, through its contents and shapes and the transitions that occur between successive frames. Observing the spatial design of the images tells us something about the temporality of the narrative. In examining these strategies that artists use to mark the passage of time, this section attends to the intimate correlation between time and movement within the comics medium. The way in which an artist delineates time in the narrative determines, in particular, the qualities of pace and tempo with which the illustrated movements proceed.

**Closure and Panel-to-Panel Transitions**

One mechanism through which an artist measures time is by strategically organising the transition between successive panels. Story-telling in comics depends as much on what takes place within the contents of the frames as what takes place in the interims between the frames, the vacant spaces that comics artists refer to as the gutter. As the still images of comics cannot account for every single instant of the narrative, the gutter stands in for the interim periods between any two given frames. Much of the literacy of comics depends on making sense of the gutter so that the reader fills in the blanks between the images and assembles a coherent narrative. This process by which a reader attributes narrative agency to the empty space between two panels is termed by comics artists as closure. While there is no visible content in the intermediary space of the gutter, closure nevertheless allows the reader to fill in the presumed actions so that there is continuity between the two panels. The crucial role that closure plays in comics literacy, then, is to extend action to the space of the gutter and assemble a cohesive narrative from a series of still panels.

By filling in the intervening moments between panels, the process of closure equips artists with a vital means of regulating the passage of time within the narrative. When

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33 This reliance on the spatial properties of the image to relay time is markedly different to the way in which time operates in cinema. In the cinematic medium, images move in time. Time is measured by the duration of a particular action, by how long it takes for a scene to unfold on screen. Comics, however, comprise a static image medium and there are no pre-set temporal parameters that dictate how long a particular scene lasts. Unlike its cinematic counterpart, images in comics do not move in time. Consequently, the artist relies upon the spatial elements of the images to indicate how long an action lasts, or how quickly an event unfolds.
34 For a comprehensive explanation of how closure operates within comics, see McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 63-9.
orchestrating closure, the artist determines how much time is permitted to lapse between one panel and another, which subsequently determines how quickly or slowly the narrative progresses. For example, the narrative takes longer to unfold if only a brief interim is allowed to pass between successive panels. On the other hand, if substantial chunks of time pass between consecutive frames, the narrative progresses at a much faster rate within the same amount of frames. The degree of closure between panels – the precise amount of time that passes during the panel-to-panel transition – subsequently dictates the speed with which a reader perceives the illustrated motion. By influencing the timing of how quickly events proceed, the manner in which the artist executes closure shapes the specific tempo with which movement proceeds. In his analysis of closure, McCloud comprehensively identifies six forms that each exemplifies a different type of panel-to-panel transition. McCloud’s catalogue provides a useful survey of the different modes of closures that are employed in comics narration. However, the effect that these transitions have on the way in which the reader views movement is something that is not considered in his analysis. This section steps beyond the territory of McCloud’s insight by pushing at how the different modes of transition calibrate the pace at which a particular motion occurs. Unlike McCloud, my interest lies not in the transitions in and of themselves, but how these transitions function as a vital cog in modulating the speed with which movement occurs.

One manner in which closure impacts upon the pace of movement can be observed in the moment-to-moment transition. The moment-to-moment transition painstakingly maps successive instances of the one action. The time that lapses between one panel and another is negligible and, therefore, the degree of closure that is required here is very little. The particular efficacy of this mode lies in its ability to slow down the reader’s perception of motion, a trend that is evident in Figure 2.2 discussed earlier. In this sequence, each of the four panels illustrates a successive stage in Batman’s aerial swoop and, mere seconds apart, are temporally proximate to each other. Because the amount of time that passes between each panel is minimal, there are very few details that the reader has to fill in. Moment-to-moment transitions advance the action slowly because they depict more numerous phases of the action. In employing this transition to relay Batman’s movement, Sale stretches the time by which viewers perceive his aerial acrobatics. By reducing the amount of closure in between, Sale has to utilise a greater amount of frames to relay this action and it consequently takes longer to unfold. The

small degree of closure means that more increments of the action require illustration. What the reader could ordinarily observe in two or three frames might take four or five frames when using the moment-to-moment transition. For example, Sale could effectively narrate the same scenario if he erased panels two and three and only deployed panels one and four to relay Batman’s flight (see Figure 2.7 below). The

![Figure 2.7](image)

reader would still be able to discern the same action: Batman swings on a rope and gets attacked by a flock of crows. However, without the two interim panels, such a manoeuvre would involve a different extent of closure and consequently advance the action quicker. While erasing the two panels in between would not alter the content of

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the movement (what Batman is doing), what it does alter is the timing with which readers receive the action. Readers would grasp the entirety of the action two frames sooner if Sale were to use two panels instead of four. Instead, Sale’s decision to use the moment-to-moment transition demands the extra two panels in between and they serve to prolong the duration with which viewers perceive the superhero’s movement. They subsequently stretch the timing of a given movement.\(^{37}\) One witnesses here how the impression of movement that readers perceive is contingent on the degree of closure between panels precisely because it determines how quickly movement is allowed to pass. The time elapsed during this transition directly engineers how fast or slow the motion of the superhero takes place.

While the superhero’s movement can be slowed down by the use of moment-to-moment transitions, they are used sparingly by Sale. The artist tends to deploy them at points in the narrative when he wants to prolong an event in order to instil suspense and heighten the poetic eloquence of the superhero’s motion. However, as a core enterprise of superhero comics firmly lies in showcasing feats of motion that are swift and robust, that show bodily acceleration, a more rapid mode of closure is often used: the action-to-action transition. This method of transition quickens the procession of movement because it advances a single subject from one discrete action to another. Unlike the moment-to-moment mode, it does not feature multiple takes of the one feat but rather jumps from one entire action to another in a more prompt delivery of the story. The amount of time that passes between panels here is greater than in the moment-to-moment format and, as such, the narrative advances more quickly within a given number of panels. Consequently, the action-to-action mode optimises the speed with which readers receive a given movement. This effect can be traced if we re-observe Figure 2.3. This page displays a faster delivery of movement because it employs a more efficient panel-to-panel transition than the previous one. The sequence progresses promptly from one distinct action to another: Batman kicks one thug in panel one before punching another in panel two, while panels three and four respectively exhibit the superhero as he smashes a pole on the head of a third adversary before throwing a fourth assailant out of a window. While the previous page required four panels to deliver a single action alone, readers witness four individual feats across the same

\(^{37}\) To use a filmic reference, this mode of transition harbours an analogous function to cinematic slow-motion in the way that it decelerates the course of action. Similar to slow-motion, the moment-by-moment advancement of the narrative in comics drags out the duration of the depicted movements and slows them down.
number of panels here. The degree of closure that is demanded here is greater than before as readers are expected to fill in a wider interval of narrative gaps. For example, we do not see Batman’s interim actions that presumably take place between kicking the first opponent and striking the second. Neither are we privy to Batman picking up a pole to use as a weapon between the second and third panels. Perhaps the greatest degree of closure takes place between the third and fourth (bottom) panel: the reader is asked to account here for the lengthy period during which Batman finishes off the third villain before confronting the fourth and hurling him out of the window. By asking the reader to fill in greater intervals of time between panels, Sale moves the narrative forward more briskly than in the previous example. There is no prolonged dwelling on the one action but rather a swift procession of blows as Batman deals ruthlessly with his opponents. The use of action-to-action panels increases the velocity with which readers perceive the movement of the superhero. It is this increase in the speed of action that lends Batman’s movements the qualities of fierce propulsion and thrust that are a hallmark of bodily motion in superhero comics. Here, the aesthetic of fast and powerful movement that is championed in the superhero genre emerges directly out of the manner in which the artist executes the timing of his sequence. By increasing the amount of elapsed time between panels, Sale accelerates the action, permitting a greater immediacy and forcefulness that create the superhero’s powerful capabilities of motion.

**The Duration of Dialogue**

While the speed with which a movement unfolds is modified by the nature of panel-to-panel transitions and the degree of closure that occurs during these intervals, it is not the only device through which the artist controls the passage of time. Another means by which comics orient the reader’s perception of time is through the insertion of dialogue within panels. Words occupy time and, as such, their presence in a panel is instrumental in signalling the duration of a particular sequence. In his study, McCloud indicates this role that words play in delineating time: “Just as pictures and the intervals between them create the illusion of time through closure, words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time – sound.”38 This chapter has already contemplated how the spatial presence of text within panels affects the scale and intensity of bodily action that can be illustrated. This section examines the impact that the text has on the temporal progression of the narrative, and its subsequent effect on how quickly or slowly motion is allowed to unfold.

38 Ibid., p. 95.
The role of the text in modulating the speed of the action is perhaps most discernible if we take another look at Figure 2.6. The page is striking for the way in which it attributes two contrasting tempos to the action, where the two sets of events proceed according to two extremes of pace. In the top half of the page, Mad Hatter’s wounding of Batman and the superhero’s retaliatory kick to Hatter’s face is depicted via a brief pair of panels. The closure that occurs between the two panels is an action-to-action transition, which promptly moves the action along. However, this transition only goes so far in establishing a swift velocity to Batman and Hatter’s fight. What further propels the action ahead is the complete lack of dialogue in these two panels. Without this verbiage, which would add more parcels of time to the scene, Sale streamlines the progression of events and attributes a quick-fire urgency to the scene. The rapidity of Batman’s moves is in direct correlation with the absence of text and the delaying tactics that it can instil within the flow of events.

The fast tempo that underlies these first two frames is in distinct contrast to what unfolds in the bottom half of the page. The bottom half discards the hectic action of the upper panels and catalogues the verbal exchange between Batman and Mad Hatter. Instead of the spare economy of the opening two frames, Sale stretches out their conversation across eight panels. This increases the number of panel-to-panel transitions that readers have to navigate and consequently lengthens our reception of the confrontation. This bottom half introduces a third mode of closure: the subject-to-subject transition. Unlike the moment-to-moment and action-to-action modes, which stay focused on the same subject, this third version jumps from one subject to another. Subject-to-subject transitions can advance the action to varying degrees of quickness. However, its particular use by Sale here to capture a conversation serves to decelerate the narrative. A primary reason for this decline in the narrative tempo is the profusion of dialogue that appears in this bottom sequence. Unlike the action-packed and wordless encounter earlier, the verbal exchange between the pair adds increments of time to the confrontation. Because readers have to navigate through a steady stream of dialogue, the action takes longer to unfold and the rate at which the reader processes the narrative decreases. By strategically inserting dialogue here, Sale stretches out the duration of the sequence and increases the suspense with which events unfold. Unbeknownst to Batman, Hatter surreptitiously draws out a gun and the narrative is slowed down here to lend maximum drama and tension to Hatter’s manoeuvre. Slow and calculating, Hatter’s motion in drawing out the gun is prolonged by the intercession of text. Collectively, the
reader uncovers two distinct paces of action, where the presence of text determines how fast or slow the action occurs. The wordless procession of the top half harbours an immediacy that delivers the superhero’s movements quickly and directly, while the bottom half drags out the sequence by loading it with dialogue and subduing the motion that takes place within.

**Holding Movement Still: The Anatomical Form of Superhero Motion**

The chapter has so far focused on the mechanics via which the artist and writer brings the body into motion upon the comic book page. In doing so, it has put forward the argument that the graphic production of movement in comics is enabled by the manner in which the artist-writer organises the spatial and temporal coordinates of an individual page or sequence. By varying the space and timing of the graphics, the comics artist and writer are able to orchestrate the magnitude and extent of the superhero’s movements on the page as well as the pace and tempo with which this action occurs. In this latter phase of the chapter, I want to step beyond this enquiry of how comics engineer movement and specify precisely what conception of movement that superhero comics, as a narrative genre, privilege. In doing so, I turn attention to how the stillness of the medium provides an essential cog in establishing the particular ideology of movement that is espoused within the graphic world of superheroes. This final third of the chapter is strongly compelled by the idea that still images can show us something of movement that we perhaps miss when observing motion via the stream of images that constitutes ordinary vision or the vision afforded by a cinematic apparatus. Its ability to freeze instances of movement, to poise the procession of motion for contemplation, enables one to see the definite form of movement as it takes shape, a form that would be lost in the flurry of regular human vision. This capacity to freeze the body amidst the various poses of its motion is especially vital for a genre such as superhero comics whose core enterprise lies in showcasing the muscular anatomy of the superhero body. Centred on an obsessive display of hulking flesh and overstated bulk, the still image is able to suspend and retain this flaunting of superbodies to maximum effect. What this section argues, then, is that the crucial function of the still image lies in its ability to concretise the corporeal *form* of the body’s motion. It suspends and outlines the material configurations created by successive states of a body’s activity. Furthermore, by foregrounding the body’s figure amidst motion, a body that is rippling with extreme musculature, I propose that the still form of comics brings about the particular mode of *superheroic movement* specific to the genre, one that is brimming with physical
intensity, anatomical excess, and visual hyperbole. That is, this insistence on the body is what makes and defines superhero motion and the stillness of comics is essential in inscribing this super-movement. The movement of superheroes is one that privileges and parades bodily form and anatomical definition, and the still form of comics constitutes a key foundation in producing this ideological construction intrinsic to the genre.

The aesthetic capacity of the still image to suspend and lend form to an aspect of material reality that is lost within ordinary vision acquires further resonance in Walter Benjamin’s critical writings on photography. While photography registers an altogether different form of still images to comics panels, Benjamin’s meditation on how the photograph captures a stratum of the material world that is imperceptible to normal vision has deep import for what comics panels do to one’s perception of movement. In his essay, “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin first postulates that the material world that opens itself to the apparatus of the camera is different to the one that is susceptible to raw human vision. The term that he uses to describe this experience is the “optical unconscious.” Benjamin articulates this concept most cogently in the following explanation:

For it is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than to the eye; “other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to one informed by the unconscious. While it is common that, for example, an individual is able to offer an account of the human gait (if only in general terms), that same individual has no knowledge at all of human posture during the fraction of a second when a person begins to take a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals this posture to him.  

In the experience of the “optical unconscious,” the camera fixes within the photograph an image of a reality – the material objects before the lens, and the spatial and temporal relationships among these objects – that is different to, and that exceeds the faculties of, the version glimpsed by regular vision. In short, the camera catches something of the material world that evades our conscious optical awareness. Benjamin’s point about what the photograph does to the activity of walking is particularly salient as it directly addresses what the still image has to offer to the enterprise of recomposing movement. As Benjamin points out, the normal act of viewing someone walking only allows us to

grasp a generalised idea of that motion. It is when this motion is fixed into photographic emulsions that the fleeting postures of the body, and the precise spatial orientation of its motion, are revealed to the observer. The mechanism of the camera thus exposes the postures and bearings of the body’s motion that goes amiss in the stream of ordinary vision.

It is here that one can make a case, albeit cautiously, for the persuasive pull that Benjamin’s idea has for thinking about what the still frames of comics offer to the configuration of movement. It would be a radical misunderstanding of Benjamin’s concept if it were to be suggested that comics enact the same principle of the “optical unconscious” that photographs do. For Benjamin, the primary instigator of the “optical unconscious” is the very apparatus of the camera and its ability to open up an impression of the material world that exceeds the faculty of human techniques that are unaided by a photo-based medium. As David Ferris stresses in his explanation of Benjamin’s idea, it is the photographic apparatus itself that possesses “a double quality which belongs to it quite independently of the artfulness of the photographer.”

Comics frames are drawn by hand, at least in their initial phase of production, and do not employ a photo-based intermediary to produce its images. As such, they cannot be subsumed under the experience of the “optical unconscious.” However, while the concept itself cannot be hastily applied to comics, its aesthetic effects can nevertheless be recruited as a useful reference point when discussing what still images “do” to movement. The crux of Benjamin’s idea is that the photograph opens up a new stratum of perception, revealing details of material reality that go unnoticed within ordinary vision, details that rely upon the very apparatus of the still image for their exposure. It is this notion, the aesthetic effect of the “optical unconscious” in opening up a new modality of perception, that holds currency for my point about the stillness of comics. Similar to Benjamin’s photograph, the still comics frame opens up a perception of movement that holds movement’s poses and gestures in a way that ordinary vision does not. My analysis, however, seeks to push the implications of Benjamin’s ideas further. The still comics frame not only exposes the fleeting forms of movement but, in doing so, concretises the intimate relation between bodily form and motion, a relation that defines superhero movement as a mode of action.

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One telling case in which the stillness of the comics frame is at its most potent can be glimpsed in the first image of the chapter, Figure 2.1. The four panels in this figure capture the successive stages of Batman’s plummeting fall down the length of a skyscraper. Each frame carefully illustrates a variety of the superhero’s splayed positions in mid-air during his descent. While these postures might not be visually remarkable in themselves, what is remarkable is how their frozen forms fundamentally inform the nature of one’s reception to the motion that unfolds. The stillness of comics allows its images to precipitate the solid postures of Batman’s motion. They pin down the definite corporeal forms that a superbody assumes when moving. Comics express movement in a manner that intimately links motion with its passing states of bodily configuration. In the way that Benjamin’s photograph exposes a level of perceptual knowledge that evades the awareness of conscious vision, the stillness of the comics frame similarly peels open a new perceptual mode that locates motion’s undetected formations. By holding movement still, our perception of motion shifts from viewing it as a continuous stream of images, where the body is always in flux, to registering motion as a concatenation of frozen instances in which the corporeal state of the body comes to the fore. In solidifying the body’s postures amidst movement, the stillness of the medium privileges the idea that superhero motion is, above all, a matter of bodily form.

If the stillness of comics harnesses a perception of motion that privileges the form that it assumes, it remains to clarify precisely what that form is and what it says about the particular modality of superhero movement. In order to address this question of the ideological conceptions that underpin movement in the world of superhero comics, this discussion gains benefit from delving more deeply into the early twentieth-century Futurist paintings alluded to in the Introduction as critical frameworks. Futurist artwork provides a useful resource here because it holds a similar interest in creating movement within a still form, although its focus gravitated around more ordinary instances of human motion rather than superhuman feats of movement. Drawn to an urban condition that was increasingly driven by developments in technology and industry, and the newfound experiences and sensations of speed that these developments induced, the

41 It may be useful to recruit cinema here as a point of comparison to realise precisely what it is the stillness of comics does to motion. As a medium in which action ordinarily takes place at twenty-four frames per second, film is composed of a sequence of constantly moving, constantly disappearing images in which it is hard to discern the fleeting interims of a given movement. The velocity of film means that these momentary instances would be lost amidst the passing carousel of images, rendering it difficult to hold down the definite bodily states of the passing movements.
Futurist painters sought to imprint this impression of dynamic motion on canvas. For the purposes of this present discussion, the particular suggestiveness that Futurist art holds for superhero comics lies in its analogous concern with the dialogue between motion and form. The images composed by Futurist painters reveal a preoccupation with what the activity of movement does to moving figures, and with the visual regime that movement assumes in certain forms. In this respect, briefly looking at how the Futurists envisage the form instigated by motion in a selection of paintings offers a useful exercise before subsequently defining how superhero comics treat the form of motion.

One example of this artwork is Umberto Boccioni’s *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* (1913) (see Figure 2.8). The painting depicts the kinetic surge of a soccer player as it sprints towards the ball. What is most captivating about this image is the way in which

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**Figure 2.8**

*Dynamism of a Soccer Player*[^A2]

the form of the player’s body is visibly affected by its fast movement. The vague outline and figure of the body is barely perceptible amidst the explosion of radiant colours. While one can vaguely decipher the bundles of arm, shoulder, chest, thigh, and calf muscles of the soccer player among the assortment of angular lines and smooth round shapes, they appear disjointed and lack a bodily cohesion. Instead of possessing distinctive contours, all the bodily elements blend together in a blaze of motion. This dispersal of the player’s body is further aided by the play of light within the painting. Large diagonal shafts of light pierce the image and intensify its radiance. In their Technical Manifesto, the Futurist painters point out that the element of light provides a useful means of “destroy[ing] the materiality of bodies.”43 Appropriating this technique, Boccioni concentrates beams of light and colour onto the player, illuminating his figure to the extent that the contours of his body are dematerialised amidst the luminescence of red and gold hues. Boccioni’s painting consequently presents a body visually deformed by the vigour of its movement, one that is not recognisable as a body as such. Movement decomposes the spatial unity and distinctiveness of the moving object, its outlines and proportions disintegrating amidst the surge of action. As Ester Coen astutely points out in her study of Futurist paintings, “forms [are] broken down not for analysis of their structure and components but in consequence of their motion in space.”44 Motion, in the eyes of the Futurists, breaks down the form of the body and transforms it into a deformed kaleidoscope of lines and colours.

This disfiguration of the body is perhaps more acutely evoked in another example of Boccioni’s paintings, *Dynamism of a Cyclist* (1913) (see Figure 2.9). Like the previous painting, *Dynamism of a Cyclist* captures a human body in the throes of fast motion, exhibiting the vigorous pedalling activity of the cyclist. However, the anatomical features of the cyclist are even less pronounced than those of the soccer player. While the profile of the head and upper torso can be roughly discerned, the lower half of the body is almost indistinguishable. Instead of outlining the cyclist’s legs, Boccioni depicts a series of circular lines that indicate the rotating motion of the cyclist’s legs and the bicycle wheels as both revolve at speed. The form of the lower body dissipates completely as a consequence of its furious activity while the upper body is itself barely legible. This artistic conceit is explained by Gino Severini, another Futurist painter and

colleague of Boccioni’s, who insists that in painting a body’s motion, “you have to see him in connection with all the movements he can make and in all the deformations resulting from the movements.” Bodily profile is subsumed within and disassembled as a result of, the visual disfiguration that motion induces. In the Futurist paradigm, bodily form loses its unity and crystal-clear proportions when it becomes subjected to motion. The visual scattering of bodily detail is emphasised in a Technical Manifesto written by the Futurist painters:

A profile is never motionless before our eyes, but constantly appears and disappears. On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves, change shape, succeeding one another, like rapid vibrations, in the space which they traverse. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular.

For the Futurists, one sees movement in terms of the multiplicity of the moving form. In their analogy, a running horse has twenty legs because the hurtling speed of motion

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multiplies and distorts the moving figure. This disregard for a conception of singular and unitary form is reaffirmed by Severini in the following declaration: “artistic expression needs to be liberated from atavistic slavery to form, and that form must be subjected to all the sensations and deformations due both to movement and to the almost simultaneous succession of different impressions on the retina.” In accordance with this viewpoint, Boccioni’s images demonstrate less of a concern with the moving body as a body, in all its corporeal dimensions, than with illustrating the distortions wreaked on the body. The core enterprise of Futurist painting, then, lies more in capturing the abstracted form of motion rather than the form of the body in motion, more with illustrating the kinetic essence and dynamism of motion than with showcasing the body as a legible and clearly defined entity.

While superhero comics also foreground this dialogue between movement and the visible form it takes, their treatment of this relationship reinstates the body, accentuating its proportions rather than dispersing and transforming them. The momentary foray into Boccioni’s paintings undertaken in this discussion helps expose the degree to which, by contrast, the figure of the body occupies a central place in the rendition of movement one finds in superhero comics. This attention that the genre invests within bodily anatomy can be observed in one of Sale’s images (see Figure 2.10). In this full page spread, Batman’s leaping motion is depicted in a manner that gives full expression to his array of muscles. The angle from which Sale depicts the superhero serves a crucial function here, allowing the artist to splay across the frame all the major features of Batman’s impressive physique. The arms bulge with menace, the curves and shadowing giving specific definition to the individual muscle components of biceps, triceps, and deltoids. Similarly, Batman’s chest prominently thrusts outwards while his abdominal muscles are outlined by small strokes. The lower half of the body is given equal emphasis, with his hamstrings and calves sculpted by the combination of lines and shading. Sale’s illustration of the superhero’s motion is one that positions the viewer to glimpse the extensive artillery of Batman’s rippling figure. Unlike Boccioni’s athletes, where the different features of the body are barely distinguishable due to their visual amalgamation, each compartment of Batman’s body is clearly outlined. Furthermore, Sale’s panel not only displays an extensive cataloguing of muscular details but also ensures that the body retains its spatial cohesion and unity. For the Futurists, the visual space of the body does not remain unitary and singular when moving. This is evident in

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48 Severini quoted by Coen, Umberto Boccioni, p. xl.
Boccioni’s figures as their forms diffract among the profusion of lines, light, and colours. By contrast, Batman’s figure is composed as a crystalline and discrete form that possesses precise contours. While Futurist art disassembles bodily matter and the specificities of anatomy, Batman’s figure remains intact and cohesive. In retaining the unity and clinical definition of the body, superhero comics articulate the moving body as a body, one whose anatomical bulk and definition is not only visible in the throes of rapid movement but further accentuated as a defining feature of this movement.

This insistence on the body that one finds in the production of movement in superhero comics is a conceit that is further conditioned by the sequential form of the medium.

While the Futurists transform and distort the body in motion within the *one frame*, Sale’s images reinstate the body with more force than ever before *across multiple frames*. The bodily stature of motion that the superhero genre privileges is thus not only evident in the clear resolution with which the moving figure is drawn but is also stressed by the fact that this figure is reinstated time and time again across a sequence of images. That is, by reiterating the body in its various poses of motion *frame after frame*, comics make a forceful and recurring connection between the corporeal figure and movement. This efficacy of the medium’s sequentiality is especially pronounced in the series of panels below (see Figure 2.11). The two-page spread illustrates a typically

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 2.11**

*Batman: Haunted Knight*

explosive scenario where Batman confronts his arch-nemesis, Penguin. In the left panel, which occupies the full page, the superhero crashes through a glass ceiling in his eagerness to get to Penguin while the villain terrorises a crowd of civilians. The second panel captures the brief interim during which Batman lands before promptly

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uppercutting the villain in the final frame. This three-panel ensemble demonstrates the condition that the medium’s sequential nature imposes in re-establishing the muscular physique of the superhero *individually* in each frame. The first frame visually strikes the reader with the full array of Batman’s bulging assets, using the full dimensions of the page to magnify these features to overblown proportions. The second frame contains a more understated rendition, though nevertheless outlining his ripped profile, while the last panel depicts a forearm imbued with such sinewy detail that it possesses more definition than the villain’s face. The accumulation of panels here permits a reaffirmation of the superhero’s build in a way that is not possible in the singular frame of the canvass. Due to the structural demands of working with multiple frames, the artist has to re-create the body in intricate detail with every new panel, constantly honing and sculpting the figure in motion rather than disassembling it. In a discussion of the way that superhero bodies are represented, Aaron Taylor insightfully suggests that “Reading the superbody is in many ways an attempt to understand a physiognomy that continually collapses and reforms itself from panel to panel, comic to comic, reader to reader.”

For Taylor, this panel-to-panel reinvention of the superhero body underscores the transformative and polymorphous character of superhero bodies, bodies whose ability to change their appearance, size, and shape is a hallmark of the genre. However, I want to point to how sequential form lends itself less to the transformation of the superhero body than to its *reinscription*. The act of continually rebuilding Batman’s body and the postures of his motion with every succeeding panel constitutes a method of graphic production that affirms and concretises the flexed anatomy of the superhero at every turn. The superhero’s movement becomes a perpetual reinstatement of muscular poses and rippling flesh.

Indeed, the emphasis placed on the over-elaborated and hyperbolised body is what *defines* the particular brand of “super-movement” fostered in superhero comics. These comics not only foreground an intimate affinity between bodily form and movement but, in doing so, decisively locate that bodily form as a central element of what superhero movement is as an ideological construct. This insistence is one that is conditioned by the very conceits of the superhero genre and its preoccupation with bodily spectacle. In his study, Bukatman notes the central place that muscled anatomies inhabit in superhero comics:

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Where comics art once emphasized a vigorous flow of line that would lead the eye from panel to panel, recent comics turn each page into a stiffly posed pinup of flexed muscles and dramatic shading. The narrative, not very important to begin with, is further devalued against this fetishism of the superhero’s overstated iconographic status; always spectacular in superhero comics, the body is now hyperbolized into pure, hypermasculine spectacle.\(^52\)

As Bukatman remarks, the genre is grounded in the showy and fetishistic parading of powerfully-built and overly-defined bodies. The figure-hugging, skin-tight outfits that is often championed by superheroes is a testament to this conceit as they serve to, in Bukatman’s words, “emphasize the (increasingly exaggerated) human musculature beneath.”\(^53\) Consequently, it is not possible for the superhero body to be disassembled according to the view of the Futurists. The body-centric foundations of the genre mean that the figure of the body must always be intact, its figure clearly legible and rippling, even in the throes of rapid motion.\(^54\) What distinguishes superhero movement as a mode, then, is the continuous pictorial reinstatement of a body that is obsessively detailed and exaggerated, its form always decipherable amidst the very act of moving. The particular blend of power, menace, and thrilling energy that infuses the motion of superheroes would not be possible without this foregrounding and embellishment of bodily form. The pivotal role that this form plays in encoding the specific look and feel of superhero motion can be observed in one final look at Sale’s frames. In Figure 2.12, Batman typically smashes his way through another ceiling to confront Scarecrow. Although the nature of the movement here is itself impressive and athletic, it is the careful sculpting of Batman’s overbearing physique that turns this action into the inflection of super-movement particular to the genre. Similar to previous frames, Batman’s spectrum of muscles – the rear deltoids and triceps, the laterals and trapezius – are splayed at the centre of the frame with an almost surgical precision. The precise and intense contouring of physique here and the exaggeration of figure is what unleashes the type of physically intense, forceful and explosive motion that is intrinsic to superheroes, turning a human athletic feat into the hyperbolic and larger-than-life spectacle that is superhero movement. The motion would not retain the same sense of

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\(^53\) Ibid., p. 215.

\(^54\) There are some exceptions in superhero comics where the bodily figure is obscured. For example, in the various incarnations of DC’s *Flash* comics, the titular superhero is often depicted as a series of colourful streaks and blurs in order to emphasise the rapidity with which he moves. However, although Flash’s figure is distorted to create this impression of speed, the panels always inevitably restore his muscular, larger-than-life frame. Consequently, while bodily form is disassembled momentarily, it always culminates in a return to an intact and clearly discernible physique.
superhuman feat if Batman’s figure was not etched with the pinup of lined muscles and
dramatic shading. In his analysis, Harvey observes that the tendency to overstate the
musculature of superheroes lends “dramatic emphasis to the actions being depicted.”

However, Harvey’s observation requires a slight amendment: the disclosure of muscles
in bold relief does not simply add to the intensity of the action; rather, the decoration of
bodily anatomy is the definitive feature and pre-requisite of what makes superhero
action and movement. As Sale’s images in the chapter affirm, the constant adornment of
brimming musculature and sinew is what makes possible the phenomenon of super-

55 Harvey, The Art of the Comic Book, p. 35.
56 Loeb and Sale, Batman: Haunted Knight, p. 51.
Conclusion

In his analysis of the comics medium, David Carrier makes an interesting, though questionable, observation when he states that “the form of comics places very real constraints on its content, on the kinds of stories that are most effectively told.” Where the production of movement is concerned, this chapter has preferred to view the form of comics not as something that constrains its narrative content, but one that finds new possibilities of expressing movement, privileging both an iconography and ideology of movement that reinstates the anatomical “body-ness” of motion in a manner that cannot be articulated in other media. In mapping out a method of comics criticism that pushes at this uniqueness of the medium, Douglas Wolk adamantly states:

Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices; its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciating comics is acknowledging that.

While Wolk’s observation comprises an astute account of the analytical approach employed in this chapter, my analysis also pushes beyond this claim to glean an essential relationship between the form of comics and movement. That is, the particular lexicon and mechanisms of the medium are not only essential towards developing a methodology of comics scholarship in general but also comprise key concepts in the theorisation of movement. Focusing on a selection of frames from superhero comics, the analysis examines the crucial role that these nuts and bolts of comics play in engineering the specific physical dynamics with which superhero movement takes place on the page. In particular, the spatial organisation of comics – the design of panels, the relative visual proportions between image and text, the distribution and layout of panels across a page – are instrumental in determining the particular scale and magnitude with which movement is orchestrated. In a similar vein, the temporal coordinates that emerge from the different degrees of closure and panel-to-panel transitions, as well as the density and duration of text, regulate the particular velocity and pace at which the movement occurs. Collectively, the organisation of spatial and temporal dimensions is what creates and makes movement possible in comics. Furthermore, the chapter’s

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specific focus on superhero comics has permitted attention to the unique mode of visually exciting, overly-stylised, and hyperbolic movement that is a pronounced feature of the genre. The palpable sense of hyperbole that infuses depictions of superhero motion stem primarily from the overstatement and exaggeration of the body within and across the comics frames. The stillness of the medium, with its ability to freeze postures of movement, means that the anatomical features of the body can be held with a concreteness and clarity even amidst rapid motion, while the medium’s sequential form enables this rippling body to be reified time and time again with every new frame. At its core, superhero movement is the frame-by-frame insistence on, and reinstatement of, the bulky, heaving, and defined body of the moving subject. This chapter offered by means of a preliminary meditation Bukatman’s words that superhero narratives are sagas of movement and propulsion, that “to be a superhero, you’ve got to be able to move.” To be a superhero in the medium of comics, this movement has to take place in a way that always forcefully and legibly inscribes the body from panel to panel.
CHAPTER THREE

Image, Sound, Touch: Sensuous Movement in Pipilotti Rist’s *Ever is Over All* (1997) and *Lobe of the Lung* (2009)

I use video because I’m not interested in creating images that are more pictorial and sharper than reality, something that film often does. Video has its own beauty, even if it suffers from problems like super poor resolution, which is its major disadvantage. But its problems bring with them other unique qualities, like the way the light shifts or the way colors build up. I try to bring these qualities together in what I want to show about movement.

- Pipilotti Rist

**Introduction**

This chapter continues the trajectory of the thesis by wandering through the video installation artwork of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist. As a video artist who consistently explores sensuous experiences of the body in action, Rist’s work offers a potent outlet in which to examine the aesthetic production of bodily movement. Over the past two decades, video installation has formed an emerging and innovative medium within the arena of contemporary art, a development in which Rist has played a prominent part. Working since the mid-1980s to the present day, Rist combines colourful imagery, sensuous environments, and rhythmic sounds to explore and foreground the sensual nature of bodily experience. The imagery of gleeful and vivacious movement particularly forms a sustained point of meditation in her video installations and it is this aspect of her work to which this chapter is drawn. What I want to do in this chapter is to bring movement to the fore as something that Rist examines at length as a central feature of her work. In an interview, an excerpt from which is quoted in the above epigraph, Rist acknowledges the representation of movement to be a key aesthetic consideration in her work. However, the artist herself falls short of elaborating precisely what it is that she wants to show about movement within the bands of colour, light, and texture that comprise her video installations. It is this silence that opens the space for my enquiry in this chapter, using Rist’s hesitation as a prompt to interrogate precisely what conceptions of movement are articulated and privileged through the form and narrative of video installation.

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Before identifying the individual works that draw the attention of this chapter, it is first necessary to define the medium of video installation and the way in which Rist’s use of this medium produces a sensuous movement that incorporates image, sound, and tactility. Video installation combines video technology with installation art, creating a visual environment that utilises the spatial and architectural components of the exhibiting space. It poses a distinct contrast to single-channel video art in which video footage is screened or projected as a single image. Video installation is more dynamic in its composition, often projecting multiple images simultaneously, as well as incorporating the spatial dimensions of the exhibition environment as part of the display apparatus. While Rist’s earlier work employs single-channel video, it is her work with video installation that forms the focus of this study. Furthermore, it is because of the individual characteristics of this medium that makes necessary the recruitment of other sensory registers, in addition to vision, when examining the construction of movement. In the medium of video installation, images do not function in a strictly visual sense: they work in tandem with soundtracks as well as the ambient spatial environment and features that the artist installs as part of the work. Consequently, Rist’s narration of movement does not only work at the level of visual imagination but, in addition to images, also calls upon the viewer’s auditory faculties as well as eliciting sensations of touch. It is this multi-sensory dimension of Rist’s work, and of video installation more generally, that demands a conceptual understanding of movement produced at the junction of image, sound, and tactility.

As a moving image medium, video installation does share some technical affinity with the medium of cinema. As such, my discussion of Rist’s video art takes into consideration formal elements that also have a basis in cinema, such as the agency of camerawork and editing and their role in shaping narrative meaning. However, while it dwells upon some of this shared lexicon, the intention of this chapter is to carve a critical inroad to video art on its own terms. While employing the technical conventions concomitant with film analysis is certainly useful in addressing some of the visual contents of Rist’s work, they are also inadequate when coming to terms with the artist’s tendency to employ multiple screens of projection, her use of the ambient architecture to facilitate her work, and her manipulation of her installation environments, features that are unique to the artform of video installation. These technical components activate their own set of viewing conditions and processes of assembling narrative. Pushing at these formal particularities, this chapter seeks to read Rist’s video installations as video
installations, delineating a means of thinking about movement that is tailored to the specific design and conventions of the medium.

Adopting a method of critique that is responsive to the formal specificities of video is an approach that Yvonne Spielmann calls for in her analysis of the medium. For Spielmann, the critique of video particularly necessitates an examination of the electronic operations of signal processing and transmission that constitute the way in which the technology works. In her article, “Video: From Technology to Medium”, Spielmann lays out a critical agenda whose aim is “to regard video historically […] and to emphasize technological requirements that are often neglected in debates from the art-historical perspective.” In Spielmann’s work, the discussion of video on medium-specific terms must incorporate “the articulation of an electronic language”, one that addresses the processes of signal transfer that underlie the technological mechanism of video. While Spielmann’s work provides a key foundation for how we might interrogate video as a medium in its own right, it is also important to keep in mind that her work is situated in a media studies and media history approach and methodology, one that this chapter does not share. Operating outside the disciplinary parameters of media studies, my study of Rist’s work is admittedly not equipped to deal with the technological and electronic intricacies that comprise the workings of video. However, the type of discourse that Spielmann pushes for is not the only terrain upon which one may discuss the medium of video installation, and its narrative meanings, according to a form-specific method. As this chapter reveals, the consideration of other characteristics – the use of multiple projections, the way in which video artwork makes use of ambient architectural spaces, and the manipulation of sound – comprise an analytical approach that is equally sensitive to other formal considerations where video artwork is concerned. While this chapter does not address the electronic processes inherent in video technology, it nevertheless highlights other aspects of the construction and spectatorship of video imagery that adhere to a form-specific enquiry.

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3 Ibid., p. 69.
4 See Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium*, trans. Anja Welle and Stan Jones (Cambridge; London: MIT Press, 2008) for a more extensive study of the specificities of video as a medium. In this work, Spielmann traces video’s genealogy and aesthetic evolution, and presents a case for video’s medial specificities as well as its relationship with other technologies such as television and computer-based media.
This chapter specifically focuses on Rist’s exhibition *Eyeball Massage*, installed at the Hayward Gallery in London from September 2011 to January 2012. Curated by Stephanie Rosenthal, the exhibition showcased a major retrospective of Rist’s work from the mid-1980s to the present day, as well as some new installations designed especially for the Hayward Gallery. *Eyeball Massage* incorporates Rist’s earlier single-channel videos, her later large-scale video installations, as well as sculptural works that are embedded within different locations of the gallery. Set against the spacious interiors of the Hayward, the ample space afforded by the gallery particularly compliments her large installations, lending them the requisite scale, proportion, and ambience. Although my analysis only examines two of the pieces, it is crucial to identify the overall context of the exhibition and gallery as both inform the manner in which the two works are presented. In her insightful discussion of video installation art, Margaret Morse observes this need to pay attention to the specific setting in which a work is exhibited:

> the process of installing suggests a temporary occupation of space, a bracketed existence enclosed by a matching process of breaking down the composition into its elements again and vacating the site. Thus, installation implies a kind of art that is ephemeral and never to be utterly severed from the subject, time, and place of its enunciation.

Morse posits an essential reminder here that installations are site-specific and any critical analysis should take into account the precise spatial conditions under which they are exhibited. To ignore these conditions and the bearings they have on the artwork is to neglect the very nature of the medium of installation art. Morse’s point is particularly salient here, given that Rist’s pieces tend to alter in their scale, composition, and ambient setting with each new exhibition. Subsequently, her works undergo permutations within different galleries, never adhering to a singular form. Furthermore,

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5 Overall, the exhibition features twenty-two individual pieces of work. While most of the pieces are displayed within the exhibition spaces of the gallery, some are installed in more unorthodox settings, such as the terrace outside of the gallery, the gallery café and bookshop, and the female bathroom.


7 For example, *Lobe of the Lung*, one of the video installations analysed in this chapter, changes substantially in its composition and set-up from one exhibition to another. During its exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bremen Museum in Germany, *Lobe of the Lung* is projected as four images while, in its exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, the same work is displayed in the form of three images. Furthermore, while the installation in Bremen is projected onto the walls of a room in the gallery, the Hayward version is projected onto three screens that are temporarily erected for the purposes of this work. The formal arrangement of the installation is thus contingent on the spatial design of each gallery.
as is the emerging trend in contemporary video art, Rist increasingly discards the traditional site of image projection – the TV monitor – and projects her images onto walls, floors, and other surfaces of the gallery. This means that whatever projective surface is used significantly affects the composition of the image and one’s reception to the work. This attention to the ways in which the specific dimensions of a gallery inform the content and meaning of the artwork is something that is privileged in this analysis. In her study of the medium, Liz Kotz insists that “[a]s video technology moves toward incorporation into the wall and architectural container, artistic investigation of the medium must take this on.” Like Morse, Kotz is adamant that critical analysis of video art should not only take into account the composition of the image but also the spatial context of the exhibiting forum. Taking this cue, this chapter situates its discussion of Rist’s video installations within the individual context of their Hayward exhibition and the specific set of viewing conditions that the exhibition prompts. The study of Rist’s videos here does not account for any forms of her work within previous or later exhibitions. It considers the ways in which the dimensions and properties of the exhibiting spaces shape and mediate the narration of movement on screen at the Hayward Gallery.

In foregrounding the spatial and architectural specificity of Rist’s works, this chapter designates the notion of the “spectator” as a specific subject position that is necessitated by the form of video installation, one that entails a slightly different definition to the position of “viewer” assumed in the previous two chapters. My analysis calls upon this position of “spectator” as a means of flagging that what I am interested in is both the visual imagining of movement and the specific conditions of spectatorship that inform this visual content, ones that are contingent on the specific spatial context of the exhibiting arena. This premise of spectatorship is one that is made necessary because of the video installation form itself, where artistic reception requires attentiveness to the visual construction of movement on screen as well as the architectural dimensions that inform this process of narration. In specifying this role of the “spectator”, this chapter suggests that the act of identifying and spectating movement in Rist’s work demands not simply a consideration of her visual poetics, but more acutely an examination of how these contents function within, and are communicated via, the particular ambient features that form an equally integral part of the installation.

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The two pieces that constellate the focal points of my analysis are *Ever is Over All* (1997) and *Lobe of the Lung* (2009). Both exemplify large-scale video installations and occupy prominent places within the exhibition. While *Ever is Over All* presents a four-minute narrative of a woman playfully walking along an urban street, *Lobe of the Lung* presents an ensemble of sequences that depict visually exquisite scenarios of bodily motion during its fifteen-minute duration. The two pieces are brought together in this chapter because they offer extensive reflection on the activity of moving, documenting the subtle gestures and postures of a body as it mischievously strolls along a street, as it splashes around in rain-drenched puddles, or crawls along a bed of flowers. Concentrated into brief timeframes and played on a repetitive loop, these short narratives invite viewers to contemplate and re-contemplate the process of fleeting, seemingly mundane movements. In a gesture that is resonant with the exhibition title, *Eyeball Massage*, the two videos attempt to coax viewers’ vision to revitalise our habitual ways of looking at human movement. *Ever is Over All* composes movements that are divorced from narrative impetus and eventfulness and instead focuses attention on an idea of motion as rhythm, one where small gestures of motion play out in repetitive and rhythmic progression. On the other hand, *Lobe of the Lung* privileges a haptic apprehension of movement that combines sight and tactility, where the viewer not only witnesses movement as a visual spectacle but also senses the textural sensations involved in the movements that unfold on screen. Together, the two installations bring to the fore movement as a sensuous phenomenon, the former establishing movement as a series of visual and auditory rhythms while the latter foregrounds the tactile impressions involved in particular acts of moving.

While the specific topic of bodies in movement has not been addressed as a subject of scrutiny in the existing scholarship on Rist’s work, there are some critiques that do offer insight on movement-related issues. For example, numerous scholars refer to the dynamism of Rist’s camerawork as it perpetually moves around when filming its subjects. In an essay written for the *Eyeball Massage* exhibition catalogue, Chrissie Iles talks about the relationship between the roaming movement of Rist’s camera and the bodies that the camera depicts. For Iles, the “democracy of Rist’s camera”\(^9\) as it moves across its subjects transforms these bodies into sensuous and luscious landscapes that the camera caresses. As Iles discusses, the sinuous activity of the camera strokes and

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excavates the surfaces of the body, its winding motion acting to highlight the sensuality of the body.\textsuperscript{10} The poetry of motion inherent in Rist’s camerawork is also noted in Elisabeth Bronfen’s essay on the artist’s work, where she discusses the fluidity and energetic zest with which Rist’s camera documents her subjects.\textsuperscript{11} Iles and Bronfen astutely locate movement as a key technical aspect of Rist’s camerawork and, in this regard, provide important perspectives for my own discussion of Rist’s camerawork. At the same time, this chapter also adds to Iles and Bronfen’s insights by considering more expansively how movement comprises the thematic subject of Rist’s work. As my analysis points out, movement is not only inherent in the activity of the camera but also informs what takes place in front of the camera. In the two installations that this chapter discusses, the protagonists of her narrative – the bodies tracked by the camera – are made to move in ways that brings movement itself to the very fore of artistic scrutiny. Rist’s works experiment with the resources of video and installation art to present this motion in compelling and unusual ways. My analysis thus aims to manoeuvre beyond discussing movement singularly in terms of the camerawork and look more expansively at how the operations of the camera, and other technical devices, frame and narrate the body in motion, how Rist’s videos lend expression to the act of moving.

The differences in agenda and method between my enquiry and the extant scholarship on Rist also stem, in large part, from a difference in the disciplinary backgrounds informing these respective studies. Much of the literature on Rist derives from the fields of art history and art criticism, and is published in the form of exhibition catalogues. This means that their enquiries offer a more generalised survey of Rist’s work and tend to focus on all the pieces of a given exhibition at large, rather than a close textual scrutiny of selective pieces. Operating outside the confines and demands of art criticism, this chapter takes certain liberties in implementing a reading practice that minutely and extensively concentrates on just the two installations. Furthermore, my specific interests within the production of movement specifically demands this method of close reading, one that pays detailed attention to the agency of narrative form, instead of the more expansive and sweeping surveys that are characteristic of essays written for exhibition catalogues. The discussion of how movement is produced necessitates the form-intensive approach that is employed here. In implementing this method, my

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 111-12.

analysis contributes to, and pushes along, the breadth and variety of scholarship that is currently available on Rist.

In contemplating what Rist’s video installations bring to the representation of movement, this chapter employs sensorial theory as a vital methodological tool for reading Rist’s work. If the thematic refrain of *Eyeball Massage* invites a gentle caressing of vision, titillating the visual sensitivity of viewers, this chapter also suggests that it equally stimulates other sensorial capacities. Rist’s installations are not only vibrant in their visual poetics but are also acoustically rich and, through the texture of her images and installation settings, engage a viewer’s sense of touch. It is Rist’s engagement of these sensory faculties, and their collaboration with the visual content of her work, that I want to suggest is vital for the production of movement. In Rist’s installations, making movement involves the interplay of visual, auditory, and tactile senses. *Ever is Over All* and *Lobe of the Lung* combine their vivid imagery with rhythmic soundtracks, as well as embedding certain fabrics into the installation environment, so that the spectator’s reception to movement is not only contingent on what one sees on the screen, but also on the artist’s ability to manipulate sound and a spectator’s sense of tactility.

This examination of the way in which Rist’s productions entice and engage different sensory faculties shares a common ground with the recently emerging field of sensorial theory. This field marks a theoretical turn across the arts and humanities to interrogate the role that the senses play in our social and material experiences. As part of this turn, there is a general call by theorists to expand our sensory vocabularies beyond the visual realm that often takes a sovereign position in Western epistemologies, and to pay equal attention to the “other” more neglected senses. In his edited volume, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, David Howes warns against “the sensorial poverty of contemporary theory”\(^{12}\), one that instigates overemphasis on the role of vision in our engagement with the world at the cost of our other sensory faculties. To remedy this imbalance of the senses in our cultural perception and critique, Howes calls for a “sensual revolution”\(^{13}\) across the humanities and social sciences to initiate a mode of critical discourse that is receptive not only to what one sees, but also to what one hears.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 4.
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touches, and smells. Where artistic representation and spectatorship are concerned, there is a call to consider the ways in which cultural productions entice sensory impressions other than vision. For example, Laura U. Marks pushes for an expansion of our sensory lexicon in the analysis of film and video. In her eloquent study, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Marks argues that the imagery of film and video can “appeal to nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experience of the senses, such as touch, smell, and taste.”

Advocating a more balanced recognition of the role that our senses play, Marks persuasively makes the case that the study of film and video should not only draw upon one’s visual faculties but also seek to incorporate the “entire environments of sense experiences.” Marks’ encouragement to extend our sensory discourse beyond the domain of the visual is something that this chapter responds to. While certainly not ignoring the agency of the visual elements of Rist’s work, my analysis articulates how her images work in tandem with her auditory undercurrents as well as the textural, tactile elements of her work. By activating these sensory strands in the spectatorship of Rist’s work, this chapter articulates how they assemble an idea of sensuous movement, one in which the production of movement occurs as a confluence of the sensibilities of sight and sound in the case of *Ever is Over All*, and of sight and touch in *Lobe of the Lung*.

**Ever is Over All: Setting the Installation**

My analysis commences with *Ever is Over All* before moving onto *Lobe of the Lung* in the second half of the chapter. I begin by providing a description of the video installation in order to locate the key components of the piece that will form the focus of my discussion. Set within the Hayward Project Space, *Ever is Over All* presents a large-scale video installation that spans 4 minutes and 9 seconds and is replayed on a loop. Located as a lone exhibition room on the second floor of the Hayward Gallery, the Project Space affords the installation its own insular and private arena. The installation takes the form of a diptych, composed of two sets of images, that is projected onto two adjacent walls (see Figure 3.1). On the left-hand screen, viewers are offered slow-motion images of a young woman (Silvana Ceschi) walking along a city street in Zurich. Armed with what appears to be a metal pole in the shape of a long-stemmed flower, the woman uses the object to smash the windows of parked cars that she passes.

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15 Ibid., p. 22.
The whole duration of this short video is dedicated to the young woman’s urban stroll and her occasional destruction of the parked cars. During her meander along the street, the heroine passes a female police officer who salutes her while another older woman walks by, quietly acknowledging the heroine’s actions. In a distinct contrast to the drama of the heroine’s actions, the right-hand screen projects roaming shots of a field of exotic flowers – Kniphofias, or otherwise named “Red Hot Pokers” – and other pastoral imagery. Rist’s agile camerawork is used to provide dipping, swivelling shots of the pastoral scene. This dual composition of the diptych and the interplay between the two sides is something that I address in my analysis. Placed side by side, the two images articulate a striking contrast in their subject matters, settings, and colour schemes, presenting seemingly disparate narratives. However, despite this apparent schism, I argue that there lies a thematic isomorphism between the two sequences in their meditation on movement. While the one depicts the motions of a body strolling across an urban landscape, the other highlights the roaming enterprise and dynamism of

\[\text{16} \textit{Ever is Over All}. 22 \text{ November} 2011. \text{ Personal photograph by author. JPEG file.}\]
camerawork, with the effect that the production of movement is accredited as much to the perambulations of the body as to the agency of Rist’s camera. Viewed together, the two sequences construct a spectacle of joyous, vivacious movement that stems from both the heroine’s actions along the street as well as the equally lively labour of the camera.

Much of the critical literature on *Ever is Over All* focuses on the feminist politics of the text. The heroine’s carefree street saunter and joyful destruction of cars, and the complicity of the other female characters in her actions, are interpreted as a celebration of female agency. In her appraisal of the work, Elisabeth Bronfen views the young woman’s actions as an act of transgression and “gleeful feminine destruction”¹⁷ that unsettles masculine law. Similarly, Michael Rush enthuses that the video presents “a life-affirming, breezy feminist tract on the girl taking the city by storm, shattering (literally) the quiet passivity of an obsessively clean street in Zurich, where Rist lives.”¹⁸ These readings provide extensive insight into the narrative content of what is taking place on screen but, perhaps as a result of this narratological focus, elide other technical aspects of the video projection. In his analysis of video installation, Alexander Alberro cautions against a tendency in visual studies to ignore the form of a medium when adopting an analytical approach that is largely content-based:

> To sum up, then, the formal aspects of exhibition and transmission significantly affect and inform a work of art’s meaning. More often than not, however, in discussions of audio-visual work these differences are overlooked in favour of content-based analyses. This focus on a more thematic methodology, while concomitantly overlooking the formal constituents of the work, is symptomatic of a more basic problematic that I find in the practice of visual studies generally. Because of an all-too-common lack of knowledge on the part of the writer of the specific histories and parameters of different media and genres, what is left is the narrative.¹⁹

Alberro’s push for a mode of analysis that tightens the screws on considerations of form is one to which this chapter responds. My enquiry certainly does not critique the validity of content-based scholarship. However, my interest in the *mechanics of how movement is produced* and what conceptions of movement are constructed via the medium of video necessitates a more form-intensive approach than one that is available

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in the extant literature. The demands of this enquiry means that, in addition to the narratological elements, what also pulls my attention are the slow-motion aesthetics of the footage, the significance of Rist’s soundtrack and its interplay with her images, and the repetitive loop to which the video is played. These mechanisms of video art have content of their own to articulate. By scrutinising the functions of these features, my analysis works towards the claim that *Ever is Over All* shifts from a conception of movement as narrative-driven spectacles and instead produces movement as a series of repetitive and cyclical rhythms that are established by the visual and auditory content of Rist’s work.

**The Two Halves of the Diptych: Foregrounding the Dynamic Camera**

In her analysis of *Ever is Over All*, Peggy Phelan astutely points out that “Insufficient attention is paid to the diptych in critical commentary on the work; most read only the narrative plot. But the narrative works in the space between the two video projections as well.”\(^{20}\) For Phelan, this “blank but fecund space”\(^ {21}\) between the two images is not a neutral site but one that is loaded with meaning. Indeed, the disposition of this interstitial space is peculiar: while the diptych presents two distinct scenarios, these two images nevertheless *bleed into one another*. As Figure 3.1 demonstrates, rather than being presented as two discrete and entirely separate frames, Rist organises the two images so that their contours blend into each other. This constitutes a different prospect to the types of multi-channel video where multiple images are scattered across different monitors or projection surfaces, visibly separated so that each image is afforded its own isolated pictorial space and does not impinge on the neighbouring image. By contrast, *Ever is Over All* projects its two images in a way that the visual terrain of each filters into the other. The space between the two images, I suggest, is one of osmosis, a structural manoeuvre designed to enable the contents to feed off each other, to be treated as a connective entity. I suggest that what brings the two images together is their mutual foregrounding of the agency of Rist’s camera in making the movement on screen, and the gesture of the bleed concretises this link between the two. That is, the bleed between the two images invites the viewer to establish this connection between the two frames and their respective emphasis on the camera’s role in the way Rist

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 62.
composes movement. This section consequently reads the two halves of the diptych as a collaborative exposure of the camera as a vital proponent in making movement.

Given that the sequence depicting the young woman provides much of the narrative impetus of this installation, my analysis will start here, before moving on to specify how one might read this left-hand image in relation to the right-hand image of the pastoral scene. What is striking about the left-hand image is the way in which movement is contingent on the technical function of the camera. The sense of gleeful and palpable energy that characterises the heroine’s motion is not only inherent in what she is doing in front of the camera, but also emerges from the substantial amount of editing and camerawork that frame her actions. The sequence starts with a full-body side profile shot of the woman as she begins her ramble. Before long, this side shot gives way to a full-body frontal view that captures the motions of the woman as she playfully swings her Kniphofia pole. Yet again, after a few seconds of this frontal perspective, the scene fades to a side close-up that brings into focus the woman’s mid-torso, before cutting back to the full side profile. After a few seconds, this introductory phase of the sequence culminates in another cut back to a full frontal shot of the woman as she propels herself and gleefully smashes the window of a parked red car. Navigating through the visual twists and turns of these few opening scenes, what is immediately discernible is the copious cutting back-and-forth between side and frontal shots. While the duration of this opening sequence barely spans one minute, there are four individual cuts during this minute alone. Subsequently, viewers are never permitted to settle within the one shot, but are instead delivered brief visual parcels that each last a few seconds. Instead of a single homogenous progression, viewers are offered small spurts of activity that compose a visually heterogeneous sequence. By continuously cutting between side and frontal shots of the heroine, Rist discards a stationary perspective and creates a viewing position that oscillates between multiple vantage points. In doing so, the lively nature of the heroine’s actions are amplified by the liveliness of the editing that is employed so that viewers are not confined to a singular impression of the action. The fact that there are a total of seventeen cuts during the 4 minute and 9 second length of the video lends a dynamic quality to the heroine’s motion on screen. The frivolous quality of the woman’s movements is generated as much by how she is moving as by the constant oscillation between close-ups, medium shots, side and frontal perspectives. Rist’s lively editing in assembling the action foregrounds the essential function that the camera plays in creating the specific energy of the heroine’s walk along the street.
This crucial role of the camera in the making of movement is similarly evident in the way in which Rist’s roaming camerawork further heightens this gleeful vivacity of the heroine’s perambulation. In a synchrony between film apparatus and subject, the camera moves at the same time as the heroine it depicts. What is at work here is not a stationary camera depicting a moving figure, but a moving camera that, invisible to the eye of the viewer, frames the activity of the woman. While this movement of the camera is not immediately discernible to the viewer, it becomes noticeable if one pays close attention to the orientation of the heroine’s figure in relation to the frame. As she walks, her figure does not recede away from the camera as it would if the camera were to remain stationary. Rather, her body always stays more or less in the centre of the frame, remaining equidistant to the camera while moving. From the frontal perspective, the proportions of the woman in relation to the frame always stay constant. In walking towards the camera, she does not appear any larger within the frame, which indicates that Rist’s camera moves backward at the same pace that the woman inches forward. The woman’s saunter is reciprocated by the simultaneous stroll of the camera: the two occur in synchronic concert. In an interview, Rist notes that the development of lighter cameras allows for a more active filming process than is possible with heavier equipment:

> What has really changed in the last decade is that video equipment has become much cheaper and smaller. Mass-market cameras now are as good as professional ones were just a few years ago. Cameras have become much lighter, so I can move them around easily, even with my thin, rather weak body.\(^{22}\)

The versatility that is enabled by lighter camera technology affords Rist a more agile filming procedure, something that is evident in the incessant activity of the camera in documenting the woman. Camera operation thus comprises a key part in mediating the woman’s meander along the street. By tracking and moving concurrently with its subject, the roaming exertion of the camera fulfils a crucial role in articulating the movement on screen.

This agency of the camera in shaping the representation of movement is something that is equally foregrounded in the right-hand image of Rist’s diptych. The analysis shifts here to account for this right half before addressing what one might make of the two

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images together. While the left image plays out the drama of the walking woman, the right image displays roaming shots of a field of Kniphofias. What is most captivating about this right half of the diptych is the kinetic, almost vertigo inducing camerawork that is employed to capture the exotic flowers. The sequence begins by slowly tracking up the stalk of the flower before panning along the red and yellow coloured tips of the flower buds. What follows is a visual rollercoaster as the camera continuously moves along the Kniphofias, animating the flowers into action. These shots of the flowers and the surrounding pastoral scenery point to a camerawork that suggests a wild abandon and fluid motion. Here, Rist’s camera swoops and dips among the Kniphofias, moving up and down the flower stems in vertical motion. In addition to this, the camera swivels on its own horizontal axis at regular interims, producing a visual whirlwind that turns the flowers and fields into a rotating blur of colours and shapes. While there this second sequence does not feature a moving body as such, what is privileged is the dynamism and movement of the camera itself in animating the flowers and pastoral landscape. Similar to the way in which the camera and editing helped to generate and underscore the very liveliness of the heroine’s walk, Rist’s camera here transforms an inert field of flowers into a fluid and vivacious spectacle.

It is in this respect that the technical gesture of the bleed proves significant. By setting up the two images as coalescent entities rather than projecting them as discrete and disparate images, the bleed underscores a dialogue between the two that highlights this fundamental role of the camera. What it allows the viewer to do is to view them associatively and, in the process, recognise their mutual privileging of the camera as a crucial agent of movement in Rist’s video. Both the motions of the young woman and the field of flowers derive their kinetic energy from the enterprise of Rist’s camera. While the two halves of the diptych differ in setting and subject matter, both operate collaboratively to underline this notion. The affiliation between the two sides of the diptych that is signalled by the bleed serves to privilege the labour and agency of Rist’s camera in producing the motion of her subjects.

**Slow-Motion: Divorcing Movement from Narrative**

Another key aspect of Rist’s composition of the heroine’s movement is the slow-motion aesthetics of the sequence. The four-minute video is played entirely in slow-motion, decelerating the viewer’s perception of the heroine’s performance. In staging the woman’s actions as a protracted and lingering sequence, rather than allowing it to
proceed at normal speed, Rist reorients the way that the viewer discerns the motion that takes place. Indeed, this ability to radically slow down the temporality of an image is a fundamental aspect of video technology. In her study, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Laura Mulvey proposes that recent media technologies such as video and DVD alter the viewer’s reception of the filmic image due to their ability to slow down, accelerate, repeat, and freeze images. The emergence of these devices enabled artists and viewers alike “to manipulate the existing speed of cinema.”23 This capacity of video technology to play with the temporality of the image is exploited by Rist to full effect, as she stretches the duration of her sequences so that the motion of her protagonist unfolds as a prolonged event. This section focuses on what slow-motion does to the way a spectator looks at movement on screen. The “aesthetics of delay”24 that slow-motion evokes, as Mulvey calls it, works to drag the duration of bodily action in *Ever is Over All* and severs it from a sense of narrative cohesion and forward thrust. The slow-motion of Rist’s imagery consequently prompts a departure from an idea of movement as grand, narrative-driven spectacles, and instead produces movement as small and fleeting gestures.

As a technical device, one of the most important components of slow-motion is its structural placement within the course of a text and the effect that this placement has on the narrative. In order to engage more fully with how slow-motion operates in Rist’s videos, it may be helpful here to refer to the more commonly seen usage of slow-motion within narrative film as a point of comparison. The discussion recruits narrative cinema here to etch out the fracture lines that separate video and film and to help push for what makes video unique in the way that it narrates movement. The use of slow-motion in most mainstream cinema is often brief and short-lived, employed at key moments of the narrative. It offers a type of lingering interlude in the stream of events, a suspended moment of heightened drama before a sequence reverts back to “normal time” and narrative resumes. In her analysis of slow-motion, Jean Wainwright writes,

> It is rare for filmmakers to use slow motion for any long period or for anything other than spectacular effect: the plastic properties of recorded time (its extensibility, contractibility or reversibility) are at best an occasional novelty.25

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24 Ibid., p. 192.
As Wainwright points out, most mainstream cinema inserts slow-motion fleetingly and for dramatic effect, to momentarily prolong a sequence in order to heighten suspense at an important moment in the film. Its insertion often comes at moments of narrative climax, as a momentary pause before delivering the film’s finale. The primary function of slow-motion in such films, then, is to amplify the drama and spectacle of a particular moment, to protract this action momentarily before reverting back to its normal pace and succumbing to the pull of the narrative towards its finale. The slow imagery thus offers a brief interim that, once it has passed, allows the narrative to rush headlong towards its endpoint.

In distinct contrast to this mode of employment in narrative film, slow-motion in Rist’s video is not used as a momentary stop-gap but informs the entire length of her work. Instead of a fleeting reprieve, the slow-motion here is relentless, spanning the whole duration of the sequence and every subsequent replay so that viewers only ever see the heroine’s actions at a crawling pace. Pervading the entirety of the piece, slow-motion has a very different inflection within video art than in mainstream film. In film, the fleeting nature of the slow-motion only suspends the action momentarily before its narrative impetus is restored. However, in *Ever is Over All*, playing out the entire sequence in slow-motion perpetually delays the narrative and forestalls its propulsion towards a designated endpoint. In their ability to substantially decelerate a sequence, Mulvey suggests that video technologies exemplify “mechanisms of delay, delaying the forward movement of the medium itself, fragmenting the forward movement of narrative and taking the spectator into the past.” In stalling the procession of the images, slow-motion negates the very forward thrust of the action. Mulvey further elaborates that this deceleration of the image “break[s] down the linearity of narrative continuity.” Suspended in the constancy of the slow imagery, the narrative cannot advance promptly and loses its cohesion. Mulvey’s thoughts here have crucial import for thinking about what slowness does to the way we look at the motion of Rist’s heroine on screen. By stretching the duration of the motion for the entirety of the sequence, the young woman’s gestures lose the sense of forward propulsion that Mulvey talks about. Subsequently, viewers are suspended in a painstaking unfolding of time that refuses to draw to a definitive end. What this perpetual state of slowness does is to nullify the movements of the woman so that they are stripped of a drive towards an

27 Ibid., p. 183.
end-point. The heroine’s acts of vandalism lose the urgency and sense of narrative eventfulness that would arguably be more pronounced if they were screened without the slow-motion. *Ever is Over All* is not driven by the lure of a narrative endpoint. The heroine’s actions do not exemplify a headlong rush towards some definitive climax. Rather, it offers a conception of movement where the body’s actions do not race towards grand and conclusive spectacles, one that forfeits narrative momentum and suspends movement in quiet repose.

In arresting the flow of narrative and the drive towards a narrative apex, Rist’s use of slow-motion focuses attention on the minute progression of movement taking place. By slowing things down, she inscribes a visual mode where bodily actions become painstakingly accentuated, every gesture and moment magnified and suspended. Rist’s deceleration of bodily action holds it up for contemplation. Suspended in the lingering and hypnotic pace with which the images pass, viewers become less inclined to wonder about the motivation behind the heroine’s vandalism of the cars or about what will happen to her as a result of this behaviour. Instead, one becomes fixated on the simple unfolding of the movements *themselves* without the impetus towards thinking about narrative purpose and consequence.

Rist’s deceleration of the images forfeits narrative drive in favour of privileging bodily action *in its here and now*, without the seductive pull towards a narrative finale. Without this pull, the slow-motion lends the viewer the space and time to concentrate on the bouncy and rhythmic gait of the heroine’s walk, the vectors of motion created by her swinging arms and the pole that she holds. Similarly, the spectator’s attention hones in on the incessant two-step of her feet, the elegant ripples of her dress as she moves, and the trajectories of the flying shards of glass as they explode on impact. It is these small and seemingly insignificant details that compel our attention, that linger amidst the slow-motion. To say that Rist divorces these movements from narrative thrust is not to suggest that her video is devoid of action. Rather, Rist resituates the very concept of “action” so that it is not found in larger-than-life, fast-paced events that race towards a resolute endpoint. In *Ever is Over All*, the concept of “action” is reappropriated to smaller and quieter incidents, like the aforementioned trajectory of glass shards flying, the patterns of the woman’s steps, or the flowing motions of her dress. The visual dynamics of action is redefined to accommodate these minute gestures. In privileging these tiny details, Rist constructs a conception of movement not in the terms of
monumental and decisive events, but as something that unfolds as a series of fleeting and insignificant gestures, a movement that is poised in non-eventfulness.

**Time after Time: Repetition and the Visual Rhythms of Movement**

If slow-motion works to nullify the narrative propulsion of *Ever is Over All*, this effect is perhaps compounded by the repetitive temporality of the video installation. The 4 minutes and 9 seconds that comprise the entire sequence is replayed on an endless loop so that viewers see the heroine walking along the street time and time again, performing the same actions, coming to the end only for it to revert to the beginning of a new cycle. I want to suggest that this repetitive loop is not an incidental gesture but a premeditated manoeuvre arranged by Rist to privilege a particular way of looking at the heroine’s movements. My methodology in analysing the video’s exploration of movement is based on viewing *Ever is Over All* in its repetitive and cyclical structure, rather than as a one-off sequence. It is this cyclical temporality of Rist’s videos that establishes the heroine’s movement as a series of rhythms. As this section suggests, it is the pulses of how movement moves that fascinates Rist rather than the destination that movement moves towards.

The repetitive loop of Rist’s video prompts a viewing position that focuses attention on the *present* unfolding of the woman’s motions. That is, by adhering to a slow and recursive timeframe, *Ever is Over All* directs a fixation on present events with a disregard towards their future narrative consequences. In her study of 1960s art and its examination of time, Pamela M. Lee notes this foregrounding of the present moment when she suggests that temporally expansive and repetitive artworks have the effect of “belabouring the present.”

Rist’s decision to play her video in a loop elicits a similar effect where its perpetual replay signals a relentless temporality that, to borrow Lee’s term, “belabours” the present actions of the heroine. What this endless repetition serves to do is to strip the woman’s motions of any anticipation of narrative consequence and to focus attention on each gesture in itself. While the woman’s gleeful destruction might initially evoke a sense of excitement, shock, exhilaration, and anticipation during the first round of viewing, it certainly does not have the same effect by the time the viewer has reached the tenth round of the loop, the impact annulled with each subsequent replay. Subjected to obsessive replay, the sense of eventfulness and drama surrounding

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the woman’s movements become exhausted and the viewer is invited to absorb the actions in their cyclical and sequential unfolding, one that sets up a rhythmic conception of movement.

There is a certain point during spectatorship when the repetition of the sequence begins to establish a rhythm to the woman’s movements. Her consecutive actions in smashing the windows of five cars regulate a rhythmic sequence, where each successive act of vandalism becomes a visual echo of the previous gesture. Embedded into the cyclical structure of the loop, the visual rhythm of each act becomes all the more accentuated as the quintet of actions is perpetuated to form a rhythmic stream of events. In her commentary on this repetitive temporality of video installation art, Ursula Frohne observes that “film and video sequences of artistic installations develop their own visual dynamics by perpetuating themselves like traumatic events to the point of obsession.”29

The idea of repetition as a “traumatic” event suggests a sense of tediousness and exhaustion, a sense of visual wear-and-tear as the viewer becomes increasingly exposed to the same sequence. In departing from Frohne’s thoughts, I want to suggest that it is in the midst of this obsessive replay that there emerges a visual rhythm, one in which spectators are invited to absorb themselves. Repetition here becomes the rhythmic articulation of movement. In the endless replay, what we are positioned to do is not to seek any narrative peaks and troughs in the woman’s actions, but to pay attention to the rhythmic pulsation of her movements that are created by the seriality of the loop. Repetition accords a sense of visual rhythm to the events of the sequence that would not be the case if the video was viewed as a singular piece. In perpetuating themselves, the repetition of the woman’s actions brings to the fore the rhythmic progression of movement as an aesthetic experience. It is the idea of movement as rhythm, its unfoldment as a series of repetitive gestures, that emerges throughout the video installation.

**Rist’s Soundscapes and Rhythmic Movement**

If repetition creates a visual rhythm in the woman’s movements, the soundtrack offers an auditory channel through which this rhythm is further accentuated. While the discussion so far has focused on the visual elements of Rist’s video installation, this section attends to the acoustic elements of the piece and how they work in tandem with

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the images to further foreground the rhythmic aspect of movement. Rist’s use of sound is not extensively examined within critical commentaries on *Ever is Over All*. On the occasions that her use of soundtrack is mentioned, they tend to be primarily descriptive, cataloguing the sounds that are produced without specifying how these sounds play out *in relation to* her images and the potential meanings that sound registers.\(^{30}\) Looking beyond this purely descriptive account of sound, I want to treat the auditory and musical aspects of her work as elements that help to establish meaning, something that functions in tandem with her images to create the rhythmic qualities of movement. This call for a detailed scrutiny of the aural dimension of artworks is one that is emerging within the arena of contemporary art theory. Critics such as Douglas Kahn and Caleb Kelly remind us that sound and noise form an intrinsic component of the arts, and that there is a need to reorient the bearings of art analysis from a strictly visual enquiry to one that is also receptive to the aural resonance of artistic productions.\(^{31}\) As Kelly stresses, spectators and critics need to “become increasingly attuned to the new aesthetics of listening”\(^{32}\) if they are to wholly engage with an artwork. In responding to Kelly’s invitation, this analysis examines how the acoustic flow and undulation of Rist’s soundtrack works in collaboration with the visual content of Rist’s images in the making of rhythmic movement.

Before examining the specific contents of *Ever is Over All*’s soundscape, it is crucial to specify that when I refer to “sound” in Rist’s work, I refer not only to the vocal and instrumental components that form the artwork itself but also to the spatial-architectural conditions that affect the way in which these sounds are received by the spectator. That is, my enquiry of sound takes into account both the content of the soundtrack as well as its specific production within the space of the gallery. In her insightful analysis, Emily Ann Thompson recognises this understanding of sound as moulded by the specific arena of its projection:

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\(^{32}\) Kelly, *Sound*, p. 18.
The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only of the sounds themselves, the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds.\(^{33}\)

The spatial dimensions of the exhibition space pose an important feature when considering the reception of sound in a gallery. This is particularly suggestive when one considers the specific location of *Ever is Over All* within the gallery in relation to the other exhibition pieces. The Hayward Gallery is composed of two floors: the main exhibition room occupies the lower floor of the building, while the smaller exhibition room that resides on the upper floor is marked out as the Hayward Project Space. It is within this smaller Project Space that *Ever is Over All* is stationed, where it is afforded its own insular space away from the other installations that are displayed on the lower floor. The reason for confining the video installation in this manner can perhaps be gleamed in Sean Cubitt’s discussion, where he delineates a dilemma with orchestrating sound within a gallery when two or more installations are involved:

> A curatorial problem with having more than one or two installations in a show is that their sound spaces tend to overlap, producing an unmanageable cacophony in the transition zones between them.\(^{34}\)

As Cubitt points out, the auditory content emanating from different works can have the undesired effect of sound interference where the spectator’s ability to focus on one set of sounds is disturbed by the murmur of other pieces. However, Rist and Stephanie Rosenthal, the head curator, solve this problem by assigning *Ever is Over All* its own room away from the other displays. This prevents the sound-bites of other installations and any other noise debris from disrupting the auditory content of *Ever is Over All*. More importantly, for the purposes of my analysis, the fact that *Ever is Over All* is situated one floor away from *Lobe of the Lung* (the second installation this chapter focuses on) means that the two pieces are afforded their own distinct auditory arenas, inviting two discrete acts of listening that are not muddled by noise confusion. In sectioning off the former to its own private cocoon, Rist encourages spectators to hone in on its polyvalent sounds, to engage in an act of listening without the disturbance of other auditory stimuli.

\(^{33}\) Emily Ann Thompson, “Sound, Modernity and History”, *Sound*, p. 118.

In listening to Rist’s soundtrack – a work of collaboration between her and Anders Guggisberg – what the listener uncovers is an audio palimpsest, with different oral and instrumental elements all adding multiple layers to the sounds that are heard. The track begins with the melodic humming of a female voice that is played for a full minute before this solo is interspersed with a background noise of chirping birds. Gradually, the humming gives way to the lilting sounds of a piano and a string instrument, which are accompanied by a soft percussion of drumbeats. The whole score alternates between the female humming tune and the instrumental refrain, pierced every now and then by the sounds of breaking glass as the protagonist embarks on her act of vandalism. What is immediately discernible is that there appears to be no apparent connection between what the spectators see and what they hear. Apart from the sound of breaking glass, the soundscape does not reveal anything about the actions and intentions of the enthusiastic protagonist. Sound does not permit an act of narrative disclosure, something that Marks touches upon in her discussion of the role that sound plays in cinema:

Characteristically, in Western societies and urban spaces, sound is primarily an information medium, and dialogue-centred narrative cinema reflects this use of sound. But sound can also be ambient and textural […]. Music, talk, ambient sound, and silence are important to many of these works and to the feeling of embodied experience they produce.\(^{35}\)

Here, Marks astutely opens up the function of sound as something more than just a means of transmitting information, suggesting that sound finds its agency in its very presence and ambience, in its very qualities as noise. While her discussion is centred upon the medium of cinema, it has equal import in the consideration of Rist’s video installation. Sound in *Ever is Over All* is not created for the purpose of transmitting information or developing the narrative; it does nothing to elucidate the actions and motivations of the heroine. What Rist’s soundtrack does instead is to compose an aural ambience within which spectators can immerse themselves. Thinking of sound as ambience helps to concentrate attention on its sonic qualities, its basic function as noise, rather than confining the act of listening to any narratological cues that the soundtrack might offer. Rist encourages spectators to listen to her sounds *as sounds*, to hear the noises of the installation *as noise*. This foregrounding of sound’s auditory agency is all the more heightened by the acoustic properties of the exhibition room. Displayed in a completely vacant room, without any furnishings, Rist’s soundtrack acquires an acute and sharp quality. Devoid of any furniture that might refract and soften the sound, Rist’s

\(^{35}\) Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. xvi.
concoction of vocal and instrumental refrain reverberates throughout the small room in an echoic and piercing fashion. If the composition of the score seeks to accentuate the noise of the soundtrack, the installation environment certainly amplifies this effect. Thus, in composing a soundtrack that is divorced from any informational purpose, and through her staging of the installation forum, Rist sets up a mode of listening that is not distracted by any narrative intimations as its primary purpose, one that instead lends attention to the timbre of sound and, as we will see – or perhaps more accurately, as we will hear – its rhythmic possibilities.

In being invited to listen to Rist’s soundtrack as noise, rather than a source of narrative information, the rhythmic sway and pull of the music comes to the fore for the spectator. While the combination of vocal and instrumental elements might reveal little about the images that are projected, there lies a deeper isomorphism between the rhythmic procession of the soundtrack and the visual pace of the installation. The tempo of the soundtrack unfolds at a slow and serene pace, adhering to a mellow two-four time signature. This unhurried progression of the music strikes a harmonic concert with the equally mellow slow-motion of the sequence. Rist comments upon this process of coordinating the auditory and visual dimensions during an interview: “I slow down the footage again and again, adjusting the sound design accordingly.”

As this statement reveals, her intention is to create sound environments that match, in rhythm and form, the slow-motion appearance of her images. Soundtrack and image corroborate each other in the crawling rhythm to which both are projected to the spectator.

Sound here contributes to the production of movement on screen, the slow revolution of the music echoing and underscoring the visual rhythm of the woman’s actions. The soundscape of Rist’s installation provides an auditory register through which the rhythm of the protagonist’s movements is produced. Architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa articulates this idea when he reflects that “sound often provides the temporal continuum in which visual impressions are embedded.” Pallasmaa’s crucial insight here is that sound helps to regulate the rhythm and temporality of what we see, a salient observation when considering *Ever is Over All*. Every beat of the soft percussion and each sound of

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shattering glass offer a means of marking the pulses of the heroine’s steps, of measuring the phases and tempo of her movements.

In establishing a rhythm to the heroine’s movements, the soundtrack also maintains the visual fluency of movement throughout Rist’s sequence. In his analysis of music, Cubitt identifies its efficacy in “smooth[ing] the transitions between shots.” That is, the soundtrack operates as a mediator, lending a sense of flow to the shots so that when one sequence cuts to another, this transition is made all the more fluid so as not to produce a jarring effect. In Rist’s installation, when each shot fades to another, this transition between shots is rendered more fluent as a result of the intermediary layer that music provides. The soundtrack serves as a type of aural channel that sutures together the different sequences, perpetuating the fluency and rhythm of the depicted motions. In helping to bridge the transitions between shots, Rist’s melodies ensure the fluidity of the woman’s movements so that each parcel of action appears to subside effortlessly to the next, composing a succession of rhythmic phases of movement. Using the stream of noise to smooth the transition, the movements of the woman are produced as a seamless progression. Rist’s soundtrack thus serves an essential purpose in helping regulate the fluency and pulse of the sequence and, in doing so, sculpting movement as rhythm.

**Lobe of the Lung: Setting the Installation**

If *Ever is Over All* stages movement as an eloquent unfolding of visual and aural rhythms, the second textual focus of this chapter – *Lobe of the Lung* – exhibits an equally sensuous and aesthetically pleasing production of bodily action. I commence this second half of the chapter by providing a description of the video installation in order to clarify its contents and composition, as well as to locate the aspects of the installation that will form the foci of my enquiry. Located one floor below *Ever is Over All* in the main exhibition area of the Hayward Gallery, *Lobe of the Lung* presents another large-scale video installation, spanning a lengthier 15 minutes and 36 seconds that is replayed on a loop. The installation takes the form of a triptych: three sets of images are projected onto three adjacent screens, each arranged in such a way as to form a semi-hexagon (see Figure 3.2). On the other side of the room, parallel to this semi-hexagon, Rist erects a large full-length mirror that spans the entirety of the back wall, reflecting everything that is projected across the three screens. An ensemble of

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38 Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics*, p. 113.
pillows and cushions are casually strewn across the floor, where viewers are invited to sit and lie down in the space between the three screens and the mirror, from where they can contemplate the images. Completing the installation is an arrangement of large transparent textiles that hang from the ceiling, situated behind the three screens so that they frame the outskirts of the exhibition room.

The visually extravagant arena that Rist creates for her video artwork is matched by the equally vibrant composition of the images that unfold across the three screens. The synopsis that I offer of *Lobe of my Lung* is a tentative one, as it is difficult to impose a coherent narrative structure onto the piece. However, for the purpose of clarity, its visual contents can be dissected into four broader sets of sequences that all gravitate around the video’s red-haired female protagonist (Ewelina Guzik). The opening sequence features the young woman wandering among a field of flowers. Replete with bright colours, the scenes feature close detail of the heroine’s motion as she bends down to pick at the flower petals and claw her hands through the dirt. This colourful exposition fades to the second sequence and an oceanic setting, in which viewers see images of the protagonist’s torso submerged in water. Her floating figure is distorted by

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the currents of the water, and the images become soaked by pools of red as the water is permeated by what appears to be blood. The third key sequence similarly depicts the lower body of the heroine walking barefoot amidst puddles of rain and the debris of ripe tropical fruit littered across the earthy ground. The scene scrutinises her playful activities as she splashes in the rainwater and mischievously walks amongst the fruit, squashing them and causing their contents to ooze out. Finally, the last segment culminates in a field under an apple tree where viewers find the naked figure of the heroine crawling on all fours, her hair flying and her body gyrating wildly as she crawls on the grass and the bed of littered apples. While it may be difficult to trace some cohesive narrative strand between all four sequences, I suggest that it is not the point of the video installation to create some overarching and coherent narrative. Instead, what Rist does is to advance her protagonist through a series of environments that are burgeoning with bright colours and rich textures, soaking her images with feasts of light and vibrant palettes to offer a sensory feast to the viewer. As Christopher Bedford describes,

Rist’s heroine identifies irresistible sensual possibilities everywhere: she kicks around in muddy puddles, chews tulips, squeezes fruit with her feet, and rolls in foliage, her face a study in innocence and wonderment.40

What brings the quartet of scenarios together are sensuous depictions of the heroine’s movements, designed to project sensually rich images to the viewer. Rist’s examination of movement is shaped by a vivid evocation of colours and textures that allow viewers to not only see movement but to also feel the textural sensation of movement passing. This core idea of a tactile sensibility of movement is something that my analysis of the video installation works towards. What distinguishes Lobe of the Lung from Ever is Over All is its arrangement of image and installation environment to stimulate and privilege the tactility of movement.

As this chapter seeks to maintain distinctions between video installation and film, it is perhaps of some interest that the video of Lobe of the Lung is drawn from hours of footage that was shot for Rist’s first feature film, Pepperminta (2009).41 However, while the two comprise correlative work, Rist’s film has no bearings on my discussion

40 Christopher Bedford, “‘Tender is the Light’”, Pipilotti Rist: The Tender Room, p. 8.
of the video installation. This analysis treats *Lobe of the Lung* as a primary work in its own right rather than a derivative or compressed version of the feature film. The justification behind this analytical approach largely lies in the spatial organisation of the installation. What we see are not just images in isolation, something that is typically the case with the medium of film, but images that are ensconced within a particular spatial set-up, one that forms an equally essential component of the work. Rist’s video is embedded in an installation arena composed of three screens, a full-length mirror, a viewing arena with pillows and cushions, and an assortment of textiles hanging from the ceiling that surround this exhibition space. The ambient environment that Rist assembles here plays an active part in generating the ideas of movement that are highlighted in the images. In an interview with Doug Aitken, Rist points out that her work is not only preoccupied with the space of the image but also with coordinating the space exterior to the image. As she reflects, “I want to reconquer the space in and around the viewer that we forget about when we’re watching a two-dimensional computer, television, or cinema screen.” Consequently, the spatial characteristics of the work, and the way in which they prompt a particular reception of the image, requires careful meditation if we are to preserve the integrity of video installation as a medium. Rist’s coordination of the installation’s ambient space sets up a viewing condition that privileges a tactile sensation in the images of movement.

In foregrounding this tactile sensibility as a core element in *Lobe of the Lung*’s production of movement, my discussion engages with Marks’ notion of *haptic visuality*. In her study, Marks explores instances in cinema that prompt this haptic mode, one that activates a tactile reception to the image and where the act of seeing simultaneously “functions like the sense of touch.” When articulating what is entailed in haptic vision, Marks makes a key distinction between *optical visuality* and *haptic visuality*:

> Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.

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42 Pipilotti Rist in an interview with Doug Aitken, “Pipilotti Rist”, *Broken Screen: 26 Conversations with Doug Aitken, Expanding the Screen, Breaking the Narrative*, p. 228.

43 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 22.

44 Ibid., p. 162 (my emphasis).
Marks defines here the specific conditions that bring about haptic vision. Haptic looking situates itself in very close proximity to the depicted object to expose texture; it moves over the object so that, as Marks eloquently puts it, the act of gazing becomes a type of “graze” that further primes the viewer towards a tactile reception to the image. Haptic looking, then, is one that occurs at close proximity and that skims across, moving over, the depicted object. I want to suggest that these conditions of haptic vision are at work in the imagery of movement in *Lobe of the Lung*, brought about by the agency of Rist’s camerawork. Rist’s persistent use of close-ups and wide-angle lenses establishes a proximity between the viewing subject and the depicted action, while the incessant movement of Rist’s camerawork instigates the type of visual grazing that Marks describes. These functions of the camera collectively work to enable a way of perceiving movement that not allows one to see it as a strictly visual phenomenon, but to also discern the textural sensations involved in the movement.

While Marks’ idea of haptic looking is a useful counterpoint to my examination of Rist’s work, a certain distinction between my application of hapticity and Marks’ application also needs to be stressed. Marks largely develops the idea in the context of cinema while this chapter’s analysis interrogates how haptic looking functions within the individual conditions set by video installation. While the technicalities of camerawork is a feature that both video and film share, and whose agency in prompting hapticity can be applied to both, there are other aspects unique to video installation that are equally instrumental in triggering a haptic reception. These aspects consequently require a conscious distinction from Marks’ formulation. In particular, the spatial arrangement of *Lobe of the Lung*, with its use of three screens aligned in a semi-hexagon, works to envelop the spectator in a way that induces a tactile response to the image. This analysis consequently extends Marks’ insight by looking at how Rist privileges a haptic visuality that emerges from the specific spatial environment created by video installation. In addition to Rist’s camerawork, the latter half of my analysis considers how the geometric layout of the installation creates an immersive environment that permits the spectator to sense the tactile sensations of movement. There emerges, within this environment, a connective tissue between the act of looking at movement and the sensation of *feeling* movement passing.
Eyeball Massage: Making Tactile Movement

One of the ways in which Rist creates this tactile movement is by establishing a very close proximity between the viewer and the actions that unfold on screen. By decimating spatial distance between the spectator and what is seen on screen, Rist embraces a mode of viewing that is up-close and intimate with the contents of the video, a proximity that prompts a spectator’s sense of touch. This is evident within the very first segment of the video. During this expository sequence, the camera slowly tracks over a field of red flowers before locating the red-haired young woman. Bringing the heroine into focus, the sequence documents her actions in plucking the flower petals, squeezing them with her hands, biting them and spitting them back out, and proceeding to claw her fingers through the dirt of flowerbeds. Here, the actions performed by the heroine already foreground a sense of the tactile: images of the woman’s hands as they reach out and squeeze the flower petals, brushing the tips of the flowerbeds exemplify a scenario where the imagery of touching is vividly portrayed to the viewer. Similarly, when viewers see the woman’s hands clawing through the dirt, fingers burrowing into the brown turf and nails scraping into the soil, these images relay a strong sense of tangible materiality. The idle activities of the woman’s hands dominate the screen during these scenes, a blatant foregrounding of the part of the body that is most associated with touch.

However, it is not just through narrative action that Rist establishes tactility as a core aesthetic within the video. The imagery of touching, scraping, and wrenching and its effect in titillating the viewer’s touch is amplified by the extreme proximity with which viewers witness these actions. Marks suggests that the act of bringing the viewer as close as possible to the image can have the effect of “converting vision to touch.”45 Haptic seeing thus requires a sense of proximity to, and intimacy with, what the spectator is viewing. Rist activates this haptic mode by utilising a very close perspective of the filmed objects. While Ever is Over All mostly employs medium shots, contemplating the movements of its protagonist from a comfortable distance, Lobe of the Lung draws viewers right up to the midst of the heroine’s actions through extreme close-ups. This impression of visual proximity is achieved through Rist’s use of a wide-angle lens to capture the video footage. Rist’s use of the wide-angle lens enables her to focus very closely on her subjects, maximising proximity without sacrificing the scale of action taking place in the frame. By permitting extremely close shots of the woman’s

45 Ibid., p. 159.
motion, the lens creates movements that invite a haptic apprehension of this movement. For instance, in the scene where the heroine reaches out to pluck the flower petals, the wide-angle lens establishes an intimate vicinity to her gestures that enables the viewer to feel the texture of this motion.

Figure 3.3

Rist’s use of a wide-angle lens also places looming emphasis on the foreground of the image, which further sharpens the tactile sensation of the depicted movements. As Figure 3.3 demonstrates, the elements that are closer to the camera – the array of pink tulips – appear large and overbearing, magnified to an extent where their surfaces and textures become a palpable presence within the frame. It is in this close intimacy that the heroine’s motions evoke a sense of the tactile. The extreme exposure of textures that the lens offers incites the spectator’s sense of touch so that, when the heroine brushes over the petals and blades of grass, and sifts through mounds of dirt, one not only sees her movements unfold as a visual spectacle but also has the tantalising sensation of feeling the textures involved in these actions, of caressing the soft sheen of the flower

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buds and the earthy roughness of dirt. The looming proximity that the wide-angle lens permits and its disclosure of the textures of Rist’s subjects on screen pushes the threshold of simply seeing movement towards a tactile apprehension of the movements taking place.

This sensitivity to movement’s tactile dimensions is further heightened by the grainy quality of video imagery. Rist mentions in an interview, as quoted in the epigraph above, that she is not interested in working with images that are “sharper than reality,” such as those that are often produced by film. Instead, she prefers the “rough, imperfect quality” that video, as a medium, brings to the image. It is this rough resolution that foregrounds a certain textural feel to the image, one that subsequently allows the spectator to sense the textures inherent in the depicted motions. This effect is particularly pronounced in Figure 3.4, which features a close-up of the heroine’s feet as she walks through rain-drenched puddles while squashing ripe fruit with her toes. The poor image resolution here serves to accentuate the slippery wetness that characterises the woman’s stroll amidst the puddles. The image distortions of the fruit, the way in which its colours build up rather than retaining their sharp definition, emphasise the pulpy mash of the flesh as it is squeezed under the her feet. The imperfections of Rist’s imagery, with its colour distortions and poor definition, thus bring out the very palpable materiality of the actions that are taking place. The faulty consistency of the image prompts responsiveness to the textures involved in these actions, enabling the viewer to sense the wetness of the puddles through which the woman walks and the runny mess of compressed fruit under her feet. Rist exploits the poor resolution of video to encode bodily action in a way that brings to the fore the textures involved in that movement, positioning the viewer to feel the texturality of movement passing.

If the graininess of video primes the viewer to a heightened awareness movement’s textures, Rist’s camerawork further reinforces this tactile perception of movement. By moving gently and sinuously over its subjects, the camera caresses the surfaces and material of these elements. This restless, probing camerawork activates a haptic production of movement on screen. In filming the heroine’s frivolous motions amongst the field of tulips, the wandering restlessness of Rist’s camera caresses its contents in a way that sets up movement not only as a visual prospect but also one that appeals to the

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viewer’s sense of touch. When Rist executes the tracking shot of the tulips, her camera slowly pans across the field from a point of elevation and gently skims across the tips of the flowers. When honing in on close-ups of individual stalks, her camera creeps up the stalk before dragging across its petals, a manoeuvre that brings out the smooth gloss of the stem and the soft lustre of the buds. The incessant movement of the camera serves to graze over the fields, grass, and flowers so that the spectator apprehends the tactile sensations involved in the movements taking place. Through the graze of the camera, the act of seeing movement is transformed into sensing the textures involved in the specific gestures of moving. In a fitting tribute to the exhibition title, the roaming caress of Rist’s camera allows the images to rub and massage our vision so that the spectators is positioned to not only see movement but to also feel the textural quality of movement passing.

This agency of the camera in exposing the textures inherent in movement is demonstrated in the earlier scene where the heroine’s hands burrow through the soil of the flowerbeds. As her hands sift through the soil, the camera is positioned directly in front of the hands and slowly retreats backwards as it documents these actions. Through

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the slow retreating activity of the camera, we are lent images that graze the surface of the dirt, accentuating its grainy and rough consistency. The kinetic procession of the camera allows one to discern the texture of what is taking place. That is, the spectator not only sees the hands as they sift through the dirt but further acquires a sense of what this action might feel like in a material sense. A similar sensation is prompted in the scene that follows, where the heroine proceeds to pick up an earthworm and run her fingers along its length. As she rubs the earthworm between thumb and forefinger, the camera too imitates this action and slides horizontally across the length of the worm, visually underscoring its smooth and slimy complexion. Similar to the earlier scene, the camera is made to move so that spectators discern the tactile sensations implicated in the actions. Consequently, Rist’s wandering camerawork privileges textural sensation as a primary dimension of what movement is in her video installations. *Lobe of the Lung* shapes a haptic epistemology of movement, where the act of perceiving and making sense of movement occurs at the intersection between sight and touch.

The Geometry of the Installation: Enfolding the Viewer in a Tactile Cocoon

The haptic reception to images of movement that Rist privileges in *Lobe of the Lung* further informs the spatial organisation of the video installation. Whilst my analysis so far has scrutinised the contents of the images, it has yet to comment on the very form the image takes and the spatial environment that circumscribes this form. In this section, I want to meditate on the specific ways in which Rist choreographs space – the space of the image and the space exterior to the image – in order to set the conditions for a haptic mode of viewing movement.

One of the striking features of the installation space is the geometric proportions of the images themselves. In her critique of the exhibition, Chrissie Iles observes that “Rist’s [installation] environments disperse the vertical plane of painting into another kind of pictorial space.”

Iles’ observation is certainly true where *Lobe of the Lung* is concerned. Its pictorial space, the space of projection, departs from the flat and singular plane that is typical of paintings and single-channel video artwork. Instead, it distributes its images over the space of three screens that are arranged adjacently to each other so as to form a semi-hexagon. The ingenuity of this set-up lies in the fact that the three screens, arranged in such a manner, not only serve as surfaces on which to project the images; they also function as a type of translucent wall that partitions off the space of

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the installation away from Rist’s other works that are exhibited in the same area. A simultaneous advantage and disadvantage of the Hayward Gallery is its immense spaciousness. The lower floor of the gallery (in which *Lobe of the Lung* is situated) can be roughly divided into three main areas, each offering a cavernous space. While this lends Rist’s large installations the requisite room to breathe, preserving their scale and proportion, it also becomes difficult when attempting to separate individual installations so that each are afforded their own private arena. Rist, in collaboration with architect Andreas Lechthaler, solves this dilemma by organising the geometry of her screens to serve as a barrier. In an interview, Rist talks about her preference for working with the spatial conditions of a gallery rather than altering them to suit her work:

One of my goals is to avoid as many of the architectural, financial and structural constraints of the institutions where I show my work as possible, or to use the constraints in such a way that they become normal conditions of creation.  

Accordingly, instead of making wholesale changes to the gallery space and erecting concrete walls that would entail a greater degree of financial strain and structural alteration, Rist uses the material of her installation to create its own private forum. In doing so, she is able to make use of the gallery’s spaciousness while simultaneously demarcating an individual pocket of space for *Lobe of the Lung* so that the other pieces do not interfere with its reception. By doubling as a translucent wall, the three screens of the triptych enclose a private cocoon in which to view its images, a spatial arrangement that, as I proceed to discuss, invites the type of haptic vision that Rist promotes.

While this arrangement of the triptych serves to prevent the audio-visual contents of other works from seeping in, it creates a sense of enfoldment once the spectator is inside the space of the installation. Rather than facing a singular flat screen that is typical of single-channel video and cinema, the spectator faces a semi-hexagon that curves out towards the audience, prompting a feeling of encasement. The pictorial space is not simply in a frontal bearing to the viewer; rather, it *wraps around* the viewer in an engulfing embrace. This idea of the image wrapping around the viewer gains further resonance when one considers the full-length mirror that spans the rear wall of the installation (see Figure 3.5). Observing the image below (a photograph taken of the full-

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length mirror and its reflections), one is able to discern the mirror’s efficacy in amplifying the sense of enfoldment created by the triptych. The mirror, as it were, extends the geometry of the installation to a full hexagon. By reflecting all the images that are played out over the three screens, the mirror constructs a 360-degree visual environment in which Rist’s images blanket the viewer in a tight cocoon. In her exploration of the medium, Eleanor Heartney proposes that video installations “create a multi-sensory environment that is intended to wrap around the viewer and make him or her, in some way, part of the action.” What I find intriguing about Heartney’s insight is the way in which video installation is caught up with a rhetoric of the projected image as a tactile layer that envelops the viewer. The image is posited not as something to be seen from a removed distance, but as a layer that wraps around the viewer in a tactile embrace. I want to propose this activity of the image wrapping around as one that speaks to the hapticity that lies at the heart of this installation. That is, by enfolding the viewer in a total ambience of images, the spatial arrangement of the installation sets up

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a particular mode of looking that calls upon a haptic engagement with what unfolds across the screens.

This mode of looking that the semi-hexagon calls upon is one based on peripheral vision. To pinpoint how peripheral vision constitutes a form of haptic visuality, I draw upon the critical insight of architect Juhani Pallasmaa. Pallasmaa makes a compelling point when proposing that peripheral vision helps stimulate our tactile senses in the way that we experience architectural spaces. He suggests that “[f]ocused vision confronts us with the world whereas peripheral vision envelops us in the flesh of the world.” The case that Pallasmaa makes is this: by extending beyond the edges of what we can clearly see, peripheral vision prompts a sense of an enveloping spatiality that triggers a tactile apprehension of what lies before us. In refusing to hone in on a singular point of attention and stretching the horizon of what we are able to see, peripheral vision “enfolds the subject in the space” and transforms vision into a tactile encounter with the world. In other words, what we see is not in a fixed and frontal position to us; rather it encroaches upon us, encasing us in the folds of its textures. While Pallasmaa’s discussion concerns one’s perceptual experience of architecture, I suggest that peripheral vision performs a similar function within the space of Rist’s video installation. Composed of three giant screens, the pictorial space of Lobe is designed to optimise the spectator’s peripheral vision by stretching the activity of looking. For when contemplating one screen, the viewer is not permitted to focus on this single point. Instead, contemplation of this screen is accompanied by peripheral vision of the two other adjoining screens that each project their own sets of images. This emphasis on the periphery of vision, and the hapticity it elicits, is perhaps best exemplified in the third key segment of Rist’s video.

What unfolds throughout this segment are scenes of the heroine (although we do not actually see her face or upper body) walking barefoot amidst puddles of rainwater and tropical fruit that are scattered across the dirt clearing. To dissect the individual contents of the three screens, the middle screen presents images of the heroine’s lower body walking in circular motions, occasionally jumping in the puddles and causing splashes of water to spiral outwards towards the camera. At the same time, the left screen focuses

54 Ibid., p. 13.
on close-ups of the feet as the woman indulges in her playful activity, sometimes splashing in puddles and, at other times, squashing the litter of fruit with her toes so that its contents ooze out. Alternatively, the right-hand screen exhibits a slow tracking shot of the array of fruit and rubbish that are splayed across the rain-drenched clearing. Collectively, what viewers behold is a continuum of images: although the video exhibits three distinct sets of images, there is visual continuity between the three screens as they present three impressions of the same action and setting. This presents a departure from Ever is Over All where the two halves of the diptych show fractious images that display a disjunction in subject matter and setting. The visual continuity across the three screens encourages spectators to look in a way that approaches the periphery of our vision, not narrowing on a centralised point but proceeding towards the corners of our sight. As such, when we observe the actions of the heroine walking amidst the puddles in the middle screen, one’s field of vision simultaneously drifts to the two adjoining screens to take in the close-ups of the heroine’s feet on the left and the tracking shots of the setting on the right. The viewer’s sight is compelled towards these recesses so that one perceives the overwhelming totality of the action. We not only witness the form of her movements but their engulfing ambience that pulls at the edges of our vision. This peripheral vision comprises a reaction that speaks to a haptic sensibility to the movement on screen. The movements of the protagonist as she walks around the rain-drenched puddles do not simply take shape before us, at a removed distance from the viewer, like it does in Ever is Over All. Rather, with the horizon of the spectator’s sight stretched by the triptych, the actions of the heroine threaten to become immanent to the viewer. Drawing on this sense of immanence, the spectator does more than merely see the movements of the heroine; he senses the textural qualities – the wetness of the rain-soaked scenery, the mushiness of the over-ripe fruit – of these movements as the images push at the edges of his vision and immerse him in their depths. Ensnconced by the semi-hexagon of the screens and the peripheral vision they prescribe, the spectator becomes enveloped in the texturality of what he sees.

**Conclusion**

In Ever is Over All and Lobe of the Lung, Pipilotti Rist offers a poetics of movement that hones in on movement’s rhythmic possibilities and its appeal to a tactile sensibility. Ever is Over All presents movement as a series of rhythms that are channelled through the visual and auditory contents of the work. Through its use of slow-motion, the video decelerates the representation of bodily action and divorces the narration of movement
from a head-long rush towards a narrative climax and end-point. In departing from the concept of bodily action as a monumental event, spectators are instead positioned to focus on the fleeting and minute gestures that are played out in slow progression. Subjected to the repetition of perpetual replay, the video installation assembles a depiction of movement not as a fast-paced and decisive spectacle, but one that unfolds as rhythmic replay. The visual rhythm that is created by the repetition of the sequences is further accentuated by the aural rhythms that underlie Rist’s soundtrack. The slow and rhythmic undulation of the video’s sounds provides an auditory layer that forms a perfect concert with the visual pulse and pace of the images. Brought together, *Ever is Over All* combines its visual and auditory strands to articulate the heroine’s movements as a constellation of rhythms that unfolds phrase by phrase, beat by beat. In an alternative trajectory, *Lobe of the Lung* offers an equally aesthetically pleasing impression of movement. Through its use of a wide-angle lens and sinuous camera activity that roams gently over its subjects, Rist produces depictions of bodily movement that appeal to a haptic visuality. The act of seeing movement becomes intimately linked with feeling the textural sensations that are implicated in the movements: we do not only gaze at the gestures but perceive what they might feel like in a material sense. This stimulation of a haptic sensibility is further stirred by the spatial organisation of the installation, one that enfolds the viewer in an ambience of images that entice the spectator’s sense of touch. In *Lobe of the Lung*, the capacity to see movement encompasses the faculty to apprehend the material sensation of movement passing. In light of the critical inroads carved into these two video installations throughout the course of this chapter, perhaps a slight amendment may be made to Rist’s words offered in the epigraph at the beginning. While Rist reflects that she utilises the artistic arena of video installation in what she wants to show about movement, this analysis suggests that she does more. Where movement is concerned, she not only *shows* us images. She makes us listen and enables us to caress and feel them too.
CHAPTER FOUR

“The hellbent sprint of numbers”: Language and a New Aesthetics of Speed in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* (2003)

What happened was, it occurred to me that what I wanted to write about was a man travelling crosstown in Manhattan. And in the next split second, I understood that this trip would take him all day and, in fact, that it would occur along one street in New York from East to West.

- Don DeLillo

The point is not about the information in itself, the point is about the absolute velocity of electronic data.

- Paul Virilio

Introduction

When New York author Don DeLillo deliberated over potential titles for his thirteenth novel, some of the contenders on the list were *Trafficus, Crosstown, The Street*, and *Adrenalin.* Although DeLillo ultimately settled on the title *Cosmopolis* (2003), the possible alternatives intriguingly point to a thematics of movement that is central to the novel. While this might appear as a passing trivial fact, I offer it here as an opening through which to locate a core concern with ideas of movement that are at play within the novel. As these alternative titles suggest, *Cosmopolis* presents a narrative of urban travel, spending its entirety following billionaire Eric Packer’s daylong journey as he cruises in his stretch limousine along 47th Street in New York. In doing so, the novel not only invites scrutiny of Packer’s physical perambulation through the city, but also of other registers of movement that are at work within the technologically affluent, information saturated culture in which Packer lives. Indeed, what incites my interest in the novel is its examination of the new meanings that movement assumes within a late capitalist, twenty-first-century context, encompassing phenomena that not only take

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3 Don DeLillo, notes on *Cosmopolis* in notebook, Don DeLillo Collection, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
place in bodily manoeuvres but also in the rapid activity of electronic information inherent in the operation of recently emerging communication technologies. Unlike the kinetic feats seen in the earlier chapters where the spectacle of movement exhibits the exuberance of the body, bodily action in *Cosmopolis* presents a more subdued exploit, tempered and at times displaced by such information devices that increasingly suppress the necessity of physical movement. Consequently, there is a need to reconceptualise one’s understanding of what movement is in the current era of these advanced technologies. Using *Cosmopolis* as a textual example, this chapter argues that movement undertakes a new form, threshold, and velocity in the speed of electronic information, one that takes place beyond the physical endeavour of the human body and, in the process, questions and diminishes the agency of bodily action. This idea of the “diminished” body is employed in the course of the chapter specifically as an extratextual reference, in relation to the spectacles of movement established in the texts of previous chapters. That is, bodily action in the novel presents a more subdued and reduced prospect than the vigorous, extensive, and energetic physical feats witnessed in earlier chapters and, when taken in this context, brings to the fore a diminished conception of movement in *Cosmopolis*. Equally importantly, I further suggest that the form, shape, and density of DeLillo’s language is instrumental in bringing about this diminution of bodily exploit and constructing a new articulation of movement as information speed. This chapter thus considers how movement takes place in language, arguing that the linguistic form of DeLillo’s prose activates and privileges new imaginings of moving phenomena that are at work in the author’s depiction of the twenty-first century.

The particular prominence that information and data acquire as crucial concepts in the discussion of movement stems from the nature of Packer’s actions during the course of his crosstown odyssey, which exposes a persistent immersion in the electronic realm of advanced communication devices. As a currency trader who has amassed a multi-billion fortune by predicting the rise and fall in the value of currencies, by foreseeing and charting “hidden rhythms in the fluctuations of a given currency”\(^5\), Packer spends a significant part of his day closely monitoring an unforeseen rise in the value of the yen. Having invested a vast portion of his wealth in the market based on the expectation of a dip in the yen, this unpredicted rise threatens to liquidate Packer’s fortune. In order to

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\(^5\) DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 76. All subsequent quotes taken from this source in this chapter will be paginated in brackets.
make transactions in response to this market activity, Packer relies on the state-of-the-art gadgetry that he has at his disposal. Operating as a makeshift office, the limousine is equipped with television monitors, cell phones, microcomputers, and interactive satellite technologies that allow Packer to instantaneously access information on the market as he makes his way crosstown. Furthermore, his itinerary along the way involves numerous impromptu meetings with his currency analyst, chief of finance, and chief of theory as they discuss strategies to leverage this rise in the yen. Consequently, the digital realm of finance and the relentless circulation of information that it entails comprise a key operation within the text. The rapid transmission of data that allows Packer to gain access to distant news, events, and assets signals a spectacle of moving that is at play in the electronic channels of Packer’s digital devices. The robust bodily exertions that are a hallmark of previous chapters are displaced in *Cosmopolis* by a different kind of robustness, one that underpins the kinetic transfer of information. Amidst this agency of information, bodily action presents a comparatively subdued prospect, moderated by technologies that displace the very necessity to move physically in everyday living. Packer’s reliance on his information accessories places limitations on the extent, range, and vigour of his physical endeavours. In sifting through the respective activity of information and bodies in the medium of the text, this chapter not only locates the new meaning that movement assumes in the velocity of information, but also subsequently proceeds to specify what this speed of information transfer does to the function of human bodies and their movements.

In order to elucidate more fully what idea of movement is at work in *Cosmopolis*, it may be useful to pause and define the precise meaning that the term “speed” takes within the parameters of this chapter, as the term operates within a particular theoretical framework that differs from its usage in previous chapters. In this present discussion, the term “speed” designates a new threshold of movement that is privileged in the novel, a movement that approaches near instantaneous velocities, and one that is no longer to do with the body. *Speed* thus alludes to the near instantaneous pace at which information moves and its subsequent ability to accelerate the processes and tasks involved in daily existence. The spectacle of speed in *Cosmopolis* is not that of agile bodies moving with physical prowess but rather the abstract and immaterial flow of information and data. This conceptualisation of speed as one that takes the digital form of information derives, in part, from French cultural theorist Paul Virilio’s formulation of the term. As a critic whose writing has gravitated around developing a theory of
speed, Virilio’s ideas find their core in an epistemological system and methodology that he calls “dromology.” Dromology is a term Virilio uses to describe a system of knowledge that locates speed as the basic underlying phenomenon shaping our social, political, and material reality. In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Virilio adamantly voices that “The political economy of speed is becoming an absolute necessity”⁶, confirming a need to rethink human spatial and temporal experience from the perspective of a theory of speed. Building on this premise, dromology attests to the way in which our experience and perception of phenomena is always, at some level, determined or limited by agents or procedures of speed, whether it is the speed of electronic communication devices or the rapid propulsion of modern systems of transport. At its core, Virilio consequently defines his concept of dromology as “the study and analysis of the impact of the increasing speed of transport and communications.”⁷ As part of this dromological enquiry, Virilio lends particular attention to how the instantaneous rate at which information travels radically alters the way we engage with and act in the world. As he suggests in the epigraph quoted above, there is something in the “absolute velocity” of electronic data that requires critical reflection. It is this speed at which information operates that I want to specify as indicative of a new imagining of movement in the novel, a movement that takes place beyond the physical faculties of the body. Virilio’s theory consequently provides a useful framework for making sense of this new extreme of moving that proceeds with instantaneous effect. DeLillo foregrounds the hurtling velocity of electronic data as a primary spectacle in the text and I want to focus attention on how this phenomenon plays out in language and the novel form.

Equally importantly, Virilio’s ideas further pose an important resource for examining the compromised nature of bodily action as a consequence of the agency of information systems. Virilio proposes that the speed of what he calls “information highways”⁸ suppresses the very necessity of the body to move exertively and extensively. That is, the ability to instantaneously access news, services, and even people via these digital networks precipitates a state of sedentary inaction where the body no longer needs to traverse physical space to perform the same activities. As Virilio confirms, such devices

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register an “advent of the static audiovisual vehicle, a substitute for bodily movement and an extension of domestic inertia which will mark the definitive triumph of sedentariness.”¹⁹ The immediate passage of images and information through electronic media – what Virilio alludes to as the “audiovisual vehicle” – leads to bodies that are rendered inert by their reliance on the speed of information. This condition is a suggestive one when examining Packer’s situation. His overwhelming dependence on electronic devices to perform work and social tasks means that Packer plays out, to a degree, the type of sedentary condition that Virilio describes. However, while acknowledging that Virilio’s theory provides a valuable reference, my analysis also proceeds with caution against the excessive and exaggerative tendencies in his discourse. Virilio’s writings embrace an extreme scenario of bodies incapacitated and handicapped by the dissemination of information technologies in everyday life and perhaps too hastily dismiss the physical aptitude of the body. Seeking to articulate a more measured account of how bodies function in an information saturated society, I argue that the representation of Packer’s movement in the text diminishes in its extent, range, and intensity as a result of his employment of digital devices to accomplish tasks that would otherwise require physical action. The late-capitalist, information-dependent culture that DeLillo monitors in Cosmopolis demands a substantial reduction in the material agency of twenty-first century bodies and their propensity for exertive and vigorous action.

A critical part of this chapter involves articulating how the textual arena of language brings out these ideas of movement. I am interested in what the specific economy of words does to highlight and communicate something of the respective action of information and bodies within a technologically rife context. At first sight, a prose-based medium perhaps does not lend itself as readily to analysing movement as a visual medium. That is, it is arguably more accessible to talk about movement as it is depicted in images, when we can expressly see the action, than through its narration via words. An important aspect of what this chapter does is to precisely grapple with this difficulty of how and what the reader might glean of movement in the structural and formal composition of words, when movement is not visually discernible in front of our eyes as in previous chapters. In an interview, DeLillo acknowledges the significance that language plays in his novels, noting, “I began to suspect that language was a subject as

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well as an instrument in my work.”¹⁰ What the author is getting at here is that language not only operates as a means of communicating narrative but also a focal point of enquiry itself. Using DeLillo’s statement as an open invitation, my analysis contends that it is in scrutinising the workings of language in Cosmopolis that the reader attains a deeper understanding of the thematic ideas of movement that are at play in the novel.

Indeed, the existing literature on Cosmopolis has commented at length on DeLillo’s meditation on the obsolescence of language and the failure of certain words and phrases to keep pace with rapid advances in technology. For instance, David Cowart, who has authored an entire monograph on the subject of language in DeLillo’s fiction, proposes that DeLillo registers a “catalog of obsolescence,”¹¹ designating terminologies that are outstripped by the technologies they are designed to describe. However, it is not the anachronistic quality of certain lexicon to which I direct my attention as the topic is comprehensively covered in previous scholarship.¹² Rather, this analysis opens an enquiry into other dimensions and aspects of DeLillo’s manipulations of language, in order to elucidate what a prose medium offers to the theorisation of movement. The form, length, structural shape, and content of DeLillo’s prose comprise essential textual instruments that express specific conditions of moving, of both information and bodies, and play a vital function in constructing new ways of thinking about movement in the current era.

This attention to movement as a key formal and thematic dimension of the novel, as something generated by the textual economy of language, marks a new analytical terrain where scholarship on Cosmopolis is concerned. As one of DeLillo’s most recent fictions, and due to the fact that the novel is generally not esteemed as highly as other DeLillo works, scholarship on the novel lacks the same level of scrutiny that surrounds earlier texts such as White Noise and Underworld. Amongst the articles and book chapters that do address the novel, there are some analyses whose areas of focus are so

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divergent from the ideas explored in this chapter that it is perhaps not helpful to examine them with any detail here as they have no significant bearing upon the present discussion. On the other hand, there are a number of critics who astutely locate the speed of information and, subsequently, of contemporary human existence as a central area of scrutiny in the novel. For instance, Michael Naas proposes that *Cosmopolis* documents “the speeding up of time and events in a postmodern world where fortunes can be made and lost in hours, and events on one side of the world can ripple across to the other side in minutes.” Naas is here alluding to the rapidity with which information technologies can relay events, and the instantaneity with which basic everyday functions can be carried out through these devices. In a similar observation, Peter Boxall also argues that *Cosmopolis* affirms the emergence of an information-rampant age that diminishes and challenges the premise of a material existence:

In the new space and time of electronic globalisation, approaching is indistinguishable from receding, here can morph into there, the very possibility of distance gives way to an unboundaried, simultaneous presence, in which all realities occur at once.

For Boxall, the type of immediate access that information technologies provide renders obsolete the very idea of spatial distance as well as the premise of physical action – the “approaching” and “receding”, the “here” and “there” – that this spatiality presumes. Both Naas and Boxall locate the speed of information as a quintessential thematic avenue in *Cosmopolis* and, in doing so, offer useful points of consideration alongside

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13 For example, see Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer’s Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011). Giammo reads *Cosmopolis* as a morality tale, interpreting Packer’s financial downfall and self-destructive behaviour as a reminder of the immorality of rampant capitalism and corporate greed. In a similar vein, see Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual: DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* and the Corruption of the Absent Body”, pp. 140-62. Valentino detects in *Cosmopolis* a parable about the decline of civic virtue and the need to reassess corporate ethics. Likewise, see Varsava, “The ‘Saturated Self’: Don DeLillo on the Problem of Rogue Capitalism”, pp. 78-107. Varsava suggests that the novel offers a cautionary tale about the excesses of global capitalism and solipsistic and immoral behaviour that is wrought by such a system of finance. Elsewhere, see Joseph M. Conte, “Writing Amid the Ruins: 9/11 and *Cosmopolis*”, *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. John N. Duvall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For Conte, *Cosmopolis* poses an attempt to register the preconditions of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Conte shows how the context of the terrorist attacks lends particular gravity and relevance to DeLillo’s critique of the corporate greed and consumerism inherent in American capitalism, conditions that rendered America a target of these terrorist attacks. On a similar topic, see also Laist, “The Concept of Disappearance in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*”, pp. 257-75. Laist proposes that the collapse of the World Trade Center and Packer’s own physical and financial disintegration constitute echoes or analogues of one another, where both posit a reflection on the self-destructive, suicidal implications of Western economic hegemony that creates the conditions of its own demise.


some of the concerns that are explored here. What my analysis adds to this insight, though, is an account of how this speed of information can be read as a new mode of movement, one that takes place in the form and shape of DeLillo’s language. This focus on what the medium of the novel and the features of a prose-based apparatus contribute to the theorisation of speed and information lends a further dimension to the current body of scholarship, one that expressly situates movement as a necessary site of debate in *Cosmopolis*.

**Whittled Words: The Immediacy of Linguistic Form**

What is most discernible about DeLillo’s language in *Cosmopolis* is its sparing form and the way in which it acts as a register for the phenomenon of speed documented in the novel. DeLillo talks about this style of prose in an interview with radio personality Michael Krasny. The author alludes to how the length and density of language in *Cosmopolis* markedly differs from that of an earlier work such as *Underworld*:

> When I wrote *Underworld*, I made a resolve of a completely different kind. I wanted to open up the sentence, write longer sentences, get more into it, absorb more in the course of a sentence or a paragraph. And in [*Cosmopolis*], I decided to do quite the opposite. […] I found that this style worked for this book. 16

As DeLillo’s longest book to date, *Underworld* makes use of weightier sentences, employing a system of expression that requires a lengthier span of prose. There is a deliberate attempt to stretch the very limits of the novel form and the linguistic magnitude of the text. In contrast to this work, *Cosmopolis* presents a serious reduction both in terms of the length of its sentences as well as the novel form itself. Standing at a comparatively meagre two hundred or so pages, the novel presents one of the shortest works in the DeLillo oeuvre and could arguably creep under the word-length of a novella. This section argues that the sparse and economic form that language assumes in *Cosmopolis* underscores the type of speed that is at play within Packer’s world of digital finance. Packer’s chief of technology, Shiner, introduces readers to this concept of speed early in the novel when he exclaims during a meeting with the protagonist:

> All this optimism, all this booming and soaring. Things happen like bang. This and that simultaneous. I put out my hand and what do I feel? I know there’s a thousand things you

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16 DeLillo, “Don DeLillo: Forum with Michael Krasny”.
analyze every ten minutes. Patterns, ratios, indexes, whole maps of information. I love information. This is our sweetness and light. It’s a fuckall wonder. (14)

The “wonder” of speed that Shiner describes in awe is one that takes place in the realm of information. The immediacy and swift efficiency with which information ensues, where “things happen like bang”, is foregrounded by a linguistic form that is similarly thrifty and prompt in its delivery. There is, I suggest, a connective tissue between the novel’s imagining of movement based on the speed of information and DeLillo’s tendency to employ a leaner mode of prose that lends expression to this process.

A key aspect of language in the novel is the sense of lightness with which it takes place. This idea of lightness is one that I appropriate from Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity”, a term that he uses to describe the current cultural era. For Bauman, “liquidity” posits an efficacious metaphor for twenty-first-century modernity because it speaks to the “fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive, and fugitive” conditions that typifies contemporary reality, one in which the increasing mobilisation of people, information, goods, and images via recent technologies exemplifies a certain fluid logic. A prominent feature of this liquid modernity is what Bauman describes as its “lightness,” a cultural ethos that dispenses with all qualities of bulkiness and heaviness, with things that slow one down. As he suggests,

Bulkiness and size are turning from assets into liabilities. For capitalists who would rather exchange massive office buildings for hot-air balloon cabins, buoyancy is the most profitable and the most cherished of assets; and buoyancy can be best enhanced by throwing overboard every bit of non-vital load and leaving the non-indispensable members of the crew on the ground.

Bauman’s “light modernity” is one that consequently eschews cumbersome weight, shedding objects and conditions that compromise rapidity and slick efficiency as surplus baggage. I want to suggest that this lightness Bauman talks about finds poignant expression in the lean build that language takes in DeLillo’s prose, and that this thrifty

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19 Ibid., pp. 121-22.
composition offers a linguistic embodiment of the speed of information central to the novel.

Indeed, the reticence towards bulk that typifies this condition of lightness finds its perfect proponent in Eric Packer. Packer abhors anything that connotes excess baggage and this volition to stay light is most pronounced in his perception and use of language. This is established in the very beginning of the novel when, contemplating his giant residential tower that spans eighty-nine stories, Packer muses about the word “skyscraper”:

He took out his hand organizer and poked a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper. No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born. (9)

What is striking here is that Packer appears less bothered by the object, the material referent of the skyscraper in all its looming totality, than by the “olden” quality of the terminology that is used to designate the architecture. If the building presents “a commonplace oblong whose only statement was its size” (8), the linguistic term “skyscraper” equally suggests a heaving mass both in terms of its alphabetic length and the connotations it brings to mind. The hefty word appears, for Packer, too slow and cumbersome in a cultural existence founded on the sleek efficiency of information flow. This tendency to be critical of words that connote a clumsy bulk is reiterated during the day. Later in the novel, Packer similarly fusses about the word “walkie-talkie”:

He saw a police lieutenant carrying a walkie-talkie. What entered his mind when he saw this? He wanted to ask the man why he was still using such a contraption, still calling it what he called it, carrying the nitwit rhyme out of the age of industrial glut into smart spaces built on beams of light. (102)

As with the earlier scenario, Packer’s incredulity lies with a term that, in his opinion, belongs in the crudeness of an “industrial” age. The sense of heavy drag that the word implies appears incongruent with the “smart spaces” in which Packer operates, spaces of electronic processing and online market transactions that operate at speed and that require a thriftier mode of linguistic inscription.
Packer’s reluctance towards accumulating any superfluous weight in language is not only inherent in his reservation towards particular words, but also extends to his whole method of conversation. Packer instils a light immediacy in the words that are spoken, using words sparingly when talking and paring down sentences to their most basic form. This linguistic style has been the object of criticism in commentaries on the novel. In a review for *The New York Times*, Walter Kim presents a scathing criticism of the clipped nature of DeLillo’s diction, describing it as “a numbing abacus calculation in prose that makes the staccato operas of Philip Glass sound like Walt Whitman poems by comparison.”

Neither is Kim the only critic to pose this viewpoint. In a similar observation in *The New Yorker*, John Updike comments that DeLillo’s dialogue harbours a “lobotomized quality.” However, in my reading of the association between language and speed, the briefness with which speech ensues in *Cosmopolis* is precisely the point. DeLillo’s streamlining of language to the point of rendering it staccato-esque posits a perfect linguistic rhythm that performs, at the level of words, a type of speed that proceeds with immediacy. This trend is evident in the novel’s very first lines of dialogue when Packer, before boarding his limousine, informs his bodyguard that he wants a haircut on the other side of town.

I want a haircut.
The president’s in town.
We don’t care. We need a haircut. We need to go crosstown.
You will hit traffic that speaks in quarter inches. (11)

What is illuminating about this exchange is less its content than the rhythm to which the conversation proceeds. DeLillo has admitted in previous interviews that he pays as much attention to the meter of his sentences as to their meaning, and this is clearly the case here. The first two lines are punctuated by a four-word beat, while each sentence in the third line exceeds no more than five words. The final line, itself quite meagre, presents the lengthiest sentence of the lot. Packer displays an austere pragmatism in his delivery of words. DeLillo’s tendency to cut dialogue short and his reluctance to use

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<http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/03/31/030331crbo_books1>

22 During an interview with Thomas LeClair, DeLillo remarks that “[w]hat writing means to me is trying to make interesting, clear, beautiful language. Working at sentences and rhythms is probably the most satisfying thing I do as a writer.” See LeClair, “An Interview with Don DeLillo”, *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, p. 6.
conjunctions or multiple clauses that might prolong a given sentence lend the conversation precisely the lobotomised tone to which the critics allude. In mincing his words, Packer treats language in a way that more fittingly inscribes the “smart spaces built on beams of light” to which he earlier alluded and the qualities of lightness and swiftness that they bring to mind. It is particularly telling that the bodyguard attempts to dissuade Packer from this trip crosstown because of “traffic that speaks in quarter inches.” This reticence towards the experience of prolonged duration and the unnecessary accumulation of factors that will bear them down not only extends to travel but is also reflected in a conversational tone that is kept as brief as possible. This pruning of dialogue into a leaner form consequently rehearses and privileges concepts of lightness and immediacy that are essential attributes of a society governed by the speed of information.

There is a key point in the novel where Packer’s reflection on this condition of speed and his sparing calibration of language that underlines this condition perfectly intersect. During a lengthy meeting with his Chief of Theory, Vija Kinski, Packer converses about the way in which the velocity at which electronic information and capital circulate radically shortens our experience and perception of time. Kinski begins the following conversation in which the pair comes to terms with this acceleration of time:

“It’s cyber-capital that creates the future. What is the measurement called a nanosecond?”

“Ten to the minus ninth power.”

“This is what.”

“One billionth of a second,” he said.

“I understand none of this. But it tells me how rigorous we need to be in order to take adequate measure of the world around us.”

“There are zeptoseconds.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“Yoctoseconds. One septillionth of a second.” (79)

Packer and Kinski voice their amazement here at the near instantaneity with which information and capital proceed, accelerating social functions and experiences to such a degree that renders necessary a lexicon based on miniscule units of time. The discussion here centres on the drastic reduction in the cultural conception of time as a result of technologies that allow for such astounding rates of transmission. The privileging of a vocabulary based on nanoseconds, zeptoseconds, and yoctoseconds points to a horizon
of speed that verges on immediacy. What is particularly striking about this passage is that the meditation on this accelerated culture is not only inherent in the content of what is being said, but also in the accelerated linguistic form that this discussion takes. While Packer and Kinski marvel at new extremes of speed, there is a jarring immediacy in the language of the conversation that registers this temporal efficiency. DeLillo parses down language to a bare form, frequently using punctuation to minimise the word density of each sentence. One gets a sense here that sentences are stripped to their bare minimum, leaving out any extra persiflage. The frugal lightness with which language is treated here, decimating any sense of unnecessary duration, becomes a necessary linguistic mould in order to underline the way in which recent technologies have drastically economised our sense of time and pushed at new thresholds of speed. In its promptness of expression, language itself plays out a logic of immediacy that foregrounds the notion of temporal instantaneity that is quintessential to Packer’s society.

It is because of this agency of lean language in communicating an accelerated culture of information that Packer gleans a special significance in the linguistic sparseness of poetry. In a telling incident during his daytrip, Packer stops at the Gotham Book Mart between Fifth and Sixth Avenue and finds himself meandering through the poetry alcove. What specifically draws Packer to the books of poetry is the paucity of words that the poetic form brings.

He stood in the poetry alcove at the Gotham Book Mart, leafing through chapbooks. He browsed lean books always, half a fingerbreadth or less, choosing poems to read based on length and width. He looked for poems of four, five, six lines. He scrutinized such poems, thinking into every intimation, and his feelings seemed to float in the white space around the lines. There were marks on the page and there was the page. The white was vital to the soul of the poem. (66)

What Packer is attracted to here is the leanness of poetic language: his preference for “four, five, six lines” of verse echoes his tendency to decimate words when speaking. The fact that Packer glimpses a particular importance in the “white space around the lines,” a space that marks the linguistic void of written language, further underlines a preference for a linguistic expression stripped of all superfluity. In doing so, Packer’s musings on the sparseness of poetic verse feature a meta-commentary on the very language and narrative length of the novel itself. The poetry volumes that span “half a fingerbreadth or less” operate as a microcosm for the equally lean shape that language
assumes in *Cosmopolis*, one where the author pays as much attention to the “length and width” of language as much as his protagonist. The thinness of prose that is at work in the novel, encapsulated here by the thinness of poetry, is a necessary linguistic register because it embodies the culture of acceleration in which Packer exists. The prevalence of the information systems that Packer and Kinski discuss within the late-capitalist era, ones that proceed at near-instantaneous rates, requires the type of linguistic form that *Cosmopolis* presents, one that channels a swiftness of expression. The lightness of language and the lean shape of the novel form in *Cosmopolis* consequently enact, in the sphere of words, a sense of the fleeting speed of information that govern this new early twenty-first century modernity.

“The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols”: A Posthuman Concept of Movement

This fleeting speed of information that the lean language and shape of the novel foreground comprises a new aesthetic prospect of movement, one that takes place not in the fleshly travail of a human body but in the luminescent and abstract realm of electronic data. In marvelling at the nanoseconds and zeptoseconds at which information is transmitted, Packer and Kinski’s conversation introduces a phenomenon of moving that lies outside the faculty of human bodily action. Packer’s constant immersion in the datasphere of market information, news, and assets attests to a relentless circulation of electronic data and DeLillo discerns a type of beauty in this kinetic stream of information. This section identifies this flow of information as a new aesthetic inscription of movement within Packer’s world of high-speed finance and cutting-edge information technologies, and suggests that the textual economy of words lends itself as a perfect medium for activating this abstract movement of numbers and information. Furthermore, this movement of electronic data is one that conditions a suppression of the body and its capacity for physical action. While the realm of information operates with increasing speed and agency, the body registers a more subdued and diminished entity as a consequence of a dependence on this technology. The world of late-capitalism in *Cosmopolis*, where information systems influence a significant aspect of social existence, demands a certain compromise of bodies and their habits of movement, as well as their ontologies. This section proposes that by attributing a primary agency to the speed of information and data, the novel introduces a “posthuman” concept of movement, one that takes place beyond the body and, in doing so, questions and rethinks the function and agency of this material body.
In introducing this idea of the “posthuman”, I find N. Katherine Hayles’ formulation of the term useful because it helps to articulate the conceptual shift towards this regime of movement that I locate in DeLillo’s representation of advanced information technologies. In her landmark work, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Hayles calls for a need to rethink what it means to be “human” in light of information and cybernetic technologies that push and expand the thresholds of human subjectivity and material existence. As she explains,

> In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.

The posthuman consequently points to a condition where the boundaries of the human body and subjectivity are redefined and adapted by information technologies. Crucially, Hayles’ concept of the posthuman is not one that rushes headlong to embrace some disembodied state of technological supremacy, and she works hard to preserve the vital importance of human material existence while at the same time examining how human experience and the very category of the “human” assumes new forms. As she adamantly reminds readers, “my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality.” Hayles’ theorisation of the posthuman is, above all, concerned with how one might rethink the idea of the “human” in an era when the boundaries of human identity and existence are increasingly negotiated, adapted, and questioned by newly emerging technologies. I want to suggest that both the idea behind and the agenda underpinning the “posthuman” posits a similar efficacy for rethinking the definition and function of movement, for analysing how the cultural operations of information technologies is working to resituate the very terrain of what movement is in a turn of the millennium society of technological affluence. DeLillo’s novel highlights a “posthuman” sensibility of movement, one that resituates movement from the exertion and labour of bodies to the enterprise of information. In arguing for a posthuman conception of movement, I am not attempting to “do away” with the body but rather to suggest how movement accrues new phenomena via

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24 Ibid., p. 3.
25 Ibid., p. 5.
information technologies that require a certain reduction in the materiality of the body and its movements.

DeLillo instils an almost poetic quality in the manner that he describes the electronic transmission of information. If previous chapters exhibit the beautiful and eloquent choreography of bodies in motion, the reader finds in *Cosmopolis* a different kind of beautiful motion altogether in the immaterial and pulsating stream of data. The aestheticisation of information in this manner is most evident when Packer and Kinski, continuing their previous conversation, walk between Sixth and Seventh Avenue and find themselves transfixed by the massive and multi-tiered display of stock information that is projected above Times Square. Packer absorbs this sight in a state of wonder:

The south side of the street was nearly empty of pedestrians. He led her out of the car and onto the sidewalk, where they were able to get a partial view of the electronic display of market information, the moving message units that streaked across the face of an office tower on the other side of Broadway. Kinski was transfixed. [...] These were tiers of data running concurrently and swiftly about a hundred feet above the street. Financial news, stock prices, currency markets. The action was unflagging. The hellbent sprint of numbers and symbols, the fractions, decimals, stylized dollar signs, the streaming release of words, of multinational news, all too fleet to be absorbed. (80)

What is compelling in this passage is the way in which DeLillo describes the stream of financial data in the terms of a rhetoric based on motion so that information is made to move and streak across the tower. The terminology used here – “streaking”, “running”, “sprinting”, “streaming” – narrates the transmission of stock prices and financial data as a riveting spectacle of movement. There is a similar use of language in earlier passages when describing the activity of data on the computer screens in Packer’s limousine, screens that “showed money moving. There were numbers gliding horizontally and bar charts pumping up and down.” (63) Similarly, when Packer first steps into his vehicle at the start of the day, the first thing he notices are the medleys of data on every screen, all the flowing symbols and alpine charts, the polychrome numbers pulsing. [...] The context was nearly touchless. He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank. (13)

Here, DeLillo draws attention to a mode of operating technology that forfeits tactile interaction and requires very little physical movement. The “pulsing” data and figures
appear more lively and vibrant in this passage than Packer’s body whose physical faculties are not needed. This comparison reformulates the very idea of what “action” is. The term “action” has so far been employed in this thesis to refer to vigorous and expansive bodily feats. However, in the scenarios above, the abstract drama of digits and numbers “pumping up and down” at speed takes precedence and instils a notion of “action” that demands very little of the body. Accordingly, Kinski’s reaction to this frenetic display – “Does it ever stop? Does it slow down? Of course not. Why should it? Fantastic.” (80) – typifies a pleasurable response to watching a new regime of movement, one inherent in the “hellbent sprint” of numbers, unfold.

It is in language that this posthuman aesthetics of movement – one where the terrain of motion shifts from the physical labour of the body to the enterprise of information – is instated and made possible. The terminologies that reference movement are not only employed to express the information that appear above Times Square, but are further used recurrently throughout the text to describe the activity of electronic data. For example, when observing the flow of market information on the computer screens in Packer’s limousine, Kinski exclaims, “Look at those numbers running.” (79, my emphasis) Similarly, Packer registers the debris of data financial data on the face of another building as “currency prices skimming across the building just ahead.” (84, my emphasis) A little while later, Packer affirms, “It thrilled him to think in zeptoseconds and to watch the numbers in their unrelenting run […] to see prices spiral into lubricious plunge.” (106, my emphasis) DeLillo’s careful selection of words here proceeds beyond the domain of metaphor: the very persistence of this terminology attempts to reorient the bearings of how movement, as a phenomenon, might be construed. By attributing the sphere of information a range of root verbs that are ordinarily used to connote different types of human motion, the very grounds of what constitutes movement shifts from a matter of human bodily action to the action of pulsing numbers and signals that occurs in a space beyond that of physical endeavour. In other words, a lexicon that is ordinarily reserved for the description of motor bodily activity is transposed to designate the electronic circulation of information. In doing so, this lexicon actively sets in motion and imagines a movement that, while it is instigated by human agency, nevertheless occurs outside of the reach of human action. Consequently, it is in language that this new condition of moving, one that is situated away from the body, is actualised.
This idea that it is expressly within the textual medium of words that the expression of this abstract movement is made possible is further reinforced if one considers, as a point of comparison, the filmic treatment of this subject matter in David Cronenberg’s cinematic adaptation *Cosmopolis* (2012). For all Cronenberg’s achievements in successfully appropriating DeLillo’s novel for the screen, the film is not able to communicate this same conceptualisation of information as a moving phenomenon that is privileged in the novel. It is certainly suggestive that the electronic data of market information as a narrative spectacle assumes less prominence in the images of the film. While Packer’s computer screens are omnipresent in most of the scenes, they often feature in the background or periphery of the screen with the effect that the viewer cannot discern the spectacle of information as a central focus of narration in the same way that the reader can in DeLillo’s prose. In the rare instances when there is a close-up on Packer’s screens, the stream of data appear dull and lack the same quality of dynamic enterprise that it possesses when phrased in the form of words. For example, in a frame taken from the film below (Figure 4.1), while the image displays the medley of

![Figure 4.1](image)

*Figure 4.1*

*Cosmopolis*

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currency information rolling down a computer screen in Packer’s limousine, these numbers do not take on any of the kinetic expressiveness that is generated in the medium of prose. The very idea of information and numbers moving comprises a spectacle that cannot readily be visualised in a cinematic form because it presents an immaterial phenomenon that takes place in the abstract spaces of electronic channels. While Cronenberg’s film may be able to show the content of an electronic screen displaying streams of numbers, it is unable to sustain the very concept of this data as movement that is foregrounded in the above passages. In other words, it is language itself that enables information to “run”, “sprint”, and “leap” in the manner that it does in the novel. This condition of movement is one that comes about through the very agency of words, through a lexicon of verbs that connote the process of moving. Equally importantly, it is through the intercession of language that the display of market information that Packer sees above Times Square, one that poses a rather mundane visual prospect, attains an aesthetic quality. The recurring sibilance in the passage attributes a poetic fluency and rhythm to the flow of information so that this abstract movement plays out with a pleasing linguistic panache. As Packer muses, “He found beauty and precision there, hidden rhythms in the fluctuations of a given currency” (76), and this beauty and eloquence is one that shapes itself in language. I refer to Cronenberg’s film not to undermine it, or to devalue the technical attributes of cinema, but rather to underline the point that the economy of words attends to different imaginings of movement that exceeds the medium of film. This foray into Cronenberg’s film demonstrates that the conceptual understanding of electronic data as an immaterial and abstract form of moving is expressly contingent on the operations of DeLillo’s language.

As information comprises the primary agent and spectacle of movement in the language of Cosmopolis, the bodies in the text become increasingly compromised both in their extent of physical action and in their ontology, their very status and existence as material beings. The speed with which information moves displaces the very necessity for human movement and, in doing so, suppresses the physical faculties and presence of the body. This displacement of bodily agency is particularly pronounced during an incident in which Packer observes in his limousine news footage documenting the assassination of a business rival, Arthur Rapp:
Arthur Rapp had just been assassinated in Nike North Korea. Happened only a minute ago. Eric watched it happen again, in obsessive replays, as the car crawled toward a choke point on Lexington Avenue. [...] A man in a short-sleeve shirt came into camera range and began to stab Arthur Rapp in the face and neck. Arthur Rapp clutched the man and seemed to draw him nearer as if to share a confidence. They tumbled together to the floor, tangled in the mike cord of the interviewer. (33)

What makes this incident a striking case for this discussion is the manner of Packer’s reception to the murder in his limousine halfway across the globe. Packer’s ability to comfortably access from the seat of his vehicle an event that occurs at a substantial geographic distance from his present location, and merely one minute after it occurs, registers the disavowal of bodily action that the speed of information instigates. Packer does not have to physically remove himself from the immediate confines of his vehicle and travel to the location of the assassination in order to access an event that occurs some 6,800 miles away. Just as, in language, the lexicon of movement is removed from the exertion of human motion to the enterprise of information, here Packer’s bodily action is deterred by the speed of an information system that relays events to him while he remains sedentary.

Furthermore, it is not only Packer’s body that is diminished as a consequence of the flow of information in this scenario. The body of Arthur Rapp also loses its very sense of materiality due to the very speed of the news reportage. Despite the visceral violence and bodily trauma that underpins the murder, Rapp is registered in this episode as little more than a stream of information that is transmitted to the screens in Packer’s car. Packer’s sardonic observation that “[Rapp] was killed live on the Money Channel” (33) attributes priority less to the gruesome physicality of the event than to the transmission of the event as information. That is, the very significance of the bodily act is subsumed under its ability to feature almost instantaneously via digital channels, attaining little more significance than the medley of financial data that appear on Packer’s screens. This relegation of Rapp’s body is further stressed when Packer observes,

There was a close-up on one of the screens. It was Arthur Rapp’s pulpy face blowing outward in spasms of shock and pain. It resembled a mass of pressed vegetable matter. Eric wanted them to show it again. Show it again. They did this, of course, and he knew they would do it repeatedly into the night, our night, until the sensation drained out of it or everyone in the world had seen it [...]. (33-34)
The initial attention to the fleshy mass of Rapp’s figure is immediately undercut by Packer’s urgency to “show it again”, the presence and relevance of Rapp’s materiality undermined by Packer’s preoccupation with the obsessive digital replay of the incident. It is in this respect that the posthuman condition described by Hayles is particularly suggestive, one where Hayles contends, “the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation.”27 As Packer’s reaction demonstrates, what takes precedence is the relaying of the event in the form of information rather than the acknowledgement of a physical event that has very serious repercussions on a material body. Consequently, the ability of information to move at speed – the “hellbent sprint” that DeLillo uses to describe the transmission of information – not only displaces the necessity of bodily action but also undermines the very presence and reality of the body as a material being.

The substantial reduction in the ontology of the body is further underlined in another incident within the novel. As the day unfolds and the value of the yen steadily rises against his predictions, Packer methodically expends vast sums in the market to leverage a fall in the yen. At one point, having exhausted all of his own funds in the market, Packer electronically accesses and transfers millions from his wife’s bank account into his own. What is key in this scenario is the manner in which his manipulation of digital information systems, one that relies on the speed of electronic processing, creates a scenario that radically compromises the material function and status of both himself and his wife. As Packer recounts,

The crystal on his wristwatch was also a screen. When he activated the online function, the other features receded. It took him a moment to decode a series of encrypted signatures. This is how he used to hack into corporate systems, testing their security for a fee. He did it this time to examine the bank, brokerage and offshore accounts of Elise Shifrin and then to impersonate her algorithmically and transfer the money in these accounts to Packer Capital, where he opened a new account for her, more or less instantaneously, by thumbnailing some numbers on the tiny keypad that was set around the bezel of the watch. Then he went about losing the money, spreading it systematically in the smoke of rumbling markets. (123)

What is notable in this account is the physical effortlessness with which Packer manages to perform these tasks. There is little bodily exertion involved in Packer’s act of illegally rewiring his wife’s vast fortune, as he manages this all from the minute

operations of his fingers upon the keypads of his multifunctional watch. In his discussion, John Tomlinson refers to this effortlessness of bodily action in the use of advanced electronic technologies:

There is little effort in communicating; there seem to be few real obstacles to overcome: just scroll through your electronic address book and press the call button on your mobile, or click on ‘Send’ in your Outlook Express. These manipulations are light, deft and smoothly choreographed into our working rhythms: they almost seem less physical operations than gestures – legerdemain.28

Tomlinson’s point helps elucidate the way in which Cosmopolis hones in on the diminution of bodily exertion, the bypassing of more active and arduous forms of human action in light of the instantaneity of electronic processing whose abstract movement comes at the expense of expansive bodily action.

Perhaps more importantly, Packer’s operations in the world of electronic finance not only come at the cost of his own material agency but also that of his wife’s. Similar to Arthur Rapp earlier, Elise Shifrin is registered solely as a sequence of information, an algorithm to be impersonated and decrypted electronically rather than as an embodied presence. The very idea of Elise as an algorithm, as “lines of code that interact in simulated space” (124), poses an extension of the novel’s critique of the way in which the abstract sphere of digits and data dislodges the body, not only its capacity for action but also its very sense of material being. The transposition of Elise’s presence and function as a body into an ensemble of decoded digits actualises something that Packer mentions earlier in the book while he contemplates the display of data on his computer screen:

This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet’s living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole. (24)

Packer’s musings offer an observation that, in the era of late-capitalism, the very premise of the body – its functions, movements, and physical being – is subsumed into and displaced by the realm of information, by the “zero-oneness of the world.”

reflection in this passage anticipates and lends further significance to his actions later in digitally impersonating his wife. Elise exists in this passage as little more than the “eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems”, her bodily entity subsumed by the velocity of information. The posthuman condition of movement that the novel scrutinises, one where information displaces the body as the primary agent and spectacle of movement, is one that precipitates a subdued and increasingly suppressed body.

“Show me my car”: The Limousine in Language
The displacement of movement as a bodily spectacle, one based on the agency and vivacity of the body, is further underlined in the way that the movement of the limousine is privileged in the language of the text. Packer’s stretch limousine provides the agent for much of the physical movement that takes place within the novel and, in doing so, reconfigures the function of what bodily movement entails at the turn of the millennium, one that narrates less the powerful and wilful exertion of a body than a largely sedentary body ensconced within a moving vehicle. In Michael Naas’ study of the novel, the critic makes a compelling suggestion that Packer’s limousine provides much of the narrative, proceeding so far as to propose that the novel’s “main protagonist is not really […] twenty-eight-year-old billionaire Eric Packer but his limousine, his automobile.”29 Although Naas’ discussion of the automobile does not focus specifically on the dynamics of its movement through the city, his observation pin-points the limousine as an important presence within the novel. I want to suggest that the central place that the limousine occupies within the text, inhabiting a significant focus of narration, has telling implications for thinking about how the human experience of movement in *Cosmopolis* demands the diminished status of the body. While the vehicle cannot, of course, operate without human agency, the manner in which DeLillo repeatedly brings the exertions of the limousine to the forefront of the text and in which he affords the vehicle a certain primacy in language works to deprive the body the endeavour of moving in the linguistic sphere of words. At the level of language, then, the movement of the body is subsumed under the narration of vehicular travel, activating a conceptual shift from the notion of a body *moving* of its own accord to one that is *moved* by the agency of a streamlined transport technology.

DeLillo establishes from the very outset the prominent agency that the car will assume during the course of the narrative. As Packer steps out of his residence, he is struck by the overbearing physicality of the vehicle:

He liked the fact that the cars were indistinguishable from each other. He wanted such a car because he thought it was a platonic replica, weightless for all its size, less an object than an idea. But he knew this wasn’t true. This was something he said for effect and he didn’t believe it for an instant. He believed it for an instant but only just. He wanted the car because it was not only oversized but aggressively and contumaciously so, metastasizingly so, a tremendous mutant thing that stood astride every argument against it. (10)

What Packer is responding to is the substantial and palpable materiality of the vehicle, something that is reiterated later in the text when he asks his driver where the limousines are stored at night: “These stretch limousines that fill the streets. I’ve been wondering. […] Where are they parked at night? They need large tracts of space.” (171) Packer’s enquiry attests to the sheer physical presence that the limousine occupies in the streets of New York. However, it is less the physicality of the limousine that draws my interest than its linguistic presence in the text, the way in which its perambulation through Manhattan is foregrounded in the prose of the novel. The car not only comprises an important material entity, but also a ubiquitous linguistic entity throughout the text. It is not only a “tremendous mutant thing” that fills the streets of New York but also something that equally fills up the language of the novel: its roaming movements assume persistent attention throughout the expanse of DeLillo’s prose and, in doing so, further demonstrates how the narration and conception of movement in *Cosmopolis* distances itself from the premise of bodily exertion.

The movements of the vehicle permeate the structural layout of the text. Often, paragraphs and chapters commence with a description of the limousine’s endeavour as it wends its way through traffic, registering its many stops and starts as it meanders along 47th Street. Readers first catch a glimpse of the vehicle’s activity at the start of the sixth paragraph of the novel, which begins by conveying, “The car ran into stalled traffic before it reached Second Avenue.” (13) From this first glimpse, updates on the trajectory of the limousine comprise a constant textual interlude throughout the narrative. For example, readers are offered the report that “The car drifted into gridlock on Third Avenue” (23) merely a few pages later. Further reports such as “The car began to move” (24) and “The car came to a stop in front of the apartment building” (25)
resonate like a litany in the course of the novel. The fact that these accounts of the vehicle are often situated at the start of a paragraph or chapter lends its movements a position of priority in the procession of language. That is, the downtown cruise of the vehicle is not an incidental backdrop in the narrative but an active and foregrounded presence in the structural course of the prose, its every twist and turn documented in close detail. Commenting on this detail with which DeLillo narrates the limousine, David Cowart notes that “The text reveals [Packer’s] progress as an inexorable arrowing westward on 47th Street, and DeLillo takes a cartographer’s care with the avenues his character crosses.”30 Indeed, DeLillo sets up a meticulous catalogue of the streets and landmarks that the car passes through from First Avenue to Eleventh Avenue.31 However, it is not this realistic cartography of Manhattan to which I want to draw attention but, rather, to how the repeated inscription of this cartographic detail in the words and paragraphs of the novel brings to the fore the motion of Packer’s limousine in language. The perambulation of the vehicle homogenises the language of Cosmopolis, permeating the entire expanse of the text. In doing so, the language of the novel locates the vehicle itself as the agent of movement. In turn, Packer’s body and the bodies of other passengers are denied status and agency as the linguistic subjects of movement. Similar to the earlier instances where the lexicon of kinetic words were selectively attributed to electronic information, language affords the limousine its own spectacle and drama of movement and consequently denies, within its content and composition, the possibility of a movement founded on bodily exertion.

The limousine’s role in suppressing the bodily spectacle of movement is particularly underlined in an incident when Packer picks up his chief of finance, Jane Melman, in his vehicle while she is in the midst of a jogging exercise. Melman exemplifies the only figure in the novel who displays any capacity for energetic and agile movement. Packer first sees Melman “on the other side of the avenue, his chief of finance, dressed in jogging shorts and a tank top, moving in a wolverine lope.” (38) However, this spectacle of “breathless and sweaty” (39) athletic enterprise that Melman embarks upon is brief. Interrupted by Packer’s sudden request for a meeting in his limousine, Melman is forced to abandon her outing and “[fall] into the jump seat with the kind of grim

31 For a detailed description of Packer’s journey along 47th Street and all the major landmarks along this path, see ibid., pp. 219-20.
deliverance that marks a deadweight drop to the toilet.” (39) Indeed, Packer mocks Melman for her jogging:

The minute you sat there in that whole tragic regalia of running. That whole Judeo-Christian jogging. You were not born to run. I look at you. I know what you are. You are sloppy-bodied, smelly and wet. A woman who was born to sit strapped in a chair […]. (49-50)

Sitting in the vehicle, Melman is told by Packer that she is “a woman who wants to live shamelessly in her body. Tell me this is not the truth. You want to follow your body into idleness and fleshiness.” (49) Consequently, Melman’s act of “flinging [her] body down Madison Avenue” (40) is displaced by a state of idleness in the backseat of Packer’s automobile. As Melman becomes a passenger in Packer’s limousine, the momentary narration of her “Judeo-Christian jogging” is replaced by persistent updates on the vehicles motion: “The car was not moving” (39); “The car moved faintly forward now” (40); “The car crossed Madison and stopped in front of the Mercantile Library as planned” (41). The language of the text consequently shifts the endeavour of moving away from Melman’s body to the vehicle in which Melman and Packer’s bodies are ensconced, and to which they forfeit their physical agency. Melman’s fleeting remark, “I thought we were moving. But we’re not anymore” (45), suggests a lack of bodily awareness as the labour of moving is transferred from the body to the vehicle. Melman’s scenario consequently demonstrates how the language of the novel harbours a certain elusiveness and fleetingness of description where the narration of exertive bodily action is concerned, privileging instead the limousine whose comings and goings feature as the central drama of movement. Although Melman “resume[s] her interrupted run” (53) after her meeting with Packer, this resumption of vigorous physical action is not permitted narration in the text. DeLillo’s selectiveness and deployment of words participates in depriving the body of authoritative and self-determined movement.

“The Streaming Release of Words”: Packer and Levin’s Showdown in Language

If Melman’s jogging venture affirms the symptoms of a culture in which agile and exertive registers of movement are not readily available, Packer’s exploits in the finale of the text further disavow such concepts of bodily action. This disavowal most emphatically takes place when Packer, having reached his journey’s end and abandoned his limousine, is assailed by gunfire near a derelict tenement building from Benno
Levin, a crazed ex-employee who plans to assassinate Packer. While this dramatic turn of events promises a surge of physical action that has been absent throughout the novel, what transpires instead is a series of occurrences that further exposes the idea of active and wilful movement as a defunct concept in the world of the text. In the midst of this gunfire, Packer, in an extended monologue, bizarrely compares his situation to similar action scenarios witnessed in films he had watched in his childhood with his mother:

I’ve seen a hundred situations like this. A man and a gun and a locked door. My mother used to take me to the movies. After my father died my mother took me to the movies. This is what we did as a parent and a child. And I saw two hundred situations where a man stands outside a locked room with a gun in his hand. My mother could tell you the actor’s name in every case. He stands the way I’m standing, back to the wall. He is ramrod straight and he holds the gun the way I’m holding the gun, pointed up. Then he turns and kicks open the door. The door is always locked and he always kicks it open. These were old movies and new movies. Didn’t matter. There was the door, there was the kick. […] Always a single kick suffices. The door flies open at once. (183-184)

In referring to these films, Packer precisely underlines the type of action-packed, physically intense movement that is missing in *Cosmopolis*. The cinematic scenarios that Packer recalls are reminiscent of the action spectacles typified by the *Casino Royale* and *Jump London* sequences addressed earlier in the thesis. However, these adrenaline-filled feats of motion feature in *Cosmopolis* as little more than a fictional reference that is at complete odds with the actuality of Packer’s circumstances, a fictional image that Packer seeks to simulate. DeLillo’s fiction has, in the past, displayed a preoccupation with the effects that media simulations have in shaping our material culture. There is a Baudrillardian fascination with the way in which our physical reality is pre-empted and conditioned by the simulations that one sees in mass media. While not wanting to overstate this Baudrillardian subtext, something that has been amply covered in previous DeLillo scholarship, the idea nevertheless has suggestive import for thinking about the status of bodily action in this passage. The notion of vigorous movement is here forwarded primarily as a screen simulation that “these mothers with their afternoons at the movies” (185) indulge in. Although Packer succeeds in kicking down the door “heel-first” (186), the act functions as an imitation of the cinematic images that

32 Jean Baudrillard declares in his work a cultural condition of *simulacra*, in which our material reality is always already a simulation of, and preceded by, the images and discourses that one is exposed to in mass media. For a fuller account of this idea, see Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
Packer has absorbed during his childhood. Indeed, Levin acutely points out this fact to Packer: “The crime you want to commit is cheap imitation. It’s a stale fantasy.” (193) As Levin’s words suggest, the endeavour of physical action remains an unfulfilled prospect rather than any meaningful and sustained event that takes place during Packer’s day.

Packer’s references to these films also functions as a commentary on the unique suitability of a visual medium like cinema, particularly the mainstream blockbuster genres to which Packer refers, to narrating action-oriented scenarios of movement. As my analysis in Chapter One shows, the visual conventions of film, with its barrage of briskly edited images and dynamic camera movements, are arguably more effective in communicating the type of highly charged bodily motions that are prevalent in this genre of narratives. The mode of speedy and overstated action characteristic of these films is less suited to narration within prose, especially within the genre of prose adopted by DeLillo’s novels whose agenda gives more priority to the examination of particular conceptual ideas than to the delivery of action-driven narratives. Throughout Packer’s monologue, DeLillo recognises cinema’s propensity to this brand of action and how the exhibition of physical feats feature as a mainstay in these film genres. As Packer remarks,

> Because no matter what kind of movie we went to, it was a spy thriller, it was a western, it was a romance, it was a comedy, there was always a man with a gun outside a locked room who was ready to kick in the door. […] Even science fiction, he stands there with his ray gun and kicks in a door. (184-185)

While these narrative-driven films might promote this mode of forceful and emphatic movement, DeLillo’s prose eschews such explosive and heart-in-mouth exploits. Instead, it offers quieter and more dialogue-driven finale to the novel than the racy action of mainstream film genres.

Accordingly, when Packer succeeds in kicking down the door, what follows is not a thrilling account of pursuit and combat but a procession of details that deflate such physical urgency. Although Packer barges his way into Levin’s apartment, gun blazing, the reception he meets is more pensive than pulsating:
He entered shooting. He did not aim and fire. He just fired. Let it express itself.

The walls were down. This was the first thing he saw in the wobbly light. He was looking into a sizable space with wall rubble everywhere. He tried to spot the subject. There was a shredded sofa, unoccupied, with a stationary bike nearby. He saw a heavy metal desk, battleship vintage, covered with papers. He saw the remains of a kitchen and bathroom, with brutally empty spaces where major appliances had stood. There was a portable orange toilet from a construction site, seven feet tall, mud-smoked and dented. He saw a coffee table with an unlit candle in a saucer and a dozen coins scattered around an Mk.23 military pistol with a matte black finish and an overall length of nine and a half inches, equipped with a laser-aiming module. (186)

Details of Levin’s apartment take up the majority of this passage and annul the eventuality of any physical confrontation. In Chapter One, I suggested the way in which cinematography – the rapid cutting, incessant camera movement, and dramatic camera angles – plays a principal role in actively generating the speedy pace and excitement of movement. However, Packer’s gunfire is narrated in four brief sentences and, presented in the form of words, possesses a comparatively flat quality. Without the helter-skelter that action cinematography provides, and relayed via the clinical composure of DeLillo’s prose, Packer’s actions arguably lack the same thrill and excitement of motion. It is fitting that when Levin comes out of the toilet and finally comes face to face with Packer, what ensues is not a physical showdown but a showdown in rhetoric. As Levin asks Packer,

“What are you doing here?”

“That’s not the question. The question,” Eric said, “is yours to answer. Why do you want to kill me?”

“No, that’s not the question. That’s too easy to be the question. I want to kill you in order to count for something in my own life. See how easy?” (187)

Instead of narrating the blows and parries of the body, DeLillo stages a parrying of words where Packer and Levin tussle for linguistic ascendancy about Levin’s motives for wanting to assassinate Packer. Indeed, Levin’s eventual offer to talk it out with Packer comprises a further exercise in this showdown of words:

“Sit. We’ll talk.”

Eric didn’t want to sit on the exercise bike. The confrontation would crumble into farce. He saw a molded plastic chair, the desk chair, and took it to the coffee table.
“Yes, I’d like that. Sit and talk,” he said. “I’ve had a long day. Things and people. Time for a philosophical pause. Some reflection, yes.” (187)

The resolution to “sit and talk”, and the shunning of the exercise bike and its connotations of bodily travail, signals a physical anti-climax that culminates in a proliferation of dialogue rather than actions. DeLillo’s treatment of the prose form disavows mainstream cinema’s clichés of large-scale bodily feats and recomposes the mechanics of action from bodily conflict to a sparring of words.

Indeed, Packer and Levin’s confrontation takes place entirely as a verbal rally, resigning their bodies to physical inaction. Although it is hinted to the reader that Levin ends up killing Packer, this act takes place beyond the parameters of the text and never actualises within the narrative. Instead, the locus of action takes root within the rhetorical bursts and blows that Packer and Levin exchange. Indeed, DeLillo has expressly alluded to the way in which language becomes an arena for this type of verbal sparring in his previous novels, observing that his characters “engage in wars of jargon with each other. […] They have to make the action part of the remark.”33 This idea that it is in language, rather than in any forceful move that the body performs, that any decisive action occurs becomes more prominent as Packer’s encounter with Levin continues. For example, Packer is nervously aware that the “awfulness of [Levin’s] need, the half-pandering expectancy made it clear that [his] next word, or the one after, could be his last.” (188, my emphasis) It is significant that Packer’s apprehension here lies in the fact that assassination will bring about as much an end to his life as to his agency in language, to the words he speaks in his verbal tussle with Levin. In short, Packer shows reticence at the prospect that Levin, in killing him, will have the last word. As the conversation ensues, it is within the arena of language that Packer seeks to strike his nemesis. When Levin informs Packer of his real name, Packer uses this as leverage to attack his opponent verbally:

“Sheets. Richard Sheets.”

“Means nothing to me.”

He said these words into the face of Richard Sheets. Means nothing to me. He felt a trace of the old stale pleasure, dropping an offhand remark that makes a person feel worthless. So small and forgettable a thing that spins such disturbance. (192, DeLillo’s emphasis)

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33 DeLillo, “An Interview with Don DeLillo”, Conversations with Don DeLillo, p. 5.
Packer recognises here that the showdown taking place is not a matter of high-adrenaline guns and fast moving bodies typified in the action cinema of his childhood but, rather, is being enacted within language where an “offhand remark” belittling an adversary displaces the necessity of a physical strike.

The reconceptualisation of action from physical combat to a tactics of language is further evident when Packer ridicules Levin for not knowing the precise names of the mechanical components that make up his gun. As Packer enquires,

> “What’s the attachment that abuts the trigger guard? What is it called? What does it do?”
> “All right. I don’t have the manhood to know these names. Men know these names. You have the experience of manhood. I can’t think that far ahead. It’s all I can do to be a person.” (196)

This exchange perhaps best exemplifies DeLillo’s subversion and deconstruction of the principles of physical action. The prospect of gunfire, and the propulsion of bodily activity that this gunfire entails, is replaced by Packer’s induction of a language game that seeks to outdo his adversary by knowing the specialist lexicon of gun mechanics. The gun, perhaps the quintessential icon of western action cinema is not employed here as an instigator of dramatic and thrilling movement but is evoked as a topic of conversation, as the focal point of a dispute in language. What unfolds between Packer and Levin in the finale of the novel consequently reifies the text’s disavowal of physical movement, particularly the modes of high-intensity and charged bodily feats that are a hallmark of action cinema. Rather than the bodily twists and turns of physical feats, Packer’s encounter with Levin enacts the twists and turns of rhetoric. DeLillo carefully constructs a concept of action that materialises in the sharp interchanges of words between the two protagonists while relegating their bodies to states of physical repose.

“The speed is the point”: Packer’s Death as Digital Prolepsis

If Packer’s confrontation with Levin demonstrates a forfeiting of the principles of concerted bodily action, the peculiar way in which DeLillo narrates Packer’s death in the closing moments of the novel emphatically consolidates this conceit. Earlier in the chapter, I proposed that the live broadcast of Arthur Rapp’s gruesome assassination privileges the speed of information transfer over the actual physiological event of Rapp’s death. With its emphasis on the instantaneity of the live newsfeed, the importance of Rapp’s murder as a narrative incident was situated not in the physical act
itself, but rather in its speedy transmission as electronic information. In the novel’s ending, the circumstances of Packer’s death – or more accurately, his impending death as it never actualises in the novel – leaves readers with a similar exposure to the way in which the digital speed of data defers the body’s functions as an active agent.

Like Arthur Rapp’s assassination before him, what is intriguing about Packer’s death is its existence in the text as a set of streamed images and data rather than a physical actuality. In a bizarre incident of prolepsis, Packer witnesses images of his dead body on the screen of his wristwatch whilst conversing with Levin. The watch presents a state-of-the-art technology that, earlier, had been used by Packer to hack into and extract millions from his wife’s account. Here, readers are informed that the watch also contains an electron camera, “a device so microscopically refined it was almost pure information. It was almost metaphysics.” (204) It is this refined device that prematurely channels images of Packer’s corpse. Packer is shocked to find that “the watch wasn’t showing the time. There was an image, a face on the crystal, and it was his […] the image on the screen was a body now, facedown on the floor.” (204-205) What takes place here is not Packer’s death in its material occurrence, but rather a scenario of the protagonist’s demise that is played out exclusively in the sphere of informatics. DeLillo’s emphasis that the event takes place primarily as information is even more pronounced when Packer further contemplates his watchface:

When he looked at the watch again, he saw an identification tag. It was a tag in long shot, fixed to a plastic wristband. He knew, he sensed that a zoom shot would follow. He thought of covering the watch but then did not. He saw the tag in tight close-up now and read the legend printed there. Male Z. (206)

DeLillo’s peculiar decision to use a terminology of camerawork – the “long shot” and “zoom shot” – conceptualises Packer’s death as a series of digitised images, privileging its status as screen data rather than as bodily referent. Packer’s demise is, like the electronic camera inside his wristwatch, “almost pure information.” Similar to Rapp’s murder earlier, readers are only privy here to the electronic transmission of Packer’s assassination as streamed images. In setting up Packer’s death in this manner, DeLillo’s directs attention not so much to the demise of his protagonist per se, but to the speed of an information system that relays this event.
This focus on the velocity of information transfer is dramatised even further by the proleptic nature of the streamed images. Packer’s ability to see images of his death on the screen of his watch, presumably the aftermath of his assassination by Levin, presents a startling and exaggerated exposure of the speed of information transfer that proceeds with such rapidity that it pre-empts the actual event itself. Numerous scholars have commented on the fantastic elements of this incident. For instance, Russell Scott Valentino suggests that it marks a departure from the “the work’s neorealist foundations” to more “symbolic interpretations.”34 In a similar vein, Jerry Varsava regards Packer’s technological vision of his mortality as “a flight of technophilic fancy.”35 While the scenario undoubtedly introduces a trace of the fanciful and the incredible, to overstate this notion of the fantastic runs the risk of underplaying the validity of DeLillo’s sustained meditation of informatics throughout the novel, one that is brought to an extreme end here. Rather than subscribing to a purely symbolic reading, I regard this event as a hyperbolised extension of DeLillo’s book-long concern with the new phenomenon and threshold of speed that information processing activates, and its subsequent deferral of the body’s function as an active and immediate presence. By choosing to narrate Packer’s death solely as a flotsam of digitised information that precedes its physical occurrence, DeLillo underlines the insistent velocity of informatics that has informed much of Packer’s activities during the day. The thrifty appearance of Packer’s dead body as screen data plays out something that he had speculated with Kinski earlier in the novel: “Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point.” (80) As Packer muses, the speed with which information circulates is precisely the point: the proleptic revelation of Packer’s death as information dramatises the inexorable thrust and rapidity of information and its constitution of a new phenomenon of movement.

In using Packer’s death to foreground the speed of informatics, the act of Packer’s assassination remains always deferred in the language of DeLillo’s text. Indeed, DeLillo carefully phrases the closing lines of the novel so as to ensure that Packer’s death remains consigned to the realm of information:

His murderer, Richard Sheets, sits facing him. He has lost interest in the man. His hand contains the pain of his life, all of it, emotional and other, and he closes his eyes one more time. This is

34 Valentino, “From Virtue to Virtual: DeLillo’s Cosmopolis and the Corruption of the Absent Body”, p. 146.
not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound. (209)

The final sentence posits a firm reminder that while the informational relay has occurred, the act of Packer’s physiological death has not yet actualised. Packer’s death is registered only as an informational flow “inside the crystal of his watch.” That is, the thrifty operations of information has preceded and deferred its physical eventuality. The fact that Packer is left “waiting for the shot to sound” in these final lines elides his assassination from the linguistic content of the novel. DeLillo’s language actively works here to deny the bodily event of Packer’s death whilst privileging and spectacularising its speedy processing as electronic data. In permitting the realm of information this precedence in the text, the final lines of Cosmopolis leave readers with a lingering image of physical inaction, of a body brought to a state of repose as it awaits death and, with it, its penultimate end.

Conclusion

In an appraisal of DeLillo’s fiction, David Cowart comments that “DeLillo is at pains constantly to characterize his subject matter in terms of the challenge it poses to language.”36 Cowart’s observation posits a useful summation of this chapter’s task in scrutinising ideas of movement as they are expressed within and through the agency of language in Cosmopolis. DeLillo’s novel offers a new imagining of movement that takes place not in vigorous bodily endeavour but in the instantaneous speeds of electronic transmission, and it is via the textual apparatus of words that such a conception of movement is foregrounded and made possible. The sparing and lean build of prose activates a swiftness of linguistic form that emulates the qualities of rapidity and immediacy intrinsic to this new threshold of information speed. Furthermore, the rhetoric of movement that is ordinarily used to convey the exploits of the body is employed by DeLillo to describe the pulsing activity of data so that the very idea of movement is relocated to delineate the flow of information. It is within language, then, that movement is shifted from a bodily concept to the immaterial procession of data, where the spectacle of dynamic motion entails the “sprint” of information racing along electronic ether instead of the sprinting body. As Packer’s interactions with information technology demonstrate, the lively agency that the realm of information occupies within the language of the text denies the bodies of characters the same activeness and sense of

36 Cowart, Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language, p. 182.
authoritative action in DeLillo’s prose. Deprived of these faculties of exertive action, Packer’s day culminates in an ultimate state of sedentary inaction, engaging in a showdown of words with his nemesis and assassin and awaiting imminent death, the penultimate state of bodily repose. The linguistic tussle that DeLillo plays out in the dialogue of the finale, one that displaces the possibility of bodily action, reifies the function that language undertakes in *Cosmopolis* in denying the body its physical attributes of exertive motion. Cowart’s reflection that DeLillo “cares passionately about capturing the cultural moment in […] language suited to the purpose”[^37] reiterates DeLillo’s ability to craft language according to the needs of his thematic concerns. *Cosmopolis* narrates a technologically-rampant millennial moment in which the instantaneous velocities of electronic information marks a horizon and phenomenon of movement that distances itself from the body, and it is in scrutinising the form, meter, and content of DeLillo’s prose that the reader discerns this new imagining of movement as it takes shape at the turn of the twenty-first century.

[^37]: Ibid., p. 222.
CONCLUSION

Movement and Representation: A Future Framework

One recent film comes to mind when thinking through the ideas of movement that underpin this thesis: David Koepp’s *Premium Rush* (2012). What makes Koepp’s action film particularly appropriate as a means of reflecting on the thesis is the manner in which the production of bodily movement assumes the overriding feature of the narration. The narrative is centred on the feats of a bicycle messenger, Wilee (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), as he dodges speeding cars, pedestrians, and other aspects of the New York streetscape to safely deliver a package and protect its contents from a pursuing enemy. Much of the ninety minutes of screen time is spent on depicting the inventive and dangerous ways in which Wilee moves through the streets on his bike. The predominant focus on movement is affirmed in Wilee’s opening words of the film: “I like to ride. Fixed gears, steel frames, no brakes. The bike cannot coast, the pedals never stop turning. Can’t stop. Don’t want to either.” In firm obedience to Wilee’s opening prologue, the plot is set up in a way that enables the dare-devil rider to progress from one scenario to another where his improvised and imaginative manoeuvres take centre stage as he weaves in and out of traffic and narrowly evades the clutches of pursuers. Consisting of relentless episodes of breathless road action, the film primarily functions as an excuse to exhibit the thrilling and aesthetically pleasing array of moves performed by Wilee and his entourage of stunt cyclists. Movement in *Premium Rush*, then, is not incidental to the narrative; rather, movement occupies the main enterprise of the narrative process.

Equally instrumental to this process is the cinematic apparatus that inscribes this extravaganza of movement. What makes *Premium Rush* a particularly efficacious coda to this thesis is the manner in which it extensively employs the tools of its medium to craft and shape the fast, energetic moves that the viewer sees on screen. That is, the nuts and bolts of cinema are not simply used to create scenarios of movement but, more importantly, are done in a way that foregrounds and emphasises the importance of the medium *itself* as a vital agent in the procedure of generating movement. Koepp

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experiments with different modes of camerawork and editing when relaying the character’s movements so that what is brought to the fore is an awareness of the textual apparatus of film as a crucial protagonist in the production of motion.

This awareness is instilled from the very opening scene where Wilee’s fall from his bike during an accident is played out in slow-motion. Through the deceleration of motion, Wilee’s mid-air flight as he falls to the turf is given an extra sense of drama and eloquence as his splayed limbs float through the frame. The shot that immediately follows this opening scene is equally intriguing in terms of its composition. In an attempt to show the trajectory of Wilee’s flight, Koepp stops the sequence at the point at which Wilee hits the pavement and tracks back in time to show the successive phases of Wilee’s fall through the use of time-lapse photography. As Figure 5.1 reveals, the time-lapse imagery poignantly captures successive instants of Wilee’s flight, establishing a graceful arc of flailing limbs and turning the protagonist’s fall into an almost balletic poetry of motion. Showcasing both slow-motion and time-lapse photography, the opening segment privileges the role of the cinematic form as a key instigator of the movement that viewers witness. By playing with different methods of conveying motion, Koepp accentuates how the technical attributes of film take intimate part in the making of movement. This agency of the medium is equally prominent in the profuse editing that is used when depicting Wilee’s manoeuvres as he races through the streets. Koepp employs a variety of camera positions when filming the bike scenes: the camera is alternatively situated at street-level vantage points (Figure 5.2), attached to the
handlebar of Wilee’s bike (Figure 5.3), set next to Wilee’s feet (Figure 5.4), and placed parallel to Wilee (Figure 5.5). In using so many different shots and perspectives to assemble the action, Koepp consciously foregrounds the technical features of film as essential in creating Wilee’s vertiginous and furious motion. Movement, as these scenes show, emerges as much from the *moves* of Wilee’s body as the *textual manoeuvres* that compose this action. *Premium Rush* concretises this interrelation between textuality and movement that is at the heart of this thesis.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 5.2**
*Premium Rush*

**Figure 5.3**
*Premium Rush*

The four chapters of this thesis have addressed the ways in which recent cultural productions, in the manner of *Premium Rush*, combine form and content to produce the movement of the human body as a central feature of their narration. The thesis proposes that the narrative forms of film, comics, video installation, and prose novel play
significant roles in generating new meanings, ideas, and methods of perceiving movement. In using these texts as the focal point of my analysis, I argue that movement is as much a textual process as it is a physical one, that it not only refers to bodily action but also to the articulation of that action by the conventions of a given narrative apparatus. The analysis has specifically employed textual productions that look beyond a purely functionalist and quotidian conception of movement and highlight movement’s aesthetic and creative qualities. By examining the ways in which movement operates across a range of recent screen and print narratives, my enquiry highlights the necessity of representation as a vital touchstone in the theoretical understanding and critical discourse of movement.

In this respect, the reference to how movement operates in *Premium Rush* serves as a crucial reinforcement of the methods and insights that underpin this thesis, demonstrating their relevance outside of the context of the four chapters examined here. Similar to the narratives that have formed the basis of my enquiry, Koepp’s film demonstrates how we might critique and make sense of movement at the intersection between narrative form and content. In doing so, it stresses the continued validity and importance of representation and textuality in the theorisation of movement beyond the parameters of this thesis. Of course, the methods of examining movement within a specific medium cannot be applied wholesale to another form as different narrative media entail their own unique set of reading practices and conventions. Nevertheless, a methodological approach that assesses the contributions of form and medium can thrive outside of the quartet of film, comics, video installation, and the prose novel, and has the potential to build the foundations of future research on movement in other cultural productions.

One such avenue for future research might lie in a rethinking of the terrain of mobilities studies mentioned earlier, one that accommodates a more sustained interest in how narrative form and representation can contribute to how we think about the social aspects of movement. This possibility is one that is intriguingly prompted by *Premium Rush*, which not only entertains an interest in the aesthetic and eye-catching dimensions of movement, but also opens up questions about movement that are equally relevant to some of the work being done within mobilities studies. For example, the film’s extensive exploration of the culture of cycling and its implications for practices of movement related to work (Wilee is employed as a delivery messenger), leisure, and
urban transportation shares affinities with some of the emerging scholarship on the social practices of cycling. Similarly, the constant juxtaposition between the automobility of cars and Wilee’s feats on his bicycle as he drifts between these automobiles features a commentary on the emergence of more “alternative” cultures of movement that take shape away from the dominant practices of urban movement such as car travel. In another direction, Wilee’s constant use of his smartphone to look up directions, locate coordinates and images of set destinations, and to talk to his girlfriend while cruising along streets prompts a meditation on how our practices of physical movement take shape alongside, and are regulated by, the increasing dissemination of interactive technologies.

As these tropes suggest, *Premium Rush* holds critical value and valence in not only thinking about the aesthetic construction and imagination of movement, but also its social functions and implications. The text presents a compelling case study for interrogating how narrative form and content might be useful for scrutinising, and opening up new questions about, the social construction and ramifications of moving practices. In making this suggestion, I certainly do not aim to flesh out here the specific terms and methods via which this line of enquiry might develop. Neither is it my intention to prescribe this narrative-based methodological approach as a necessary addition to what is already the diverse and multi-faceted field of mobilities studies. However, the analytical methods proposed in this project and the value that it invests within forms of visual and textual representation has the possibility to open themselves up to other strands of discourse where movement is concerned. It is in recognising this possibility that new practices and vocabularies of reading and imagining movement will be fostered.


Ever is Over All. 2011. Personal photograph by author. JPEG file.


Hannam, Kevin and Anya Diekmann, eds. *Beyond Backpacker Tourism: Mobilities and Experiences*. Bristol; Buffalo; Toronto: Channel View, 2010.


<http://opencontours.com/2011/10/13/seeing-bodies/>


