

Article

# Louder Than Films: Memory, Affect and the ‘Sublime Image’ in the Work of Joachim Trier

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**Abstract:** “We have to believe that new images are still possible”. This remark by Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier during a recent event in Oslo entitled ‘The Sublime Image’ speaks to the centrality in his work of images, often of trauma, that aspire to the condition of photographic stills or paintings. A hand against a window, cheerleaders tumbling against an azure sky, an infant trapped under a lake’s icy surface: these can certainly be read as sublime images insofar as we might read the sublime as an affect—a sense of the ineffable or the shock of the new. However, for Trier, cinema is an art of memory and here too, this article argues, his films stage an encounter with the temporal sublime and the undecidability of memory. Offering readings of Trier’s four feature films to date which center on their refraction of memory through crystal-images, the article emphasizes the affective encounter with the films as having its own temporality.

**Keywords:** Joachim Trier; Norwegian cinema; affect in cinema; memory in cinema; the sublime

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Prologue: Oslo, Winter 2017

What I remember is the ice. Thick iridescent-grey sheets covering the streets, dimpled with yesterday’s footprints, studded with black grit, and self-renewing with every overnight snowfall and morning frost. From November until the following Easter, Oslo was blanketed with ice. Walking had to be re-learned. Brian Massumi writes of proprioception, the mode of perception which translates the body’s encounter with the world into “conditions of movement” for the muscles and ligaments. The qualities of the physical environment inform muscle memory, becoming “skill, habit, posture” (Massumi 2002, p. 58). Tip the center of gravity forward, turn the feet inward, walk gingerly in zigzag formation down Oslo’s numerous hills. Slip, and suddenly the parts of the body find themselves in unpredictable and unaccustomed relation to each other and, soon, to the icy pavement below. The affects of proprioception under recalibration are quickly displaced by those generated by an all-too-concrete encounter with the ground. The memory of both sticks.

What I remember, too, is the sparkle. Entering the city by train for the first time in two decades, the lights of the glassy tower blocks by the station twinkled. The waters of the Oslo Fjord reflected the pure orange of the kind of sunset captured by Edvard Munch. The ice on the streets glistened. The cold air had an invigorating bite. I was happy. Sara Ahmed explores happiness as involving affect, “happiness as a happening”, in which we turn towards a thing, are made happy in relation to it. “Affect”, Ahmed goes on to write, “is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed 2010, p. 30). The “stickiness” of affect implies a temporal and mnemonic element. Massumi (2002, pp. 208–13) also explores how affect “continues” across events, in his discussion of a scientific trial designed to test human color-memory. The experiment was disrupted by the subjects’ tendency to over-state the intensity of color of remembered objects. Their

friends' eyes were remembered as "too-blue"; color, writes Massumi, "has struck" the subject as excess (p. 211, emphasis original), and, crucially, it prevails like "invisible glue", ingressing different contexts and emotions (p. 217). For me, Oslo is not too-blue, but too-silver. My emotional memory of the city is undercut by the excess of my affective encounter with it. Its sparkle sticks.

I remember *Thelma*. By which I mean: the frosty trek eastwards across central Oslo in November 2017 to watch Joachim Trier's new release. The slip and tumble onto the freezing ground somewhere in Grünerløkka. The sharp tangle of black branch shadows projected by street lighting onto the sparkling pavement. The first encounter, once ensconced in the cushioned depths of the cinema, with certain shots that stick: a father, out hunting in the snow with his small daughter, aims his rifle at her head; the daughter floats in mid-air during a brain scan; a black snake slithers into the mouth of a prone woman; a camera hovers high above the translucent surface of an iced-over lake, under which a baby is trapped, frozen.

In recounting the semiotic content of such images from *Thelma*, I preclude the possibility of positing an analogy between the affective force of the respective encounters with the icy ground and the film. The pre-cognitive, proprioceptive registration of slipping and falling can serve to illustrate Steven Shaviro's definition of affect, following Massumi (2002, pp. 23–45): "affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive" (Shaviro 2009, p. 3). In contrast, Shaviro continues, emotion is "derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful . . . Emotion is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject". The remembered fall, the remembered emotion, and the remembered film image are of different orders. All the same, a quarter century of scholarship on sensation in cinema has established that the experience of film is not purely "scopic" or "visual"; it encompasses "the synaesthetic, the kinaesthetic, the proprioceptive and the processuality of duration and movement" (Kennedy 2000, p. 48). In opening this article by staging my (memories of my) own embodied encounter with Oslo and with *Thelma*, my aim is to assert from the beginning that there is an element of affective excess that spills over from the pre-cognitive encounter with a cinematic image and sticks, like a bruise after a fall, the "too-blue" of a misremembered image, or something that we, with Joachim Trier, might call the sublime.

### 1.2. Joachim Trier and the Sublime Image

"I remember the first dip of the year in the Oslo Fjord". "I remember thinking: I'll remember this". In the opening sequence of Joachim Trier's *Oslo August 31* (Norway, 2011), a host of Oslo dwellers recount their memories of the city. Over a montage of historical and new footage, the voices begin to suggest that the city itself might have a memory, and perhaps also that the film does. Four features into his directorial career, all of which were co-written with Eskil Vogt, Joachim Trier has been lauded as a filmmaker of memory par excellence (Weston 2016; Heeney 2017). Indeed, Trier himself has singled out the potential of cinema in this respect as an important motivation: "It's why I'm interested in cinema; it's the art form of memory" (Weston 2016).

Joachim Trier's cinema is not the extreme cinema of his distant cousin Lars von Trier (Stolworthy 2017). Its power and its ambition to renew, to disrupt, would seem to lie in its portrayal of mental states: depression, addiction, mourning, seizures, and repressed memory. Trier himself has described his central ambition as to describe thought. Formalist "set-pieces", or what he describes as "films within films" (Heeney 2017), are one means to this end. Indeed, his narratives often hinge on sequences that lend themselves to the exploration of affect and memory which this theme issue explores. However, I also want to focus on another characteristic of Trier's filmmaking which, for me, sticks: set-piece shots which seem to aspire to the condition of stillness. I will be exploring both these aspects of Trier's work—standalone shots and memory sequences—through the suggestive term of the "sublime image".

This term is taken from the title of a panel discussion at the National Library of Norway in Oslo in December 2017, at which Trier was an invited speaker: "Det sublime bildet" (The Sublime Image). Chaired by the art critic Kåre Bulie, the event brought Trier into conversation with photographer

Jonas Bendiksen. As two practitioners of the visual arts whose recent work had tackled religious and supernatural themes, their remit, according to the event blurb, was to discuss the notion of the sublime in the still and moving image, and how such images can “engage the wider public” (Nasjonallbiblioteket 2017). The discussion ranged widely over their practice, and how they judge an image to be good, beautiful, or sublime. As an aside, Trier linked the act of making an image to the urge to reproduce a deep mental experience, explaining that he thinks of childhood memories as spaces in which he can move around. Trier also expressed a commitment to renewing the visual repertoire in a post-modern and post-cinematic age in which images proliferate: “We cannot rule out that new images are still possible” (“Vi kan ikke unngi at nye bilder er mulige” (my translation)).

With these two observations, inspired by the rubric of “the sublime image”, Trier suggests a connection between the potential of cinema to provoke affective response and its potential to foster radical renewal. This same connection is apparent in Gilles Deleuze’s writings on cinema. In an article examining Deleuze’s evolving dialogue with Kant, Stephen Zepke argues that the concept of the sublime becomes, for Deleuze, “not only the ontological crux of his aesthetics and the defining feature of ‘art’, but the real condition of the emergence of something ‘new’” (Zepke 2011, p. 75, emphasis added). Where the sublime, for Kant, makes (human) experience aware of its own limitations by exceeding bodily apprehension, and the Romantics had as their aim to grasp “the intolerable or the unbearable” (Deleuze 2005, p. 17), the time-image of post-war cinema confronts us with “something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful . . . like too strong a pain” (p. 17). Zepke points out that the power of affect and the sublime is variously troped across Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s work as “exploding” or “shattering” (Zepke 2011, p. 79).

Adopting the intriguing notion of the “sublime image” as its point of origin, this article examines three recurring aesthetic strategies in Joachim Trier’s oeuvre to date through the prism of affect and memory. Firstly, a selection of images from Trier’s films are examined, introducing the director’s work, considering the role of affect in the “remembered film” (Burgin 2004), and connecting the notion of the sublime to cinematic affect. Secondly, the article considers memory in Trier’s films. While his productions all thematise memory narratively, it is argued that the films all make use of set-pieces which figure memory through, on the one hand, moments of affective intensity and, on the other, the opening up of what could be called a temporal sublime, and can be helpfully read in light of recent Deleuzian explorations of “immiscible” times (Lim 2009) or the doubly suspended time of the affective encounter (Thain 2017). Thirdly, in closing, the discussion circles back to the advertised remit of the event in the National Library of Norway—the potential power of the sublime image to touch “the wider public”—in conjunction with Trier’s ambition to create “new” images for an image-saturated age.

## 2. Remembered Films

### 2.1. *A Montage of Affects*

*Reprise*: A young man presses his hand against a window pane. Shot side-on, in profile he seems to loom darkly against the Nordic light outside. There are no features to suggest the precise location: an office, perhaps, or an anteroom in the building where the man has just been reading aloud from his newly-published novel. Disoriented and sweating under the stage lights, a jump cut has lifted him and us off the stage and into this white space. He presses his hand against the pane, firmly, as if testing its potential to contain him. I feel the coolness and smoothness of the glass, a sense of threat that morphs into an anxiety that it will shatter under the pressure of the hand. The glass, I know, will pierce his skin and blood will spurt. A handprint of condensation forms on the glass and he lifts his hand away. Fade to black.

*Oslo August 31*: A camera is fixed to the side of a building, gazing out over the city. The image resembles old-fashioned video. With a lurch in the stomach, we are jolted downwards. This is a building being demolished. The camera is attached to record the process from the inside, or rather the

outside. Thick clouds of grey dust rise up to meet the lens as it rumbles earthwards. But the image was transmitted and preserved. It cuts out.

*Louder than Bombs:* Three bodies clad in red shorts hang suspended against an azure (too-blue) sky. Energetic music is pumping, but the speed of their movements defies it. They are executing impossible gymnastic twirls in the air, in slow motion. What sticks is the muscle definition of the legs (no faces are visible, or at least not remembered), their tanned skin, the fluttering of the red fabric. How is it possible to order the body to do such a thing, to fling itself into the sky, and control the movement of muscles and sinews in such a way? Weightlessness and control, muscles and camera.

*Thelma:* The frozen surface of a lake, unbroken but not quite opaque, so that the expanse is not white. It is whorled with black and brown, glimpses of fish below the surface, weeds. The camera is moving upwards, outwards, so that the terrible, incongruous thing at the center of the frame gets smaller and yet looms larger. It is a baby, spreadeagled below the ice, trapped, unmoving. An as-yet-warm body frozen behind the screen beyond the screen. This is an impossible sight—there is no logical, natural way for the baby to be there. It is evil, and yet ridiculous. A child's logic.

## 2.2. *Affect and the Remembered Film*

Cognizant of the reductiveness of introducing four films—a whole directorial career to date—with one representative image extracted from each, I nonetheless adopt this gambit for two reasons. The first is pragmatic: as yet, there is little or no substantive scholarly work on Joachim Trier, and one function of this article is thus to provide something of a survey of his extant films.

The second reason for the ekphrastic montage is to provide a starting point for a discussion of the role of affect in remembered cinema. The temporal dimension of affect seems to be something of a critical blind-spot: “Although affect is increasingly important to cinema studies to account for the spectator's embodied experience, affect's temporal dimension is rarely foregrounded, or appears as a paradoxical problem that can only be sidelined” (Thain 2017, p. 16). Before selecting and writing about the shots described above, I deliberately did not re-watch the films. Rather, I relied on Ahmed's “stickiness” of affect (Ahmed 2010, p. 30), and Massumi's assertion that the excess of the affective encounter continues across events, as a “connecting thread of experience” (Massumi 2002, p. 217). Just as the participants in the experiment described by Massumi mis-remembered and mis-matched the colors they were tasked with recollecting, it is probable that my account of the shots in question has been contextually warped, both by emotional attachments such as “familiarity and fondness” and by the excess of affect generated in the first encounter with the image, and now continuing “across the gaps” between that event and this (Massumi 2002, pp. 216–17). These are shots that have stayed with me, their resonance continuing to unfurl in the “bloom-space” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 9) of my encounter(s) with them. Part of what sticks, I want to claim, is the moment of that encounter: watching a film as “the felt experience of becoming other to ourselves” (Thain 2017, p. 27).

In his book *The Remembered Film*, Victor Burgin finds that it is his earliest cinematic memories—de-contextualized fragments of black-and-white images—that have distinctive affects such as dread attached to them (Burgin 2004, pp. 16–17). Annette Kuhn explores cinematic memory in a more empirical way, interviewing cinema-goers about their memories of films and their recollection of cinema-going. Kuhn hears from the informants she interviews a range of similarly fragmented accounts of how affect sticks to recollections of early cinematic experiences. Sometimes, observes Kuhn, the re-telling of the memory obviously evokes very strong emotional or embodied responses in the interviewee (Kuhn 2011, pp. 87–90):

these images are obviously still resonant, in all their intensity, in informants' consciousness decades after the event. It is clear that in the moment of telling in the present the remembered feelings or sensations associated with these memories are in some way being re-experienced. (Kuhn 2011, p. 87)

For Kuhn, such affective responses are rare, and taxonomised as Type A cinematic memories. More commonly occurring in her interviews are “situated memories”, her Type B, which feature contextual, narrative and anecdotal information from the interviewee’s life (pp. 87–92). Her Type C (p. 93) consists of “memories of cinemagoing”, often with little recollection of the films themselves. Kuhn makes the important point that the study of how memory works in the context of cinema makes a contribution to the understanding of collective and personal memory more broadly, demonstrating how “in the production and operation of cinema memory private and public, personal and collective, worlds shade into one another, interweave and work together in a range of different ways” (p. 96). As suggested in the prologue, I think that my first encounter with Thelma’s baby brother under the ice was accorded extra resonance by my ongoing proprioceptive struggles with that same substance on the walk to and from the cinema. More recently, in a class screening, watching *Oslo August 31* for the first time since my sabbatical in the city, I was struck by a new affective response to it. What was it—nostalgia? That sense of shimmer? Suddenly, my mind registered that I knew these streets and parks in Oslo, that I could piece together my mental and affective map of the city from a film that had previously taken place in, for me, unknown territory. The affects of the remembered film both stick and morph.

### 2.3. Stillness and the Post-Cinematic

My third motivation for dealing in film fragments is to highlight the quality of stillness in Joachim Trier’s film style. I do not want to suggest that Trier’s films can usefully be categorized as Slow Cinema. They are not characterized by excessively long takes, a tendency to de-dramatize the narrative, or to linger on quotidian detail, or even a clear interest in duration per se (De Luca and Jorge 2015). Rather, I want to argue that Trier’s films play on the tension between stillness and motion, allowing “sublime images” that aspire to the condition of stillness to irrupt into the narrative. I write “aspire to” because such images are usually framed (literally) by a camera that is moving infinitesimally slowly, by zoom, dolly or crane. Alanna Thain points out that “intensive modes of stillness” are one iteration of the time-image, and suggests that movement becomes “intensive, rather than extensive” in such cinema (Thain 2017, p. 8). The four images singled out above are all examples of this tendency, and it is doubtless no coincidence that affect sticks to my memory of them.

On the one hand, the prevalence of almost-still images in Trier’s films is part and parcel of his “dirty formalist” style. He explains this as a amalgam of the formal experiments of the auteurs he admires with “set pieces”, sequences within the films which “show people a piece of cinema in several chapters” (Weston 2016). While four feature films is a small sample, it is possible to observe an evolution in Trier’s style that increasingly emphasizes—and stills—the “set-piece”. The contrasts and similarities should emerge from the longer discussions of each film below, but a key development in *Thelma* which Trier himself has acknowledged is a more “anthropological” perspective on the characters. With *Thelma*, the element of the set-piece sequence that Trier identifies as central to his own work is sustained, but as he himself comments, there is a shift at the level of the individual image. The set-piece image, or, as termed here, the sublime image, is conceived of by Trier as to do with a new kind of gaze: “I also think there’s another element here that I haven’t done before which is that kind of gaze from another place. I only do it intuitively because I don’t have a language for it. There’s something new going on” (Heeney 2017, emphasis added). This results in a number of striking aerial images, including the baby under the ice, or Thelma herself stranded on the lakeshore or wired up to brain monitors and levitating over a hospital bed. These are “sublime” in terms of their visual and affective arrest and their opening to a nonhuman perception.

On the other hand, the tension between the film fragment and narrative is, of course, central to diagnoses of the post-cinematic condition. This is less a question of style and more a matter of changes in technologies of exhibition, distribution and consumption. If the fragmented memories of long-past cinematic experience emphasize how “memory-images” (Burgin 2004, p. 16) feed on affect, the turn of

the twenty-first century offered new means to produce and instantiate those images. There is something of the sublime in the still image that Sergi Sánchez sees erupting from the end of the twentieth century:

the non-time image rejects age, hates erosions, turns away from time to be the epitome of an untouched perfection, which it relates to the intensity of an instant that lasts forever—or won't last for an instant. It is the pause of the VHS image and it is the pause of the DVD image. From the interval between the two pauses comes a new age of the image which tries to create a space for the human that despises reality's duration, or rather, that defies reality itself. (Sánchez 2016, p. 185)

Jean-Luc Godard's monumental project *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998) uses the potential of analogue video to recapitulate the “pure pictorial presence” of iconic images and details from film history, such that they are “reintegrated into a pure kingdom of images by the fusing power of video superimposition” (Rancière 2009, p. 30). The clips display both “the singular power of silent form” and the sine qua non of the montage; Godard's project weaves images and texts across and between media to create new meanings and forms (p. 33). Writing in 2004, Burgin observes that the advent of the home video player and, later, the DVD, fundamentally altered the home viewer's power over a film's playback. Home video “put the material substrate of the narrative into the hands of the audience” (Burgin 2004, p. 8), facilitating the “decomposition”, dislocation and dismantling of cinematic narrative. Laura Mulvey makes a similar point, that the advent of the digital “opened up new perceptual possibilities, new ways of looking, not at the world, but at the internal world of cinema. The century had accumulated a recorded film world, like a parallel universe, that can now be halted or slowed or fragmented” (Mulvey 2006, p. 181). More recently, amateur remix videos have “lived a thousand lives” on YouTube (Thain 2017, p. 261), while projects such as Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2011) re-appropriate the cinematic archive to confront the viewer affectively with layers of cinematic and bodily time (pp. 263–65).

In stressing the technological and critical context in which Trier's strategy of “set-pieces” has evolved, I do not want to suggest that his formalism consists of visual quotes from cinema history. Rather, his aesthetic strategies bring cinema face to face with what it is now, or might be. Asked by an interviewer why his films sometimes feel like “a collage of moving parts”, Trier replies that the aim is to produce an experience of pure cinema: “So I'm interested in thinking about movies like that; I'm not just interested in what needs to be conveyed to tell the story but by wanting to show people a piece of cinema in several chapters” (Weston 2016). Integral to that “piece of cinema”, however, is not that it “despises reality's duration”—after all, Trier's features until *Thelma* were shot on 35 mm—but that it interrogates time and memory.

### 3. Memory in the Films of Joachim Trier

#### 3.1. Memory, Time and Cinema

Together with co-writer Eskil Vogt, Trier's declared ambition is to explore the structure of thought as it relates to time and memory. Discussing his admiration for filmmakers such as Alain Resnais, Ingmar Bergman and Nicholas Roeg, Trier comments:

So there's that sense of sliding time and association, the way the mind works. It's that kind of more fragmented, but more real, way the mind works. They're movies of the mind. *Hiroshima mon amour* is a great example, or Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*—time and time again you get into the phenomenology of memory, like how the mind perceives the past and the present in a very jumbled way, which you can do in literature as well, but cinema has its own way of doing that. (Weston 2016)

Taken together, these principles allow for sequences which are meta-cinematic in the sense that they evoke the medium-specific potential of film to gesture to memory as process. Put differently, the sequences often seem to explore how cinema remembers, as well as how the characters remember. Trier's interest in memory on the film shapes the narratives themselves: "direct images of time present contingent narrations" (Rodowick 1997, p. 95). In other words, by exploring how past, present and memory are thought, narrative chronology and cause and effect are, inevitably, destabilized; furthermore, memory is thematised, so that form and content turn back on themselves.

All four films emphasise and explore the paradoxes of time and memory which Deleuze sees as the domain of time-image cinema: "making visible those relationships of time which can only appear in a creation of the image" (Deleuze 2005, p. xiii). A central concern for the films, and for the current discussion, is how they "make visible" the process of remembering, or, as Trier says in the above interview, "the phenomenology of memory". Certain tactile visual tropes which carry affective power recur in the readings of the films offered below: the hands, water, shattered glass; sound, too, is important in the films' laying down (or unveiling) of memories. In envisioning memory, Trier suggests, cinema "shows you space and light and the process of that, which are fundamental elements of how humans perceive things" (Weston 2016). Fundamentally, Trier regards himself as a filmmaker who is attuned to the material world, one who will pay attention to "the wind in the trees" and who wants there "to be more of a smell to what I do" (Heeney 2017).

On the other hand, confronting memory demands an engagement with the abstract. Deleuze's *Cinema* books are at heart a grappling with Henri Bergson's theory of time and memory, which Deleuze summarizes thus: "the past coexists with the present that it has been; the past is preserved in itself, as past in general (non-chronological); at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past that is preserved" (Deleuze 2005, p. 80). Or, re-phrased elegantly by David Rodowick: "Rather than a chronological and successive addition of spatial moments, time continually divides into a present that is passing, a past that is preserved, and an indeterminate future" (Rodowick 1997, p. 81). The past co-exists with itself non-chronologically; it is "a virtual archive wherein we leap to link memory with an image that could represent it" (Rodowick 1997, p. 99).

This conception of the past chimes with Trier's remark during the "Sublime Image" discussion that he regards image-making as driven by the urge to represent fragments of the past (Nasjonalbiblioteket 2017). It is surely no coincidence that one of Trier's greatest influences, Alain Resnais (Weston 2016), is identified by Deleuze as one of the few filmmakers to achieve a direct image of time, by structuring his narratives (for example, *Last Year in Marienbad*, 1961) as "sheets of past" and "peaks of present" (Deleuze 2005, pp. 100–1). In such a film, distinctions between real and imaginary, actual and virtual, and subjective and objective are made, but the categories are reversible; they are "impossible". Trier's films each engage with time and memory in different ways, but in doing so, they also echo—or remember—each other. As Trier himself puts it, "Different songs, same album" (Weston 2016).

### 3.2. *Reprise* (2006)

From its first moments, *Reprise* announces itself as a narrative in the future conditional. Two aspiring writers, Erik and Philip, push their respective novel drafts into a postbox, and the voiceover recounts a chain of events that "would have" happened. This conceit is repeated towards the end of the film, by which time the viewer is uncertain what has really happened, or will happen, or would have happened in a different version of the story. This kind of non-linear narrative is further complicated by flashbacks, by back-story vignettes explaining how various characters met, by diegetic and non-diegetic countdowns from 10 to 0 heralding events, and by a plot element which involves Philip deliberately re-enacting the Paris holiday during which he and his girlfriend Kari fell in love.

Embedded in the plot is a clue to how the film thinks its own narrative structure: the first novel by a (fictional) writer worshipped by Erik and Philip, Sten Egil Dahl, is entitled *Krystall* (Crystal). Whether we take this as a simple metaphor or an allusion to Deleuze's crystal-image, it provokes reflection

(pun intended) on how stories and memories oscillate between the real and the imaginary in *Reprise*, and how time seems to fold and refract.

Deleuze's conclusions about the crystal-image towards the end of *Cinema 2* resonates with the undecidability of the status of the parcels of time in *Reprise*. The crystal-image, he writes, no longer gives us

the empirical progression of time as succession of presents, nor its indirect representation as interval or as whole; it is its direct presentation, its constitutive dividing in two into a present which is passing and a past which is preserved, the strict contemporaneity of the present with the past that it will be, of the past with the present that it has been. It is time itself which arises in the crystal, and which is constantly recommending its dividing in two without completing it, since the indiscernible exchange is always renewed and reproduced. (Deleuze 2005, p. 262)

The Parisian sub-plot in *Reprise* is particularly illustrative of the film's refusal to privilege past/present, or reality/fiction. While Philip and Kari's first holiday is shown only in a single shot during a "would have . . ." montage, the holiday redux is shown in some detail, but in ways that layer the first trip onto the second, or vice versa. The plane tickets are purchased for the same day of the year as the first holiday, the lovers visit the same places, and Philip tries to reproduce the smallest details of photographs he took the first time round. Their conversations concern the first holiday: when did they each know they were in love with the other, were they happy, which night did they first have sex. Repeatedly, the dialogue is relegated to voice-over or voice-off, not synched with the shot-reverse-shots and two-shots, such that it is unclear whether the conversation and/or the place emanates from the first holiday or the second, and thus belongs to both.

Another notable element of style is handheld extreme close-ups during such conversations, of faces, hands, legs, the nape of the neck. It could be argued that this attention to the flesh roots the image in the present, with an invitation to kinaesthetic empathy. However, as we know from the work of Laura Marks and others, cinema "appeals to contact—to embodied knowledge, and to the sense of touch in particular—in order to recreate memories" (Marks 2000, p. 129). The camera's lingering on the skin in the present conjures up the feel of those same bodies in the past, further elaborating the impossibility of the two holidays.

In a sense, the story of the repeated holiday anchors time in *Reprise*. It is the plot point most obviously related to the film's title. The notion of present time folding back on itself to duplicate a past event is viscerally graspable as Philip and Kari's bodies writhe entwined in the hotel room—and it is coitus interruptus that viscerally pulls the two apart.

The rest of the film feels like a shattering of crystal in process. The metaphor is rendered literal by Philip's first episode of psychosis, during which he smashes a window, leaving deep cuts in his cheek and hands (fulfilling the promise of the hand-on-window shot described above). The resulting scars are fleshly reminders that in biological time, at least, a before and after can be marked. The film's ending also suggests a temporal absolute marked by a bodily event. A sequence late in the film shows Philip, by now depressed again, eyeing up a multi-story building and ascending in an elevator as a voice-off counts down from 10 to 0 in a litany we have come to associate with Philip. Rather than throw himself from the roof, it transpires, he is there to visit Kari, and he is institutionalised again after a psychotic episode in her workplace. The end credits of *Reprise*, however, begin with a similar countdown over a black screen, the end of which coincides with a dull and meaty thud and the appearance of an emphatic "SLUTT" (THE END) on screen. The affective force of this unseen, unconfirmed event brings the real and virtual story-vectors to a visceral ground zero.

### 3.3. Oslo August 31 (2011)

Like *Reprise*, the title of Trier's second feature is suggestive of an acute interest in time and memory. The interest is made explicit in the opening montage of *Oslo August 31*. Five stationary shots of deserted

city streets are voiced over with fragments of memories: “I remember the first dip of the year in the Oslo Fjord”; “I remember driving into the deserted city”. This is a compelling opening to a film which establishes the city as a character, and one with a memory. In Bliss Lim’s words, “[p]laces have long memories; space is neither static nor solid but vibrates with both permanence and becoming” (Lim 2009, p. 37).

The tone of the images in this sequence, and the recollections, changes with the observation: “I remember thinking: I’ll remember this”. Thereafter, the montage alternates between home video clips and footage from different eras (as suggested by cars and the fashions worn by passers-by). In its juxtaposition of film stocks and periods, the montage makes the case for cinema as the analogue repository of personal and collective memory, here erupting into the film as “peaks of present”.

Indeed, the end of the same opening montage doubles down on this suggestion. The sequence ends with video camera footage from the demolition of Philipsbygget, the Philips Building, in the Majorstuen district of Oslo in April 2000 (Wikipedia 2018). “I remember when they demolished the Philips Building”, an anonymous voice muses, and the camera goes down with the office block in an overwhelming hissy rumble. Given that the building shares its name with the main character in *Reprise*, whose life may or may not have ended at the foot of another office block, *Oslo August 31* seems also through this echo to declare itself *qua* film to have a memory.

Like its predecessor, *Oslo August 31* works with editing and sound design to imbue encounters between characters with a temporality that merges event and its remembrance, present and past. An extended walk and conversation between the main character, recovering drug addict Anders, and his best friend, Thomas, at first places the friends in parks and side streets around central Oslo. That the film elides their movements between their stopping places gives the sequence a fragmentary air which is compounded when they are about to say their goodbyes. While the audio of the dialogue continues, jump cuts replace footage of the moments of speaking with images of Thomas looking at his friend with fondness and concern. Edited into the conversation as it takes place, then, is Thomas’s memory of his last moments alone with Anders; the transitional remark in the opening montage—“I remember thinking: I’ll remember this”—could just as well belong to Thomas.

While this memory can reasonably be attributed to Thomas, the film’s closing sequence returns to the sense of a non-attributable memory that could variously belong to Anders, the city, or the film itself. In the early hours of the morning of August 31, Anders has gone to a public swimming pool with three others he met at a party the night before. The girl on whose cycle he has piggybacked through the city in clouds of fog from the fire extinguishers they have picked up jumps into the pool in her underwear, and beckons him to follow. Anders smiles, considering. There is a jump cut, and he is gone. He heads to his parents’ empty house in the leafy suburbs, and takes his own life with an overdose of heroin. As Anders lies sprawled on his parents’ bed, a needle hanging out of his arm, the camera moves infinitesimally outwards and away from him, breaking a pattern of very slow zooms and dollies into the *mise-en-scène*. The movement reverses with the next few shots, which each depict a place where Anders has visited over the previous 24 h: a park bench, a balcony, the pool, all of them now empty.

If we were to try to pin down the owner of these recollection-images, it would be possible to argue that they are associated with Anders, his life flashing before his eyes as he passes away. As Trier says, an important implication in the film is that Anders “revisits the places of his past, perhaps for the last time” (Heeney 2017). Or we could associate them with Anders’ friends, who have spent time with him in these places, and will soon be mourning and remembering him. Or with the city itself, its spaces imprinted with the microscopic traces of the bodies and stories that have passed through them. Or with the film itself, reasserting its power to preserve and to overwrite images and thus memories. Or even with time itself, the cycle of the days: the title of the film, significantly, is the new day that is dawning as Anders takes his life—the day he will not live to see, the day after his last day. In this context I think we need not—must not—decide. We can also usefully appeal to Lim’s term “immiscible”, by which she means “traces of untranslatable temporal otherness . . . multiple times that never quite dissolve

into the code of modern time consciousness, discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform chronological present" (Lim 2009, p. 12).

Such stagings of the sublime of memory are connected in Trier's other films to the image of the crystal, rendered literal. In *Oslo August 31*, there is no shattered glass to play this role. However, there is a sequence which can be read as a variant on this trope. On the afternoon of his interview, Anders sits alone in a café, listening to the voices around him. The café is spacious and light, walled on two sides with plate glass. This encloses Anders in a kind of crystal, from which city life moving vibrantly outside as well as inside can be glimpsed. Exquisite sound design tracks how his attention shifts between conversations: fragments of teenage chat about Kurt Cobain's suicide, or mothers comparing stories of their children. A young girl reads a 'bucket-list' from her computer screen. It is a laughably long and ambitious litany of her desires for the future, and encompasses single events and lifelong projections, ranging from swimming with dolphins to staying in a long and happy marriage. The temporality is dizzying, and arguably a quotidian expression of a Bergsonian conception of time: "Just as the past may be considered simultaneously all of the past in general, as distinct layers of regions, or as contracted entirely into the moving point of a present passing, the present fragments into a present of the future, a present of the present, and a present of the past" (Rodowick 1997, p. 100).

Meanwhile, attention wanders to two passers-by. One man crosses into the nearby park, tracked by the camera, and sits down on a bench in despair. A woman in work-out gear is on her way home via the supermarket. The camera follows her into the aisles and back to her apartment, where she slumps, depressed, over the kitchen counter. These two abortive routes out into the world both wash up against walls of melancholy. There is no deciding whether they are slices of real life or the trajectories Anders imagines for the passers-by: they move off into the "present of the future" while the voices around him in the glassy box weave their own times. He is in the city, and the city is in him.

#### 3.4. *Louder than Bombs* (2015)

In its title and in its central iteration of the immiscibility of memory, *Louder than Bombs* gives us the sublime "explosions" that Deleuze and Guattari call for (Zepke 2011, p. 81). The film's central character, Isabelle, already deceased, was a war photographer and mother of two sons, Jonah and Conrad, and married to Gene; the mystery that undergirds *Louder than Bombs* is whether her fatal car accident was a suicide. The accident itself is envisioned as one amongst a broader set of questions and conflicting memories of Isabelle, both quotidian and more existential (did she see Conrad that day in the garden when they were playing hide-and-seek? Was she having an affair?), as well as other questions of perspective on events.

A sequence centering on the apparently troubled behavior of the younger son, Conrad, arguably does most to establish the film's agnostic approach to how memory and cinema visualize events. Conrad is in school, listening to a piece of creative writing being read aloud. The words trigger his imaginings about how his mother died. First there is the moment of impact itself, imagined side-one, so that Isabelle is catapulted forward amidst a slow-motion sea of glass shards. In *Louder than Bombs*, the shattered glass has graduated from the detritus on the floor that bears witness to Philip's destructive rage in *Reprise*; here, the crystals are in flight, forming and re-forming a sort of prismatic screen behind the screen. The reverie continues as Conrad imagines versions of events: perhaps she drifted off to sleep? Isabelle is seen behind the wheel, her eyes growing heavy. She nods off, swerves, and finds herself in the path of a truck. A second version has her swerving to avoid a deer on the road, the truck headlights bearing down on the windscreen, which explodes. A third perspective is from the roadside, as the car is flung into the air on impact and spins almost gracefully, Isabelle's distinctive auburn hair and face frozen in shock visible through the side window. The stream of images is balletic, bloodless, and sublime. (I remembered this sequence as being repeated in the film, but in fact it occurs only once—and sticks).

Conrad's reconstruction of alternative versions of the crash is situated within a longer sub-plot which explores his relationship with his father. Before the car crash reverie, Gene had followed Conrad after school, observing from a distance while he sat alone in the park, gestured puzzlingly with his hand outside a coffee shop, and wandered to the graveyard where his mother was buried, only to throw himself violently onto the grave of an unknown man. After Conrad's imaginings about the car crash are revealed, his perspective on the after-school walk plays out: the same phone call from his father in the park, and the same visit to the coffee shop and graveyard, but now with the knowledge that he had glimpsed his father tailing him in a reflection on the coffee shop's gleaming counter. The brief shot which reveals that Conrad has seen his father is a kind of map of the crystal image: it shows Gene in miniature, watching, surrounded on screen by reflections from within the cafe, the cafe window, the waiter behind the counter. Though less geometrical than the polygons or multiple facets of a ring that Deleuze identifies as the ultimate expressions of the crystal-image, in a similar way, this shot of a banal situation leaves Gene as "no more than one virtuality among others" (Deleuze 2005, p. 68). Later yet, when Jonah reads Conrad's diary, it is revealed that though his hand gesture is a fantasy of being able to affect the world materially, throwing himself on the unknown grave was a ploy to confuse his father.

As in both previous feature films, sound is used to de-couple memory from one subject and one time. Conrad's reverie in the classroom is triggered by a literary text read aloud by a classmate, which poses the question: what was this person thinking in extremis, when she realized the accident was inevitable? Later on, there is an echo of this device in the montage sequence that accompanies Jonah's reading of his brother's piece of creative writing—a mash-up of random memories and facts about him—the text of which is heard in Conrad's own voiceover.

The self-conscious play with perspectives and versions unfolds against the backdrop of Isabelle's career as a war photographer. Conrad remembers how she explained to him that cropping a photograph could transform its meaning, and this is demonstrated in the stream-of-consciousness montage that accompanies his diary. That Isabelle's work is now being prepared for a retrospective curated by a man who may be her former lover contrasts the sturdy analogue indexicality of her war photographs with the shifting uncertainties of her family entanglements and the mysteries she left behind. Conrad, too, discusses her photography in the same breath as he details his interest in how dead bodies decompose in different climates. Jonah finds a tiny glimpse of visual evidence that his mother was having an affair only by enlarging a digital scan of one of the photographs. The physical, sensual relation connection to the lost mother that Barthes retrieves from her photographic image in *Camera Lucida* is here torn to shreds (Barthes 1980).

A shimmer of the reassurance of the indexical image is recapitulated, however. Half an hour from the end of *Louder than Bombs*, Isabelle seems to emerge from the crystal of her husband's and son's memories of her, and looks directly into the camera for just over thirty seconds. This is a pure affection-image; her face in close-up is slightly off-center so that an undefined dark space can be seen behind her hair. There is silence. The camera is slightly unsteady and clearly handheld. In fact, it was held by Joachim Trier, whose regular cinematographer, Jakob Ihre, felt it was important that the director take this shot: "I was sitting on a little wooden box facing Isabelle and filmed her for three minutes and she didn't blink" (Weston 2016). This is not just a detail of the production story; there is something symbolic about the director committing to analogue film the extended moment in which Isabelle comes into her own as subject in her encounter with the camera and viewer. In this encounter, we enjoy, as Thain puts it, "the suspension of action that accompanies the intensity of affect itself" (Thain 2017, p. 34).

### 3.5. *Thelma* (2017)

Shattered glass is also at the heart of *Thelma*. Traumatized by her realization that she is in love with another young woman, Anja, the eponymous main character inadvertently makes the object of her desire disappear through a plate glass window in a vortex of glass shards, leaving only a strand of

dark hair trapped in a crack in the reconfigured pane. This power to affect the material world is also manifested in Thelma's apparent ability to reanimate dead birds, call people to her, move buildings as if by the force of an earthquake, and heal the lame—her mother regains the ability to walk at the end of the film at the touch of Thelma's hand. However, because her abilities are driven by her desires, as a child, Thelma had killed her baby brother by moving him telekinetically to the middle of an ice-bound lake—under the ice. And her troubled, co-dependent relationship with her controlling father, Trond, meets its resolution out on that same lake, as he spontaneously combusts.

For much of the film, Thelma does not understand her own power. The first sign of trouble comes in the intense hush of the university library. A murmuration of black birds forms in the sky outside, and Thelma falls to the floor in the grip of what seems to be an epileptic seizure, as birds crash into the library windows. Medical investigations can find no obvious malady. It transpires that Thelma has inherited a condition from her grandmother, who has spent much of her life drugged in a nursing home; a kinder fate than being burnt at the stake, as an on-screen Wikipedia search reveals had been doled out to medieval sufferers of the condition. Remembering how she had used her powers as a child, and coming to terms with her actions, is the key to controlling her ability to manifest her desires.

Thus, while repressed memory is a key plot point in *Thelma*, this film's concern is not so much to explore the sublime ambiguities of memory, as in Trier's earlier films. The turn to a "gaze from somewhere else" discussed earlier seems congruent with a non-human force, the same realm, perhaps, from which Thelma's otherworldly powers emanate, and into which Anja is sucked. This gaze, like Thelma's power, is ungraspable—and thus sublime—and conceived as such by the filmmaker himself. We could read it in terms of Lim's discussion of the "immiscible" temporalities that often obtain in fantastical films, making other times heard, seen and felt. Such temporalities are "multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern time consciousness, discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform chronological present" (Lim 2009, p. 12). While Lim's concern is with the temporalities of other cultures, *Thelma's* exploration of queer love and the repression of women's witchcraft places its "gaze from elsewhere" somewhere other than the dominant culture.

The set-pieces in which Thelma (and *Thelma*) literally move(s) the world can be read as stagings of cinematic affect. As noted previously, Trier's films often make recourse to affection-images and close, sensual encounters with bodies when a remembered event seems to be oscillating between one sheet of time and another. The extreme close-up, handheld camera work and the interest in flesh continues in *Thelma*, particularly in the tentative sensual encounters between Thelma and her lover. But this is a genre film, under the rules of "body-horror" (Stolworthy 2017), and as such, the cinematography is not restricted to naturalism. Thelma's arousal and desire are transmediated into physical effects on the world. The most memorable such set-piece takes place in Oslo Opera House, a recently-completed landmark on the harbor front (Operahuset 2018). Invited to a contemporary dance performance by her lover and her mother, Thelma is enraptured by the choreography, and distracted by Anja's hand caressing her thigh. As her arousal and shame build, the monumental architectonics of the opera hall ceiling begin to sway. Like massive Viking ships, the acoustic structures up above form a slow, powerful counterpoint to the frantic writhings of the dancers on stage. In this cross-cutting, the deep seismographic rumblings of arousal overhead are set in relation with proprioceptive rhythms of dance performance. Two on-screen temporalities are choreographed with the intensity of related affects that are produced in the moment of viewing.

#### 4. Conclusions

When I introduced a screening of *Thelma* at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin in April 2018, the audience was almost unanimous in insisting that Trier had not achieved his ambition to create "new images". The set-pieces were derivative, they thought, and the magical-realist metaphors too literal. The weight of the film's precursors, the cinematic archive of images, hung too heavy on *Thelma*. It was a cursory warning against over-freighting a film with historically loaded terms such as

“the sublime”, and perhaps pre-empting the film’s power to affect—and thus to renew. Nonetheless, I would maintain that the concept of the sublime, as marshalled by the National Library that icy December evening in Oslo, is a productive perspective on Joachim Trier’s work. In our challenging times, it may be that the sublime is re-emerging as a subject for public discussion or as an aesthetic strategy precisely because of its era-appropriate “aesthetic of immensity, excess, and disproportion” (Shaviro 2002, p. 9). Or, in Melissa McMahon’s delicious turn of phrase, the sublime “seems to capture, redeem, and even glamorize [a] pathos of individual impotence in the face of a gormless modernity” (McMahon 2002, p. 4).

For Deleuze, the time-image of post-war cinema is a present-day sublime: it confronts us with “something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful . . . like too strong a pain” (Deleuze 2005, p. 17). This insistent “too” is echoed in Massumi’s account of how the affective encounter with colour strikes a body, and sticks as an excess of intensity, becoming “too-blue”. I have drawn on Massumi’s account of how affect “continues”, as well as Ahmad’s notion of affect as something that “sticks”, holding the world together, as a means to grasp an element of our encounter with cinema that precedes cognition but lingers in memory. Alanna Thain also argues for this effect of affective intensity of the time-image in particular: “it is the suspension of action that accompanies the intensity of affect itself. Rather than the lived body, its vitalism repeats as a difference or newness, even the minor form of difference that is the body in time”. Secondly, the time-image allows for an experience of what it feels like to live and to change; it is a form of “self-enjoyment” (Thain 2017, p. 34). This encounter with difference, newness, embodiment, seems akin to what Trier is striving for with his ambition to create images whose newness gives rise to this contemporary sublime.

While the project of “integrating the dimension of intensity into cultural theory” (Massumi 2002, p. 27) is of much wider import, Joachim Trier’s aesthetic strategies offer a particularly rich seam of possibilities for interrogating how memory in particular intersects with affective intensity in cinema. I have tried to use the sublime as a key to open up two aspects of Trier’s films in this respect: their propensity to arrest time and the viewer with shots that aspire to the condition of the still image, and examples of the “set-piece” sequence integral to Trier’s aesthetic which explore the processes of memory. Such explorations are compounded by the films’ propensity to gesture back and forth across his oeuvre, that is, to remember each other—not least refracted in the shards of crystal that concentrate around explorations of memory in each film. Both the still image and the set-piece sequence offer up a sense of the temporal sublime, the impossible or immiscible elements of memory that cannot be grasped intellectually, but which resound louder than bombs.

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