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Acting the Part: How Audience Problematizes Butlerian Performativity in the Films of Darren Aronofsky Kathryn Bigelow and Lars Van Trier

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Acting the Part: How 'Audience' Problematizes Butlerian Performativity in the Films of
Darren Aronofsky, Kathryn Bigelow, and Lars von Trier

By

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of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

SEMERAD, RYAN Acting the Part: How ‘Audience’ Problematizes Butlerian Performativity in the Films of Darren Aronofsky, Kathryn Bigelow, and Lars von Trier

ADVISORS: Prof. Andrew Burkett and Prof. Katherine Lynes

Feminist and gender studies critics laud Judith Butler’s theory of the performative construction of identity because of its capacity to liberate gender from the biological essentialism entailed by previous identity theories. In this thesis, I show how six twenty-first century films demonstrate the importance and problematic nature of ‘audience’ in the performative construction of identity. Each film employs a dialectic model between their protagonists and the reception they receive from diegetic audiences within the film to describe performativity. *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Wrestler* (2008) demonstrate how performative identities require an audience to legitimize them. *Antichrist* (2009) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) show how society functions as an audience that legitimizes flawed performative identities. *Melancholia* (2011) and *The Fountain* (2006) illustrate how the death of the audience destroys the performative identity. Butler’s theory doesn’t adequately acknowledge the power of the relationship between performativity and audience because she doesn’t entirely consider the audience’s influence on the performative construction of identity. Each of the films examined in this thesis show how either an explicit or implicit diegetic audience is largely responsible for a given character's performative construction of identity. In doing so, they establish that performative identities cannot be separated from the audiences because the performative process is inherently a dialectic construct between performers and their diegetic audiences. Therefore, scholars who engage with Butlerian performativity must more

thoroughly consider the audience's role in authenticating performatively constructed identities.

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Introduction

“This text does not sufficiently explain performativity in terms of its social, psychic, corporeal, and temporal dimensions.”

--Judith Butler, 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

“Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, *a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.*”

--Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (emphasis mine)

“The only ones who are gonna tell me when I’m through doing my thing is you people here. You people here are the ones who are worth bringing it for, because you’re my family. I love you all so much.”

--Randy “the Ram” Robinson, *The Wrestler* (2008)

In her highly acclaimed text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler describes gender as a feature of the human identity that is socially constructed. For Butler, gender is unstable. A person isn't a particular gender; he or she *constructs* a gender through specific actions, bodily movements, styles of speaking, etc. A person dons a gender much in the same way he or she puts on a certain article of clothing. That is, a woman is not a woman simply because she is female, a woman is a woman because she acts the part of a woman—she behaves like a woman. Butler calls this gender-identity construction process 'performative.' While there are many variants of 'performativity' (which will be discussed shortly), Butler's understanding of performativity focuses on the construction of gender-identities. According to Butler, the performative construction of a gender-identity is a process through which a person adopts

and shapes features of his or her gender in an overtly extrinsic fashion. This performative construction is accomplished through the repetition of physical appearances, stylized gestures, or actions which have (for better or worse) been ascribed to those possessing certain gender-identities. Importantly, Butlerian performativity entails a series of actions that are necessarily visual. Moreover, although she doesn't explicitly state it, her theory configures an individual's identity as dependent upon external observation. That is, the Butlerian performer needs an audience—an audience that affirms their identity.

There is a pervasive ideological dissonance between Butler's theory of performativity and a practical understanding of the performative construction of identity. Butler's theory, renowned both for its complexity and its profoundly transformative nature, destabilizes the simplistic and harmfully restrictive biological essentialism entailed by previous theories of identity in regards to gender. Her argument's liberation of gender is an important part of the continuing development of feminism and is an integral foundation for an understanding of transgender personhood. Personally, I find Butler's argument to be persuasive in its reformulation of gender as a social construct not a biological necessity. However, Butler doesn't provide adequate attention to the role of the 'audience,' which makes her theory of performativity incomplete, and, as a result, increasingly vulnerable to potential dismissal. Butler's theory of performativity asserts that a person's gender-identity is a social construct that must be repeatedly established over time. In formulating her theory, she incorporates and rethinks many of the ideas of performativity first used by J.L. Austin in his work *How to Do Things with Words*, and later adapted by Jacques Derrida in his work *Margins of Philosophy*. Butler agrees with Derrida's sense of the "general iterability . . . without which there would not even be a

‘successful’ performative” (Derrida 325). That is, like Derrida, Butler supports the argument that actions that successfully establish a particular identity must adhere to a specific recognized form or style—a socially-approved “general iterability” (Derrida 325). Additionally, and importantly, Butler agrees with Austin’s distinction between theatrical performativity and *real* performativity. Austin argues that a “performative utterance will . . . be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy . . . Language in such circumstances is in special ways . . . used *not seriously*” (Austin 22, emphasis mine). Here Austin proposes that theatrical performativity is a kind of false communication—it doesn't provide any substantive, genuine information about the world or the actor's role in it. Butler makes a similar distinction concerning theatrical performativity’s lack of authenticity in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” She writes:

In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life. On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality[.] (Butler 527)

Butler, like Austin, maintains that there are genuine performative expressions which actually constitute identity in a way that is not “distinct from reality,” and theatrical performativity simply cannot do this (Butler 527). One can easily “de-realize” the theatrically performative act, delegitimizing its expressive, constructive power, because it

is markedly false (Butler 527). Austin and Butler's argument here brings up a subtle yet important point: the social context in which an individual introduces a performative expression has transformative power. In one environment, a performative expression is "hollow" as Austin puts it; however, in another environment, a performative expression is incredibly significant and meaningful—perhaps, even "dangerous" (Austin 22; Butler 527).

The central concern of this thesis is to show that Butler's performative construction of identity requires the existence of a legitimizing, confirming audience. This feature of Butler's theory is implicitly present in the way she articulates the distinction between theatrical performativity and real performativity. She describes how a person's identity is real in one context and false in another not because of a change in that person's actions or appearance, but because of a fundamental change in the way an outside observer perceives that person. She writes "the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (Butler 527). In other words, it isn't the transvestite—the performer—who dictates the reality of the performance, it is the observer—the audience, who authenticates the performance. Thus, the reality and significance of the performance depends upon the observing audience's perception and adjudication of the performance's authenticity. Applying this conclusion to the performative construction of identity, the authenticity of that identity, which is itself a collection of repeated performative expressions, depends upon the audience's perception and confirmation of those individual, discontinuous expressions. Butler briefly hints at this dependence, but she doesn't fully investigate its implications. She writes:

Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (Butler 526)

Here Butler is simultaneously admitting to the restrictive influence of the audience, which in this case can be seen as the nebulous 'public' or 'society,' and arguing that the individual is liberated by the sheer number of potential interpretations on that audience's expectations. Nonetheless, Butler's argument still entails the existence of the observing audience. Moreover, she suggests that the multiplicity of interpretations available "within the confines of already existing directives" liberates the performer; however, this claim is undermined by her (and Austin's) own charge that the observing audience entirely determines the authenticity of the performer's identity.

This thesis does not take issue with the implications Butler's theory has on gender. As I mentioned above, I find Butler's theory, on the whole, persuasive. As such, my work does not address or even consider any controversies surrounding Butler's theory as it pertains to gender. The heart of this thesis is instead focused on the mechanics by which Butler arrives at and constructs her theory. It is my position that she ignores the enormity of the problem the audience has on performativity. Butler writes in *Gender Trouble*:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. (Butler 179)

This passage is incredibly important for Butler's theory because in it she describes how gender ought to be liberated from its entrenched position as a *de facto* identity and be seen as nothing more "substantial" than a social construct (Butler 179). However, this liberation only removes gender from the clutches of biological essentialism just to shift it into another, albeit different, entrenched position: gender becomes a part of the pantheon of identifying markers that are dictated by society not science. That is, a woman is not a woman because she was born that way; she is a woman precisely because she acts in a way people perceive as woman-like—she acts the part, as it were. In this way, for Butler gender is, if anything, more of a "locus of agency" than previously described in the sense that a person adopts a gender through behaving in a certain specific, socially-recognized way. Additionally, the other features of a person's identity that are socially constructed such as occupation, marital status, and so forth are not *necessarily* any less stabilizing than the biological features that constitute the physical person.

This thesis shows how twenty-first century films illustrate the performative identity's dependence on an external, legitimizing audience. As a result, these films are themselves critical and theoretical interventions in human performativity. To this end, they show how Butler's theory suffers because she doesn't adequately consider the influence of audience on performative constructs. Six characters from the films construct their identities in a kind of Butlerian performative way—that is, through repetitive stylized actions that establish their identities as socially constructed and not innately present. I demonstrate how each character's performative construction of identity is

vitality dependent on an audience within the film—a diegetic audience.¹ In this way, the films establish that the social construction needed to create “substance” from these performative acts which are “internally discontinuous” is a result of an audience who observes and, through that observation, legitimizes these identities (Butler 179). Each character I focus on has an intimate connection with their audience either directly or indirectly because their audience serves an important purpose: namely, the audience authenticates their performative identities and doesn’t reduce them to “hollow”, artificial expressions (Austin 22).

Film is a controversial yet fitting medium for undertaking this analysis of Butler’s conception of performativity and the performative construction of identity. Film is controversial in this endeavor because it appears to fall into the category of the ‘theatrical performative expression’ in the sense that movies are (putatively) just collections of acts, which are themselves overtly false. However, film is nothing like going to the theatre and watching actual physical performers recreating a conflict. Film is not directly representational in this way. As Gilles Deleuze explains in “Recapitulation of Images and Signs,” film “does not reproduce a world, but constitutes an autonomous world, made up of breaks and disproportion, deprived of all its centres, addressing itself as such to a viewer who is in himself no longer centre of his own perception” (Deleuze 193). In other words, film creates an alternative ‘world’ that exists sidelong to the real world; it does not, like the flesh and bones performance of the theatre, create an overtly false world within the real world. The authenticity of film is ambiguous. While it is certain that the images

¹ Importantly, throughout this thesis, when I refer to the ‘audience’ I am not referring to the audience who watches the films—the extra-diegetic audience—I am referring to the social audience within the films—the diegetic audience—who directly or indirectly observes and confirms the performative identities of the characters in each film.

film presents are not *necessarily* real, they aren't necessarily unreal either. In this way, film recreates the shifting social landscape in which performative identities are authentically constructed according to Butler. Thus, film is an ideal medium to investigate the performative construction of identity because it replicates the authenticity of performative identities in the real world.

I have structured this thesis in three chapters. The first chapter, "On the Stage," analyzes Darren Aronofsky's films *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Wrestler* (2008). In this chapter, I demonstrate how the protagonists of both films are not only onstage performers but also construct their identities in addictive ways through their performances. In the course of my analysis, I show that the key difference between these characters' performative lives and their nonperformative lives is the presence of the diegetic audience in the former and its absent in the latter. In this way, I establish that the performative construction of identity requires an audience. The second chapter, "At Work," focuses on Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist* (2009) and Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker* (2008). In this chapter, I argue that audiences can encourage and enable specific problematic performative identities to be constructed. In the case of these two films, I show how two men who are highly successful at jobs that are integral to society's continuity—namely, a therapist and a soldier—conflate their identities with their occupations, causing them to neglect and endanger their families. The third chapter, "At Home," interprets Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011) and Darren Aronofsky's film *The Fountain* (2006) as examples of how families can be diegetic audiences that authenticate performatively constructed identities for individual family members. In doing so, I argue that individuals' performative identities come undone by the loss of the

audiences that legitimize them. Altogether, these three chapters demonstrate the significant role the audience plays in the performative construction of identity. They show that the audience's influence has the ability to fundamentally control the performer's identity. Thus, Butler's failure to address fully the power of audience over the authenticity of the performative construction of identity leaves open the possibility that her theory, in fact, only reformulates gender as "a substantial model of identity" that is social and does not liberate it from other essentialist theories of gender-identity—a conclusion which would ultimately undermine her project altogether.

Chapter 1: On the Stage

Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Wrestler* (2008) describe the power of audience approval in the construction of performers' identities. These films present two performers who construct their identities through repeated performances, and in doing so they construct their identities in something like a Butlerian performative fashion. According to Butler, a performatively constructed identity is a social construct, which is created "through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 179). According to the films, these two protagonists are existentially dependent on performance—their identities are so inextricably linked to performance that they fundamentally cease to exist without it. That is, without their performances, these characters cease to exist. Significantly, their audiences encourage and enable their self-destructive addictions through the praise and endorsement that comes along with observing their performances. As a result of their protagonists' performance-based identities, *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler* exemplify Butler's theory of performativity; however, unlike in Butler's theory, these characters' performative identities are intimately tied to their diegetic audiences—that is, the audiences within the film who observe their performances. Butler understands that identity theories' tendency to categorize people in a seemingly arbitrary fashion is capable of causing harm of some kind. In this way, she sees all identity theories, in one way or another, as problematic: "I'm permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble" (Butler 1708). An identity category is a key component to any identity theory that functions as a tool to differentiate between identities, including certain kinds of persons and excluding others. For example, in queer

theory, 'gay' can refer to any homosexual person or only to homosexual men. In the latter case, the identity category 'gay' is more exclusive and restricts women as well as transgender people from being included. *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler* can then be seen as cinematic explications as well as complications of the areas of "necessary trouble" in Butler's own theory. The problem these films present is the defining role the audience plays in the performative construction of identity. Both films highlight the audience's influence by distinguishing the performative world from the nonperformative world, two arenas the films explore that I will define in depth shortly.

Butler describes the performances that construct identity as separate and independent of one another. These performative discontinuities are the core of her argument that identity is constructed *post facto* and is not essential, or not innately a feature of a person. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler describes how these discontinuities establish the performative identity as a constructed entity:

Significantly, if gender [a performatively constructed identity] is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* [the appearance of a coherent identity] is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (Butler 179)

Butler maintains that the gaps between identifying performances are the evidence that identity is constructed because these gaps necessitate synthesis of the performances after the fact. The discontinuous nature of these performances give rise to a hegemonic system of identity politics in which there are identity-constructive actions (performances) and there are gaps between those actions (non-performances). These two films are highly concerned with explicating the distinction between these two arenas of existence, which I refer to as the 'performative' and 'nonperformative' worlds. Importantly, *Black Swan* and

The Wrestler describe the audience as an agent for the performative world which allows the performative identity to be maintained between performances. In this way, the performative identity requires the “social audience . . . to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” in its construction during its performative gaps in order to exist as a coherent “substance” (Butler 179).

The performative world is the arena of a performer’s life wherein she prepares to perform and actually performs. In *Black Swan*, the film focuses on one ballerina in particular: Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman). Nina’s performative world consists of the dressing room, rehearsal space, stage, costume shop, and so on. In *The Wrestler*, the film follows one wrestler: Randy the Ram Robinson whose real name is Robin Ramzinsky² (Mickey Rourke). Randy’s performative world consists of the gym, the dressing room, and the ring. The defining feature of the performative world is the presence of an audience or the anticipation of an audience’s presence (these are the diegetic audiences of the film). This is a crucial element of the performative world because it justifies the performative world’s existence by legitimizing the performative identities constructed within that world. Both films indicate that one’s actions cannot authentically construct her identity without observation. As noted in the introduction, according to Butler, the observational context of a performative act renders it *real* or *theatrical*—that is, defining or superficial. Thus, performative acts require observation.

² As we shall see later in this chapter, there is great significance to this nominal distinction thematically within the film. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to this character only as Randy the Ram or Randy hereafter.

The nonperformative world comprises every relationship, interaction, event, and location outside of performance, where neither Randy nor Nina is recognized by their performances. For Nina, the nonperformative world consists of her bedroom, the bathroom, a restaurant, and a club. For Randy, the nonperformative world consists of his trailer park home, his van, a grocery store he works at, a hospital, and a local strip club. For both Nina and Randy, real interpersonal relationships with family and friends take place in the nonperformative world, which excludes the audience. Additionally, the nonperformative world serves as an intermediary for the different performances the protagonists give. Thematically, it juxtaposes the characters' relative ease in performance with their anxieties and discomfort outside of performance. The films describe the nonperformative world as a sickening place full of misery and conflict for these performers. In this way, the gaps between identity-constructing performances reveal the profundity of the audience's presence: without the audience, Nina and Randy can't construct their performative identities. As a result, they suffer.

In *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler*, the audience plays a vital role in distinguishing the performative world from the nonperformative world. In these films, the audience is never present in the nonperformative world, whereas the audience's presence or anticipation of the audience's presence is the *raison d'être* of the performative world. Randy and Nina ultimately die from their performative identities because they stop taking care of themselves in order to dedicate themselves to perform for their diegetic audiences. Thus the films demonstrate the audience influences Nina and Randy to construct harmful identities in the sense that they hurt themselves to please the audience. Nina and Randy are preferentially divided between the performative and nonperformative worlds. They

share an obsession with the performative world that undermines their ability to function properly in the nonperformative world: they don't have any real friends outside of performance, and they both have to endure a variety of conflicts born out of their broken or nonexistent families. In this way, Randy and Nina depend on the audience for the love, affection, and especially the attention that they don't receive in the nonperformative world. The films don't explicitly provide the order in which this dependency was created—were their nonperformative worlds broken before their performative worlds provided attention or vice versa? Nonetheless they establish that both Randy and Nina need and desire the performative world over the nonperformative world.

The intensity of the passion these characters have for performance is at once admirable and heartbreaking. Randy and Nina exemplify the absolute professionalism that only the best performers possess. Their audiences love them for it. Unfortunately, their dedication and commitment comes with a great cost. Moreover, because they rely on their performances for the construction of their identities, they are at the mercy of their audiences: if the audience desires a performance that requires them to destroy their bodies or minds, they must do it—the alternative is equally suicidal since they conflate their identities with their respective performances. Thus, their passion reveals something other than dedication or commitment: it exposes the construction of their identities as a kind of *addiction* and their audiences as the providers of their 'fix.' This returns my analysis to the problematic role of the diegetic audiences in these films. Do they observe, and so encourage, an intensely passionate performer in her performance; or do they observe, and thus encourage an addict in the throes of her addiction, egging her on towards total self-destruction? I will show the audience's observation serves the latter

purpose: Nina and Randy are quite literally destroyed by the dialectic between performance and reception.

***Black Swan*: Nina Sayers**

Black Swan uses Nina's isolation and alienation from the nonperformative world to establish her dependence on performance for the construction of her identity. In the film, Nina is a ballerina in a company that is producing Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*. She is cast as the Swan Queen, meaning that she will play the role of both the White Swan and the Black Swan. Because she is cast as the lead dancer, Nina's nonperformative world takes on heightened significance: her behavior outside of the company becomes everyone's business, which forces her to reexamine her personal life (or lack thereof). Throughout the course of the film, it is clear that Nina simply cannot function in this world outside of the stage. Roger Ebert puts Nina's plight succinctly in his review of *Black Swan*:

The tragedy of Nina, and of many young performers and athletes, is that perfection in one area of life has led to sacrifices in many of the others. At a young age, everything becomes focused on pleasing someone (a parent, a coach, a partner), and somehow it gets wired in that the person can never be pleased. One becomes perfect in every area except for life itself. (Ebert)

Black Swan is structurally divided into two sections: the first section, which comprises the first two-thirds of the film, focuses on Nina's internal struggle between the nonperformative world and the performative world; and the second section focuses solely on Nina's performance. Throughout the first section of the film, we see Nina alone and isolated. She sits alone on the train. She walks home alone. She prepares for rehearsal by herself. She dances alone. She sleeps alone. The moments when Nina does interact with other people are strange, stilted encounters. Her conversations with her mother Erica (Barbara Hershey) and her director Thomas (Vincent Cassel) are juvenile in an unsettling way. In both instances, Nina appears weak and uncomfortable. Moreover, she

reacts unpredictably and unstably around her fellow dancers. Nina mentally unravels throughout the first two-thirds of the film. Nina's social and interpersonal alienation in this initial section directly contrasts with her performance in the final third.

Throughout the last third of *Black Swan*, Nina is graceful, elegant, powerful, and utterly unhinged. Unlike the first section's depiction of Nina as alienated and weak, this section shows Nina as transcendent—even dangerous. When Nina performs, she is uninhibited by her social ineptitudes and her mental degradation. Nina's actions in this performative world expose her alienation in the nonperformative world as a symptom of her addiction to her constructed identity: without the audience's affirmation of her, Nina has no identity and as such struggles to function in a social way. The film even opens with her dreaming about a performance. This moment shows how her performative identity is enmeshed in her subconscious mind. Everything that makes up Nina—her body, her mind, and her soul—is tied to performance. She has no other sense of identity.

The first section of the film portrays Nina as a fragile, damaged character. She suffers from bulimia, anxiety, and hallucinations—potentially multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia. She cannot communicate well with anyone in her life. She is the epitome of naivety and vulnerability. Nina is an infantile neophyte in the nonperformative world; she is unable to understand the adult world of sex, relationships, and self-control. The initial section of *Black Swan* describes Nina's nonperformative world as unnerving because of her lack of stable, understandable relationships. To this end, all of Nina's relationships are terribly ambiguous. She has no father, or at least no father present in the film. Her mother, Erica, appears to be overbearing and jealous at times, yet at other times she seems caring and perhaps overprotective. The director of her

ballet company, Thomas, is both abusive, and supportive. The only semblance of a friend Nina has in the company, Lily (Mila Kunis), convinces her to take ecstasy the night before an important rehearsal, which allows Nina to loosen up and approach something like a 'social experience'; however, the drug also causes her to have a terrifying, suicidal hallucination. As a result of the opaque significance of these relationships, the nonperformative world becomes an impenetrable puzzle for Nina. Moreover, Nina becomes more and more paranoid and afraid of the nonperformative world as time goes on because its unintelligibility.

The nonperformative world's unintelligibility is born out of an interaction Nina has with the director of the company, which ultimately gets her cast as the Swan Queen. This interaction highlights Nina's struggle with the unpredictable nature of the nonperformative world as well as her fragility in social situations. It begins when Nina goes to see the director, Thomas, after she fails to impress him during her audition for the lead role (the Swan Queen). During Nina's train ride to Thomas's office, there is a static medium close-up of Nina putting on lipstick using the window of the train as a mirror. The lipstick Nina uses belongs to the former lead dancer of the company Beth Macintyre (Winona Ryder). This shot shows Nina donning the guise of the lead dancer before she speaks to Thomas. This moment reveals that she wants to play the performative role of 'Beth'—that is, the lead role. In their essay "Gender Undone: Subversion, Regulation and Embodiment in the Work of Judith Butler," Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily describe this exact act—the application of lipstick—as an example of Butlerian performativity. They write:

Consider, for example, the seemingly straightforward act of a girl putting on lipstick. Rather than attribute this action to a knowable

female subject, in *Bodies that Matter* Butler describes such activities as a mode of 'girling' (1993) through which the 'subject' is only made intelligible through action. 'My argument', she recounts, 'is that there need not be a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed' (Butler, 1990, p. 142). (Nayak and Kehily 460)

In this way, Nayak and Kehily articulate how Butlerian performativity is intrinsically performance-based. Moreover, they assert that specific, visual actions necessarily construct one's identity. Thus, Nina's application of Beth's lipstick is an overtly performative act (in the Butlerian sense of the phrase) wherein Nina attempts to become or attain Beth's status. However, Nina doesn't reveal this performative intention to Thomas. She states, "I just wanted to tell you that I practiced the coda last night and I finished." The camera cuts to Thomas who looks irritated and confused, then cuts back to Nina who appears to be on the verge of tears. Thomas dismisses Nina's statement: "I don't care about your technique; you should know that by now." He informs her that he has already cast Veronica (Ksenia Solo) as the Swan Queen. These remarks demonstrate Thomas has read into Nina's intentions and has refused to affirm them. His comments also appear to imply that he will not change his mind. However, later in the scene, that's exactly what Thomas does.

Thomas initially criticizes Nina's dancing as "fragile" and "fearful." He tells Nina her greatest weakness as a dancer is her methodical style—according to Thomas, she cannot transcend the dance and surprise the audience because she is so focused on technical perfection. He goes on to explain that "perfection is not just about control; it's about letting go." He condemns Nina for never "losing herself" in the dance. He describes how she is perfect for the structured, innocent White Swan, but her obsession with technique and control prevent him from seeing her as the Black Swan. As Nina is

about to leave defeated, Thomas grabs her and kisses her. In response, Nina surprises Thomas and bites him. It is this unexpected violent reaction that shocks Thomas enough to see beyond Nina's "fragile," controlled exterior and cast her as the Swan Queen; however, Nina doesn't anticipate or understand this effect. For Nina, Thomas's altered opinion is inexplicable. Nina's inability to see the effect she had on Thomas accelerates her descent into madness and further complicates her nonperformative world.

Importantly, Nina's interaction with Thomas in this scene captures the way the ballet's audience is an integral component to her performatively constructed identity and her resulting self-destruction. Thomas is Nina's director and as such he has complete control over her performance. In this way—like the people who come to see the ballet—Thomas's opinion of Nina and her performance can either affirm or reject her performatively constructed identity. Amber Jacobs, in "Debating *Black Swan*: Gender and Horror," reads this binary relationship differently. She argues that the film "reproduces, romanticizes, and condones . . . the patriarchal conditions [under which] women's attempts to achieve subjectivity invariably result in madness, breakdown, self-destructivity, and premature death" (Jacobs 59). In other words, Jacobs argues that the film represents Thomas as the patriarch and Nina as an oppressed subject of that hegemonic system. In this reading of the film, Nina's mental breakdown and subsequent suicide are due to her attempt to transcend the established gender boundaries of the system. However, Thomas represents more than a man in power over a woman (in this case, as the director of a ballet company, over many women—and men too). He is an agent who controls performance itself. Nonperformative life for Nina is a quagmire of unpredictable interpersonal relationships. She depends on performance to construct an

intelligible identity. Thus, Thomas's power in this situation isn't rooted in his status as a man and Nina's status as a woman, but, like the audience of the ballet, it rests in his status as a special kind of judge with the ability to either endorse Nina's performance or reject it.

The fact that Thomas endorses Nina's performance (and so selects her for the lead role effectively enabling her addiction to her performatively constructed identity) is, as noted above, unthinkable to her after her meeting with him. Another result of his endorsement's unintelligibility is Nina's further alienation from everyone in her nonperformative world. Nina strains three key relationships in her nonperformative world because of Thomas's endorsement. Nina's new role strains her relationship with Veronica (a fellow dancer), her mother (a former dancer), and Beth (the former lead dancer). Her new role strains these relationships because it destroys the performative identity of the other person involved.

The social hierarchy of the ballet company's nonperformative world is inversely related to its performative world. That is, since a lead dancer like Nina is featured and glorified during the company's performance she is shunned outside of the performance. The dancers in the company ostracize the lead dancer because of jealousy: every dancer in the company strives to be the lead dancer, although there can be only one. It doesn't matter who the lead dancer is, she will be shunned by the others. For example, Beth was the company's lead dancer for many seasons until she stepped down. However, upon hearing that she still showed up for rehearsal, the other dancers don't reflect on Beth's dedication to the company or her humility in accepting a smaller role, but instead focus on her age and lack of popular appeal. Veronica, the dancer Thomas had initially cast as the Swan Queen, sardonically questions, "What? She [Beth] can't take a hint?" She goes

on to state, “No one comes to see her anymore.” Nina tries to defend her: “It’s sad . . . Beth’s such a beautiful dancer.” Another dancer, Galina (Kristina Anapau), acerbically retorts, “Yeah. So is my grandmother.” This scene takes place in the dressing room for the company’s soloists. While the dancers are tearing down Beth, the camera doesn’t focus on them, but instead tracks their reflections in their mirrors as they apply makeup and fix their hair. The camera’s interest in their reflections and its disinterest in their actual faces illustrate the superficiality of their snide remarks and comments. These dancers are attacking Beth to cover up their own aspirations: everybody wants to be like Beth—everyone wants to be the lead.

From the moment Nina is cast as the lead—even before she knows about it—all of the other dancers in the company aim their animosity and vitriol at her. This fact compounds Nina’s misunderstanding of the nonperformative world. For one thing, she doesn’t understand how she got the role. Moreover, she doesn’t understand the scorn and disgust she receives from the other dancers. The conflict begins after Nina’s meeting with Thomas. After Nina leaves Thomas, the camera cuts to Veronica, Galina, and another dancer, Madeline (Janet Montgomery), who sit together in the drab cinderblock hallway outside the dressing room. The other dancers praise Veronica for an incredible performance. Then, the camera cuts to a close-up of Veronica who notices that Nina is “staring” at her. Veronica asks the group, “Why is she always staring at me?” Her friends respond: “She’s obsessed with you.” The moment is rich and complex. Nina looks at Veronica because she believes Veronica has been cast as the Swan Queen. Veronica looks at Nina with revulsion because she doesn’t understand Nina’s stare. Her friends correctly assume it’s because Nina is “obsessed” with Veronica—that is, she

wishes she had Veronica's role in the performative world. However, the camera cuts back and forth between them in a way that visually describes Nina as the person playing the exceptional role: while Veronica sits among friends who encourage her, Nina sits alone and is the subject of dirty looks and snarky comments. The *mise en scene* of the two shots shows that Nina has already assumed the lead role. The cast list only confirms the fact. Before Veronica can go read the cast list, Nina tells her "congratulations" because she assumes she got the lead role. Nina walks off in the opposite direction of the list sulking as Veronica flitters off excitedly to read the cast list. Moments later, Veronica returns to Nina incensed: "why would you say that? . . . Your idea of some sick joke?" Caught off guard, Nina asks, "What?" Veronica curses her: "fuck you." Only after this confused interaction does Nina learn that she has been cast as the lead role, not Veronica. Thus, Nina's role destroys Veronica's temporary performative identity as the star of the company. In this crucible of confusion, animosity, and surprise, Nina becomes a star in the performative world, and the nonperformative world becomes a living hell. In his review of *Black Swan* at the Venice Film Festival, Richard Corliss notes that "[g]etting a lead role is a freaking nightmare" (Corliss). For Nina, it is fatal.

Nina's mother, Erica, exacerbates the discomfort and rejection Nina experiences in the nonperformative world by simultaneously supporting and opposing Nina's newfound stardom. Erica, a former dancer whose career was stunted by her unplanned pregnancy with Nina, has conflicting interests. On the one hand, she supports her daughter's career as a ballerina by giving her a place to live, feeding her, encouraging her, and attempting to protect her from the brutal reality of a harsh world—she encourages and enables Nina to depend on her. On the other hand, Erica envies Nina's success and

holds her achievements against her. She stymies Nina's social life, intrudes on her privacy, and manipulates her emotions—she infantilizes Nina. In this way, Erica supports Nina in a manner that prevents her from acting independently because she needs Nina to be vulnerable and weak so she can construct a performative identity as her protector. Thus, Nina's elevated role as lead dancer represents a threat to Erica's identity as the wise, protective mother because this role allows Nina to get all the care and support she needs from the audience of the ballet. In response to this existential challenge, Erica makes Nina's home-life increasingly unbearable. Erica deliberately sabotages Nina's independence. She forbids Nina from going out with Lily, a fellow dancer, and she constantly checks up on her by questioning her directly and by calling the ballet's offices. Additionally, Erica herself becomes increasingly unstable and depressed. The first incident of Erica's mental deterioration occurs when Nina gets home after being cast. Erica surprises Nina with a disgustingly pink cake that she calls "our favorite." Nina, who suffers from eating disorders, declines to have a piece as large as the slice Erica cuts for her. In response, Erica threatens to throw the whole cake out, stating, "well then it's garbage." When Nina pleads with her not to throw it out, Erica responds with a non-sequitur: "I'm just *so* proud of you" (emphasis mine). In this moment the film's musical score becomes bombastic in order to heighten the tension of the moment as Erica, wearing a black dress with an agonized, fake smile, is contrasted with Nina, dressed in a pink bathrobe with a pained look of torture on her face. The juxtaposition of their strained expression indicates the façade of the whole encounter. What appears to be a mother congratulating her daughter is actually a woman lashing out at the absence of an integral part of her performative identity: a helpless child.

Henceforth, Erica's attention becomes utterly consumed with a scratch Nina has recently developed on her back. The scratch is barely noticeable; however, it appears to grow and shrink spontaneously depending on the situation in which it is examined. No one in the ballet company (not even the costume designer or the trainer) notice it or comment on it. The only people that seem to be aware of it are Nina and her mother. In his essay "The Looking Glass," Joshua Clover maintains that in film madness is born out of unnecessary visual repetitions—that is, too much of the same look, appearance, or image. Clover writes specifically about Erica in *Black Swan*:

The mother [Erica], like so many screen maniacs before her, keeps a shrine of the same portrait in near-endless repetition, with only minor variation. In this case it's a self-portrait. It is an under-remarked matter that this has become a kind of unquestioned folk belief, at least in the movies: the sign of madness is having too many copies of the same image. (Clover 8)

According to Clover, Erica's numerous copies of herself expose her madness. More to the point, the variations in each painting are their only distinguishing features since their subject is the same. In this way, Nina's tiny evolving scratch, her only physical imperfection, comes to represent for Erica the difference between the former Nina, who was helpless and allowed her mother to construct a custodial identity, and the new Nina, who has destroyed that performative identity. Erica first notices the scratch before Nina even auditions for the lead role. When Erica points it out, Nina explains that "it's nothing," and Erica doesn't press the issue. After a gala Nina attends where she is publically introduced as the new lead dancer, Erica notices the scratch again. This time she flies into a furious rage about how she thought Nina had "outgrown that childish habit" (although the film hasn't shown Nina scratching her back at this point). She proceeds to vigorously cut Nina's fingernails while she describes how she'll hide the

scratch. All the tiny little details of Nina's life (e.g., her fingernails, a tiny scratch) become precious to Erica who is searching for a new identity to construct for herself via her daughter.

Erica's loss of her performative identity throws her into a manic state of depression in which she projects her regrets over her own performative failures onto Nina. Feminist philosopher Jane Flax describes how the complex interdependencies that exist between mothers and daughters can cause such identity crises in her essay, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships And within Feminism." Flax writes:

As an adult, the daughter repeats the process by thwarting her daughter's moves toward autonomy. She makes herself powerful by overvaluing the son through whom she indirectly exerts power in the outside world. She thereby fulfills her own repressed wishes for autonomy and achievement. *Her only source of emotional security is her daughter, whom she cannot allow to individuate.* Thus her daughter ends up in the same situation as herself. Some mothers encourage daughters to escape; but often in the process they convey a double message of "be like me" but also "do not be like me."
(Flax 179, emphasis mine)

Flax maintains that mothers see their daughters as repetitions of themselves while they see their sons as their unique products. Using Flax's terms, in *Black Swan* Erica's "overvalued son" is the attention Nina receives from her role in the ballet. Perhaps, she pushed Nina into dance through her disproportionate affection for this performative attention. Either way, Erica needs Nina to depend on her—not the ballet—for her (Erica's) own sense of identity. Since Nina gains a kind of individual identity as the star dancer, Erica stifles any chance Nina has at achieving autonomy and individuality in the nonperformative world, which ironically reinforces the importance of Nina's performative identity.

In one particularly hostile interaction, Erica asks Nina about Thomas, the director of the ballet. She asks if Thomas has “tried anything [with Nina]” stating that she has a right “to be concerned” given his reputation. However, Erica’s concern appears misplaced. She tells Nina that she doesn’t want her to “make the mistake [she] did,” referring to the fact that her pregnancy with Nina ended her career as a dancer. Thus, Erica is not concerned that Thomas is “taking advantage” of Nina—as she puts it—but that Nina’s stardom will be cut short by his taking advantage. At the end of the day, what matters is not Nina’s safety or well-being, but her identity as the star of the company.

Black Swan characterizes the star dancer of a ballet company as a problematic identity for anyone to maintain. The main issues with this identity are: (1) it can only be held by one dancer at a time, and (2) every dancer aspires to be the star. Thus, there is fierce competition to acquire this role, and there is intense paranoia about being replaced for the dancer who has this role. As a result of the emotional trauma that goes into obtaining and maintaining the identity of the star dancer, it is no surprise that any dancer, especially one as fragile as Nina, can become obsessed and addicted to it. More significantly, the role provides such a powerful and important identity to a dancer that losing it (by being replaced, retiring, etc.) is more than simply stepping down: a dancer must sacrifice her identity. Therefore, Nina’s new identity destroys the performative identity of Beth, the former star of the company. More poignantly, Nina’s relationship to Beth foreshadows Nina’s own inevitable downfall. No dancer can be the star forever.

The conflict between Nina and Beth exposes the powerful attraction to being the star dancer. Siegfried Kracauer describes the transcendent power of dance as a process through which the dancer abandons the normal world of commonplace happenings. In

The Mass Ornament, Kracauer writes specifically on dance in a chapter entitled, “On Travel and Dance.” He writes:

What one expects and gets from . . . dance – a liberation from earthly woes, the possibility of an *aesthetic* relation to organized toil – corresponds to the sort of elevation above the ephemeral and the contingent that might occur within people’s existence in the relation to the eternal and absolute . . . The dancer . . . grasps eternity in the rhythm: the contrast between the time in which he floats about and the time that demolishes him is his authentic rapture within the inauthentic domain. (Kracauer 72)

Kracauer’s understanding of dance as an “authentic rapture within the inauthentic domain” shows dance to be capable of providing a religious significance to a trivial, artificial world (Kracauer 72). Put another way, the star dancer’s performatively constructed identity is something like a divine role that reveals the mundane, nonperformative world to be not only insignificant, but utterly meaningless. Beth’s downward spiral after Nina destroys her performative identity is so exaggeratedly violent, maddening, and self-destructive because Beth loses the transcendent connection that identity provided.

Black Swan uses Nina’s two interactions with Beth to show how the performatively constructed identity Nina has gained makes addicts out of performers. The first interaction Nina has with Beth takes place after the gala at which Nina is formally introduced as the ballet’s new star. Beth, who is in attendance, is a wreck. She is miserable, intoxicated, and angry with the entire performative world. She doesn’t mingle or talk to anyone. The only time she is shown at the gala is when Thomas gives a speech about how she is retiring. The camera cuts to her disgusted face as she walks out abandoning the façade of a clean, happy transition from one star to the next and revealing the pain and anguish that comes with being replaced. Nina first speaks to Beth outside the gala in a large receiving hall. Nina looks at a large bronze statue of an armless,

winged, masked figure that visually alludes to both the suicidal Swan Queen in Tchaikovsky's ballet and Beth, the broken ideal Nina compares herself to. Immediately thereafter, Beth bitterly questions how Nina got the role. She asks if Nina "sucked his [Thomas's] cock" to get the role. Nina responds, "not all of us have to." In this situation, the two women appear less like dancers arguing about a role and more like drug addicts fighting over their fix. The camera quickly cuts back and forth between their faces, never showing the two in the same shot, to reinforce that they are interchangeable. That is, they both want the same identity; the only difference is that Nina possesses it, for the moment. The conflict stalls once Thomas enters the hall because he controls both dancers' performative identities as the director of the ballet. Again, Thomas represents the audience whose approval is required for either dancer to construct their performative identity as the star.

The second interaction Nina has with Beth crystallizes the interchangeability of the two dancers and their mutual addiction to the performative identity of the star dancer. For apparently inscrutable reasons, Nina seeks out advice from Beth, who is in the hospital after getting hit by a car. The only sensible pretense for Nina's visit is her concern that Thomas is going to replace her with Lily. Perhaps, Nina feels as though Beth would know how to handle potential replacement since she was herself replaced. Perhaps, Nina feels that it would cheer Beth up to know that her replacement is being replaced. The film doesn't give a clear answer, but Nina definitely feels responsible for Beth's downfall because she returns a few small items that she stole from Beth's dressing room in this moment. Nina explains that she took Beth's things because she "just wanted to be perfect like" Beth was. Acting like Beth and using Beth's personal objects—

essentially performing the role of Beth—would, in Nina’s damaged perspective, allow her to obtain Beth’s role as the star dancer. Nina’s superstitious actions work, but her paranoia causes her to unnecessarily conflate Beth’s fate—rejection—with her own. Beth tells Nina: “I’m not perfect; I’m nothing.” In other words, because Beth loses her performatively constructed identity, she becomes insubstantial and forgotten. Of course, the ballet company is sad when she enters the hospital and sends her flowers, but no one visits anymore. She is left alone to suffer a performer’s ultimate punishment: anonymity and isolation. The film hints that this will be Nina’s fate as well. The camera shows Beth stab herself in the face several times; however, as Nina runs away from the gruesome scene, the camera looks back to reveal that the woman stabbing herself appears to be Nina. It seems like Nina hallucinates this violent suicide, although the film leaves the scene open-ended and does not confirm the subject of this mutilation. Either way, this image of self-mutilation foreshadows Nina’s own self-destructive behavior during her performance as the Swan Queen.

Altogether, Nina’s new performative identity strains these three nonperformative relationships (Nina-Veronica, Nina-Erica, and Nina-Beth) in such a way that it reveals her performative identity as the only sense of self Nina has left. Nina’s newly strained relationships make the nonperformative world insufferable. The other dancers reject Nina because she possesses what they desire. Her mother goes mad and figuratively smothers her. Neither her mother nor the other dancers encourage and support her. Nina’s performative identity isolates her in the nonperformative world. Thus, the performative world becomes a kind of existential haven for Nina. In the performative world, she is the focus of everyone’s *positive* attention. However, Nina’s relationship to

Beth, the former star, demonstrates the transience of the positivity of the performative world. Beth's depression and self-loathing expose how both the nonperformative and the performative worlds will become torturous when Nina is no longer the star. In this way, the nonperformative world that accompanies Nina's performative identity is destructive and obtrusive, and the post-performative world—the realm that Beth inhabits—is equally if not more bleak. Therefore, Nina is trapped by her performatively constructed identity.

Nina's performative identity becomes simultaneously claustrophobic and transcendent during the final third of *Black Swan*. Nina is at her most paranoid and her most graceful during her performance. She arrives to the theater late because her mother believes Nina is unable to perform because “[she was] scratching all night.” Again, her mother's obsession invades Nina's life. However, this delay only serves to heighten the tension of Nina's arrival at the theater. When Nina arrives, Lily, her alternate, is preparing to fill in for her. Thus, Nina enters into an existential crisis caused by her mother's own subjective collapse. Nina's actual performance reflects the duality of the film and her life. Fittingly, the first section, as the White Swan who represents order and innocence, is a disaster for Nina as she falls during the climax, whereas the second section, as the Black Swan who represents chaos and danger, is magnificent and transformative. Hence, the White Swan, for which Thomas originally thought Nina was perfect, represents the disarray of Nina's nonperformative world, and the Black Swan represents the power and, ultimately, the fatal nature of her performative world. During the second section, Nina literally transforms into a black swan on stage as she dances. However, this supernatural moment, like others in the film, appears to be only in Nina's mind because neither the audience nor the other performers notice or are aware of this

transformation. Regardless, the film uses this section to illustrate Nina's transformation from a common dancer to the star of the ballet who "loses [herself]" as Thomas pleads for her to do. Unfortunately, Nina takes Thomas's charge too literally as she ends up killing herself during her final dance by stabbing herself with a shard of glass from the mirror in her dressing room.³

What is particularly distressing about this finale is the audience's response to Nina's final dance. The camera shows Nina notice blood coming from a wound in her stomach halfway through her final dance. Because she so desperately wants to construct her performative identity perfectly, she continues to dance even though she knows it will kill her. When Nina finishes her dance, the crowd cheers and claps loudly. The camera even cuts to her mother in the crowd who appears to be in awe at Nina's performance. Thomas runs over to Nina to congratulate her. Only then does he notice that she is hurt. As he calls for the other dancers to help, Nina whispers to him, "I was perfect." The audience's overwhelmingly positive reception of her dance, as well as Thomas's initial response, confirms Nina's incredible performance. However, the cost for such a performance is Nina's sanity, well-being, and her life.

The diegetic audience's approval and raucous celebration of Nina's sublimely suicidal performance exposes the audience's perverse role in her death. The audience's positive response to Nina's performance enables her to construct her performative identity as the star dancer, which causes her death, because of its stark contrast with the

³ At this point, the film's adherence to realism has severely deteriorated. The film shows Nina literally transform into a swan during her dance; it shows her kill Lily in her dressing room only to later find out that Lily is alive and well. In this vein, the actual manner in which Nina procures the shard of glass on stage is left unexplained.

treatment she receives in the nonperformative world. On the one hand, Nina's nonperformative world is full of anxiety, misplaced animosity, and isolation because she is the star. On the other hand, Nina's performative world is composed of positive attention and praise. The audience wants to see Nina perform, and they want to see her perform well. They support and encourage her performance. However, because Nina's nonperformative and post-performative worlds are so bleak, the audience's approval enmeshes her in the performative world. Moreover, the audience's support of Nina's performance almost gives her reason to commit suicide: for Nina, the world doesn't get any better than her moment as the star. In fact, the world will inevitably get much worse for her, so ending her life in this transcendent, almost religious moment is a permanent "liberation from earthly woes" (Kracauer 72). That is, Nina's performatively constructed identity as the star dancer is so superior to her experiences in the nonperformative world that she is not only addicted to this identity, she would also rather die than lose it. Again, the key difference between her performative world and the nonperformative world is the positive support of the diegetic audience.

***The Wrestler*: Randy “The Ram” Robinson**

The Wrestler characterizes Randy as a lonely man who relies solely on his performative identity as a wrestler for positive attention, a sense of community, and the love his nonperformative world lacks. Like Nina, Randy’s broken relationships mar the nonperformative world and make the performative world a sanctuary from emotional pain. Randy is a complex character: he is a vulnerable brute; a savage performer with a big, broken heart. The film depicts Randy as a person preferentially divided between the performative and nonperformative worlds in a way similar to Nina; however, unlike Nina, throughout *The Wrestler* Randy is subtly aware of this internal struggle.

The Wrestler blends Randy’s nonperformative and performative worlds together seamlessly. Keri Walsh, in her essay “Why Does Mickey Rourke Give Pleasure?,” describes the mixed presentation of these two worlds in the film as Randy “inhabit[ing] the slur” (Walsh 153). However, for Walsh, Randy’s complexity doesn’t lie in the struggle between the performative world and the nonperformative world but instead in his mixed persona as a “nice guy” and “a prick” (Walsh 153). She writes:

A prick is a contemptible man – usually one with some worldly authority – who has let that power get the better of him; he’s imperial, self-aggrandizing, selfish, irresponsible. *The Wrestler* leaves us to arbitrate between two versions of Randy. Is he the prickish deadbeat dad who ruins the chance to reconcile with his daughter . . . or is he the sweetheart who gives her a touching set of secondhand clothes? This question is never settled. (Walsh 153)

Walsh’s analysis of the film focuses entirely on the symbolism of Randy’s performance as the Ram which is “synonymous with prickish aggression, lechery, and penetration” (Walsh 154). Walsh even notes how Randy’s signature finishing move in the wrestling world, called the Ram Jam, involves him thrusting his body at his weakened, supine

opponent from off of the top rope of the ring in a way that embodies phallic penetration (Walsh 154). However, in doing so, she ignores the extent of the audience's role in Randy's construction of his "prickish" performative identity just as Butler doesn't properly account for the influence of the audience in her articulation of performativity in general (Walsh 154). The notoriety and relative fame the audience gives Randy enables his prickish nature. The cause of Randy's problems in the nonperformative world is, like the cause of Nina's issues, the comparatively better treatment he receives from the audience when he is performing. As a result of the audience's endorsement, Randy selfishly ignores his responsibilities as a father to focus all his energies on his performative identity. Yet, Randy's selfishness is born out of the attention his performative identity garners for him. In this way, the question is not whether Randy is a "prick" or a "nice guy." Rather, the real quandary is to investigate why Randy is a prick. Randy prefers the performative world because he is the star; however, he yearns for similar acceptance in the nonperformative world. Randy never finds acceptance outside of wrestling because he can't handle the inconsistent, unpredictable, and often tragic nature of that nonperformative world.

The Wrestler describes Randy's meteoric rise to the top of the wrestling profession in a romanticized opening montage of newspaper clippings and magazine headlines accompanied by rock and roll music and the booming voice of an announcer. Conversely, the film itself starts twenty years after Randy's peak performative years and is shot in a singularly realistic fashion. In his review for *Entertainment Weekly*, Owen Gleiberman describes *The Wrestler*'s cinematography as "naturalistic":

Aronofsky doesn't speak a sentimental cinematic language. Shooting in a grainy, bare-bones naturalistic style, full of jump cuts

and raw light and a handheld camera whooshing about, the director of *Requiem for a Dream* and *The Fountain* now strips away all frills, tapping a classic Hollywood myth — a has-been looking for redemption — and, at the same time, transcending that myth. (Gleiberman)

The Wrestler's realism allows the film to provide a raw, uncut look at Randy's life. The film doesn't hold back when it shows how Randy tragically has nothing save his performative identity, which depends on a fan-base that has been dramatically reduced over the years.

In the film, Randy's bifurcated life is divided along occupational lines. In his nonperformative life, he works at a grocery store. This job gives Randy a consistent income. It also provides him with a sense of stability. In his performative life as a wrestler, Randy can make great money at times, and at other times he can make no money at all. Additionally, the quality of the venues he performs at fluctuates: some nights he wrestles in a packed theater in a large city while other nights he wrestles in a seemingly abandoned gymnasium at a local school. Despite the obvious fact that his job in the nonperformative world is more practical than his wrestling career, and especially given his age and physical maladies at this point in his wrestling career, Randy still saves certain nights for wrestling.

Randy continues to wrestle because he is addicted to his identity as a wrestler. Randy needs the positive attention the audience gives him in response to his performative identity no matter how much that attention has diminished as he has gotten older. The nonperformative world simply doesn't satisfy his needs the way the performative world does for him. As a wrestler, Randy is seen as a hero and a role model. He's very popular with other wrestlers and the fans. In the nonperformative world, Randy is a loser and a

loner. He has very few friends and no family. He can barely afford to live in the mobile home he rents. Nonetheless, he understands the absurdity of his dependence on his performative identity in a way Nina never does.

After the first match shown in the film, his promoter and manager, Nick Volpe (Wass Stevens), tells Randy about a potential rematch with his arch nemesis from his peak wrestling years, the Ayatollah (Ernest Miller). Randy responds with a practical concern: “Hey I heard Bob was doing really good with his used car lot out in Arizona – I don’t know if he’s gonna’ come on for this.” Randy’s comment exposes his awareness of the impracticality of wrestling for a man who finds success and positive attention outside of the world of wrestling. Moreover, by referring to ‘the Ayatollah’ as ‘Bob,’ Randy demonstrates how he makes an overt distinction between his performative and nonperformative worlds. Significantly, Randy indirectly asserts that a person’s status in the nonperformative world is more substantially defining than his or her status in the performative world. Thus, according to Randy, if a man can achieve success in the nonperformative realm, he doesn’t need to perform like Randy does. Despite Randy’s understanding and awareness of these facts about the differences between the performative and nonperformative worlds, he still chooses the former over the latter.

Roland Barthes, in his essay “The World of Wrestling,” writes that “the function of the wrestler is not to win: it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him” (Barthes 2). Barthes describes wrestling as an act of submission to the expectations of whoever observes it. The wrestler, in Barthes's conception, must give up his autonomy to the whims of his diegetic audience. Barthes conception of the wrestler’s function fits well with Butler’s understanding of performativity as an adherence to

“cultural conventions which essentially signify [identities]” (Butler 526). In *The Wrestler*, Randy’s three matches show how his submission to the audience causes him to suffer intense physical pain; however, it also provides him with the positive attention he lacks in the nonperformative world. Barthes explains the appeal of this violent performance—over and above the mundane existence Randy has in the nonperformative world—in his description of wrestling’s significance. Barthes writes:

What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a universal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction. (Barthes 5)

According to Barthes, wrestling is a medium through which the commonplace reality of the nonperformative world—a reality wrought with complexity and undeserved injustice—can be transcended to show the world in a grand fashion without the absurd trappings that make it unintelligible. Therefore, the violence a person must experience to produce this performance is not vain or indulgent, but incredibly meaningful as it allows the world to appear logical and obvious instead of irrational and impossible. The performance of wrestling gives the world order, albeit a socially-constructed order.

Randy’s performatively constructed identity is similar to Nina’s in that they both perform in order to transcend the enigma of the nonperformative world. Kracauer and Barthes describe dance and wrestling as tools that allow performers to escape the agony of an ambiguous and confusing existence. Perhaps, both characters effectively achieve this understanding of the world through their deaths, which their performances cause. However, there is a significant difference between the two characters’ relationships to the nonperformative world: unlike Nina, Randy almost finds meaning in the

nonperformative world through a relationship with another person. Throughout *The Wrestler*, Randy is in love with a stripper, Cassidy (Marisa Tomei). Cassidy's real name is Pam.⁴ She spurns Randy's advances and rejects his suggestion that he should "make an honest woman" out of her. Despite her dismissal of Randy's affection, Cassidy does care about him. After the first complete match of the film, Randy visits Cassidy. Randy notices several patrons of the strip club insult Cassidy because she is older than the other strippers. He threatens them and scares them off. Cassidy initially appears angry with Randy because his threats cause "two-hundred dollars [to] just [walk] out." However, she quickly forgives him, hugs him, and gives him a lap dance. The playful way that Cassidy handles and speaks to Randy is markedly different than the manner in which she interacts with other clients: she has a special bond with him because they are both aging performers.

In this scene, Randy and Cassidy's conversation concerns how performers martyr themselves for their audiences. After giving Randy a lap dance, Cassidy notices he's bleeding from a cut on his forehead. Randy explains that his cut is from his match earlier. Cassidy states, "[she] thought wrestling was fake." In response, Randy describes all the very real injuries he has suffered for his art. After seeing his scars, Cassidy quotes the book of Isaiah as she fawns over Randy's broken body, stating "he was pierced for our transgressions,/He was crushed for our iniquities;/The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we were healed." She implies that Randy is some kind of savior. The tenor of the scene becomes very serious. Then, Cassidy calls him a

⁴ I will refer to Cassidy/Pam hereafter as Cassidy.

“sacrificial Ram” and laughs. The moment reverts to a warm and playful state. However, the scene describes an insidious reality: performers physically sacrifice themselves in order to entertain their audiences. Both Randy and Nina suffer to please crowds and get the attention they crave. For Randy, the crowd erases his pain. He states, “when you hear the roar of the crowd, you just motor through [the pain].”

The cut that Cassidy notices on Randy’s forehead occurs during the only moment of the first match of *The Wrestler* that lacks fidelity to filmic realism. Randy wrestles an up-and-coming wrestler called Tommy Rotten (Tommy Farras). There is a surreal montage before Randy’s match where the camera jumps around to a variety of different wrestlers describing just how they want to be beat up with the giddiness of children. Randy and Tommy choreograph their bout while the other wrestlers also carefully plot out their matches. The whole moment takes on a degree of unreality: a group of large men about to beat the shit out of each other are socializing like they’re part of a hybrid sewing circle/fight club. During the match, Randy uses a razor blade he cuts and conceals under his wrist-tape to slice open his forehead. When Randy cuts himself, a sharp-pitched whine dominates the film’s musical score. This sound strays from the naturalistic style in which the majority of the film is shot and edited. The sound repeats two other times during the film: in the moments preceding a terrible heart attack Randy suffers after the second match in the film; and during the film's third match as his heart begins to give out. The sound represents the moments where Randy's performative identity is physically destroying him in order to please the diegetic audience.

The film raises the question: why does Randy endure this physical pain if the people who watch his matches don’t expect him actually to be hurt? According to

Barthes, a wrestler's job is to do what is expected of him. Therefore, it seems that real violence is unwarranted. However, the audiences expect the wrestlers to maintain the fiction of the match—to feign animosity towards one another. In order to do so, real violence and real pain are sometimes necessary. In this way, *The Wrestler* shows how the expectations of the audience who endorses a person's performatively constructed identity are often internalized and enacted to an incongruous extreme by that person.⁵

Importantly, although the violence is real, the hatred the wrestlers show for each other in the ring is not. This performance of inauthentic emotion is another area where Cassidy relates to Randy. The key difference between their performances exists is Randy fakes a negative emotion, whereas Cassidy fakes a positive emotion. A.O. Scott in his review of *The Wrestler* for *The New York Times* describes this distinction between Randy and Cassidy's performances. He writes:

Randy and Cassidy (it's not her real name, either) are both performers, both expert at faking something the customers desperately want to believe is real. The wrestlers don't really *hate* one another, and the stripper doesn't really *love* you. (Scott, emphasis mine)

According to Scott then, Randy's love for Cassidy is problematic because Randy is her customer, and her job is to make her customers believe she loves them. Thus, if Randy wants Cassidy to really love him back, he needs her to give up her performative identity as a false lover. Interestingly, it is only after the especially gruesome second match in the film causes Randy to have a heart attack and to contemplate giving up his performative identity that he wants Cassidy to love him—ergo, to give up her performative identity.

⁵ This point will be expanded on in the third chapter of this thesis.

Randy actually tries to quit wrestling after this match (the second match of the film). This match highlights Randy's submission to the whims of the audience and the violence that submission causes. It is a "hardcore" match: a match where the wrestlers use a variety of household objects and weapons to hurt one another. In this way, this match shows the brutal reality of Randy's performative identity. The film focuses on one feature of this match in particular: the use of a staple gun. Randy's opponent in this match, Necro Butcher (Dylan Keith Summers), suggests this grisly element. Randy asks if the staples hurt. Necro, who, according to Richard Corliss, looks like "an angry Ozark farmer," states "not so bad going in . . . but pulling them out, they're gonna' leave a couple little holes, a little bit of blood loss" (Corliss). The two men piercing each other for the viewing pleasure of the masses exaggeratedly expresses the biblical symbolism of their bloody sacrifice. However, more subversively, the violent display cannot be faked and is really painful for both men. The audience in this case actually expects real violence from them. Provocatively, the extra-diegetic audience—the audience that watches the film—cannot be distinguished from the diegetic audience—the match's audience—in regards to the reality of the violence it observes: the lived actors in *The Wrestler* actually staple each other.

The film's display of the men putting staples in each other and later having them removed contrasts shockingly with Necro's casual description of the pain the staples will cause. The film inverts graphic images of the staples going into the men and the staples being ripped out. For example, immediately after a medic removes a stapled five-dollar bill from Necro's forehead with pliers, the camera cuts to a shot of Necro in the ring as he staples the bill to his head. The juxtaposition of violence in the ring with the nauseating

medical assistance after the match creates a tapestry of pain both in performance and recovery. The next moment this inverted intercutting occurs is after Necro hits Randy with a chair outside the ring. The ominous high-pitched whine that occurs when Randy cuts himself in the first match accompanies Necro's blow and leads directly to a shot of a medic pulling out a particularly deep staple from Randy's back. Randy's mental state at this moment is utterly different than it is after his first match. After the first match, Randy is sharp, witty, and calm: like he's coming off a high. After this match, during this more visceral and painful treatment, Randy is nervous, jittery, and scared—he is deeply troubled. The expression on Randy's face reveals that this match was too much for him to handle; although he needs to impress the audience to construct his performative identity, in this moment he knows doing so has cost him dearly. After the medic finishes taking the staples out of Randy's broken body, Randy feebly walks towards the showers, grips his left arm, vomits, and collapses as his heart gives out on him.

Randy is physically and emotionally fragile after his heart attack. He is at his most vulnerable in the hospital because he has to face the reality that his performative identity (i.e., his shield against emotional pain) is killing him. Randy's desire for his doctor to call him by his stage name after his heart attack reveals the depth of his dependence on his performative identity. When the doctor, Dr. Moayedizadeh (Armin Amiri), first enters Randy's room in the hospital he calls him "Mr. Ramzinsky." In response, Randy quickly tells the doctor to call him "Randy." During the initial interaction, Randy faces away from the doctor. He literally doesn't want to face his problems. Randy quietly agrees to everything his doctor tells him to do until his doctor

tells him he has to moderate his exercise. After this recommendation, Randy faces the doctor for the first time and states, “Doc, I’m a professional wrestler.” This line is more than just a statement of fact about Randy’s occupation: the pained expression on Randy’s face, the severity of the situation, and Randy’s incessant demand to be called by his stage name combine in this moment to show his absolute commitment and dependence on his performative identity. Dr. Moayedizadeh tells Randy to stop wrestling. He states, “you [Randy] almost died.” However, for Randy, the choice of death or not wrestling is one in the same. Without wrestling, Randy is not “Randy.” He is Robin Ramzinsky, a nonperformative mess of a man with no friends, family, or meaningful identity. Thus, Randy’s doctor presents him not with options, but courses of self-destruction.

The success of Randy’s attempt to abide by his doctor’s recommendation and retire from wrestling depends on his ability to satisfy his need for positive attention in the real world. The first person he goes to see is Cassidy. Randy’s choice to see her first demonstrates how important she is to him. She suggests that Randy should reach out to his estranged daughter, Stephanie (Evan Rachel Wood). Randy is an absentee parent, always choosing wrestling over his child. However, because Cassidy recommends visiting Stephanie, he goes to see her. Randy’s broken relationship with his daughter reveals why he prefers the unconditional positive attention his performative identity provides him over the trials and tribulations of the nonperformative world. During this first interaction with Stephanie, it is clear that she will not provide Randy with the positive attention and love he needs. She berates Randy for wanting her to take care of him. She states:

Where the fuck were you when I needed you to take care of me?
And on all my birthdays which you never even made one – you

probably don't even know when it is. So, you know what? I don't care if you had a heart attack. Fuck you.

Randy's performative identity doesn't require the reciprocity a traditional relationship—like the relationship between a father and his daughter—does. His performative identity involves a purely self-indulgent relationship: his fans give him positive attention without him ever really knowing them let alone giving them attention. This selfish construction consumes and precludes his ability to maintain, let alone mend, a normal, functional relationship.

After Stephanie explicates Randy's absenteeism as a father, he returns to Cassidy who takes an interest in the conflict. Cassidy's attention empowers Randy to fix his relationship with his daughter. In this way, she becomes the sole source of positive attention in Randy's nonperformative life. He sees her as the path to success without the audience and his performative identity. She agrees to help Randy buy a gift for Stephanie in an attempt to reconnect with her. This act of kindness makes Randy redouble his efforts to succeed in the nonperformative world. Because Cassidy shows even this small interest in Randy's life, he becomes a happier person—even at his job at the grocery store. The gift Cassidy helps Randy pick out for Stephanie even manages to put their relationship back on the right track. Randy's relationship with Cassidy reaches a climax when she agrees to have a beer with him outside of the strip club, and they kiss. This intimate gesture gives Randy the impression that he is truly loved. This moment is also (ironically) the breaking point for their relationship and starts Randy down the path towards returning to his performative identity.

Cassidy rejects Randy's love after this intimate moment in an attempt to protect herself from being emotionally vulnerable. A key part of Cassidy's performative identity

as a stripper is to feign love, but never to fall in love. If Cassidy actually loves one customer, she won't be able to provide the same quality of performance to another. Moreover, if she really loves a customer that would require her to invest herself in a person who is typically a transient figure in her life which would make her at risk to be hurt. Randy isn't this kind of customer, but Cassidy cannot allow herself to be open to that kind of risk regardless. She has bigger plans for herself than becoming involved with a patron of the strip club: she has her sights set on moving out of town with her son and starting a new life. Hence, she has to treat Randy like any other customer. When he comes to see her at the club after their kiss, she pulls her hand away when he tries to hold it and tells Randy "the real world and the club don't mix." This infuriates Randy and causes him to degrade Cassidy by throwing money at her and demanding a dance. Randy states, "I'm a paying customer and I want a dance." She refuses, which reveals both that Randy isn't just a paying customer to Cassidy, and that her explanation that she can't love Randy because she can't get involved with customers is a bluff.

Cassidy's rejection of Randy causes him to return to his performative identity functionally eliminating his chance for success and happiness in the nonperformative world. After security kicks him out of the strip club for harassing Cassidy, Randy chooses to go out with some of his wrestling friends and ends up doing drugs and having sex with a young woman whose interest in him is solely the result of a poster of Randy from his peak performative years on her brother's wall. Basically, she only gives Randy attention and physical affection because of his performative identity and, as a result, can be seen as an extension of his diegetic audience. Unfortunately because of the long night out, Randy misses a dinner date with Stephanie, irreparably destroying his chance at

reconciliation with her. Stephanie tells him, “I never want to see you again.” Thus, without Cassidy’s love and attention, Randy loses his fragile chance at redemption in the nonperformative world, and he returns to wrestling for one last match.

The final match of the film demonstrates the enormity of the audience’s influence on Randy’s decision to return to the performative world and on the construction of his performative identity. Before Randy’s last match, he gives a speech in which he describes his unbreakable dependence on and need for the audience. Randy addresses the crowd:

I just want to say to you all tonight I’m very grateful to be here. A lot of people told me that I’d never wrestle again. And that’s all I do. You know, if you live hard, and you play hard and you burn the candle at both ends you pay the price for it. You know, in this life you can lose everything that you love and everything that loves you. Now I don’t hear as good as I used to and I forget stuff and I ain’t as pretty as I used to be. But goddamn it I’m still standing here, and I’m the Ram. . . as time goes by, they say, ‘he’s washed up. He’s finished. He’s a loser. He’s all through.’ But you know what? The only ones who are gonna tell me when I’m through doing my thing is you people here. You people here are the ones who are worth bringing it for, because you’re my family. I love you all so much.

Randy accepts the terms and conditions of his addiction to his performative identity. He knows what it has cost him, and he knows that the audience is all he has left. He loves them and sees them as his family. In an interview with TheCinemaSource.com, Mickey Rourke explains this last speech as Randy’s appeal for a second chance he knows he won’t get:

You know, it [the speech] was kind of shameful, in a way. Nobody wants to admit that they screwed up so badly with their life, and you’re left alone and yesterday’s news. If you’ve been there, and I’ve been there, it’s no picnic. Randy wants one more chance, and he ain’t gonna get it. (Rourke 3-4)

So when Randy starts to have chest pains towards the end of the match, he makes an active choice to continue the match and perform his finishing move one last time (knowing full well that it will kill him) as a sacrifice to his only support group: the audience.

The Audience and the Performative Identity

In her review of *Black Swan* for the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis describes the film as a “tortured-artist drama” and “sleazy exploitation cinema” (Dargis). These two labels apply equally well to *The Wrestler*. Both films show how it is the audience that allows a performer to construct his or her performative identity. Both films insidiously demonstrate how a person who is dependent on his or her performative identity needs the attention the audience gives them for validation. *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler* show the negative effects of the performative construction of identity. These films portray the audience as culpable in these maladies. Butler’s theory that identity is constructed through performance doesn’t explicitly describe the audience’s influence in this way. However, these films show that performance can only produce a corresponding character trait or identity if there is an observing party who confirms that performance and gives it significance. Problematically, this observing party—the diegetic audience in the case of both of these films—can influence a person to construct a performative identity that causes her to inflict harm on herself or others.

Both Randy’s and Nina’s performative identities physically and emotionally damage them. They both fail to have positive relationships in the nonperformative world because of these identities. They hurt themselves to achieve success in the performative world and, ultimately, they die in order to entertain their audiences. The audience may not actively desire Randy and Nina to harm themselves or commit suicide; however, the positive reception Randy and Nina receive from their audiences enables these negative consequences nonetheless. If the audience didn’t exist and didn’t give positive support to Randy and Nina, would they be able to construct the self-destructive performative

identities they do? At the very least, the possibility seems absurd. The audience's positive attention allows Randy and Nina to neglect the nonperformative world. This neglect makes the nonperformative world unbearable and painful for both of them effectively forcing them into their addictions to their performatively constructed identities. The audience allows Randy and Nina to transcend the nonperformative world, liberating themselves from "earthly toils" (Kracauer 72). The result here is that these characters rise up above the "constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations" (Barthes 5). The audience supplies the high that Randy and Nina seek in their addiction to their performative identities. They glorify Randy's and Nina's performative identities and make them worth dying for: these performers both literally and figuratively sacrifice themselves for the audiences who experience and confirm their performative identities.

Chapter 2: On the Job

Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) explore the relationship between the performative construction of identity and the audience in the arena of the workplace.⁶ Both films focus on a person who is highly successful at a job that requires them to ameliorate a harmful (or potentially harmful) situation. In *Antichrist*, the focus is on He⁷ (Willem Defoe), an experienced psychotherapist, who treats his own wife (Charlotte Gainsbourg) after the death of their son Nic (Storm Acheche Sahlstrøm). He justifies his controversial decision to treat his wife because of his history of occupational success. Problematically, He only connects with his wife through treating her as his patient. Moreover, he only addresses their son's death as the initial trauma that triggers his wife's mental illness, not as a personal tragedy in its own right. In *The Hurt Locker*, the focus is on Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner), an American explosives expert, who defuses improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq. James's success at defusing IEDs is unparalleled although his methods and demeanor are unorthodox and dangerous. The film portrays James as a man who needs nothing in his life except war. As a result, James volunteers to abandon his wife and young son repeatedly in order to do the job he has so much success at. Because of their exceptional occupational success, both He and James neglect the other facets of

⁶ It is important to note the distinction between the workplace in *Antichrist* and *The Hurt Locker*, and the performative world in *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler*. Obviously, Nina and Randy are professionals and the performative world is their workplace; however, their occupations are typically viewed as performances. The characters examined in this chapter, He and James, have occupations that are not normally conflated with performance. Their jobs are practical endeavors, whereas Nina Randy's jobs are more readily seen as aesthetic performances.

⁷ There are only three named characters in *Antichrist*: He, She, and Nic. Throughout this chapter I will refer to He as 'the man', 'the husband', and 'the therapist' interchangeably. I will also refer to She as 'the woman', and 'the wife'.

their lives. In the films, both men construct their identities by performing the duties required of their jobs time and time again. In this way, they exemplify the Butlerian performative construction of identity, wherein “performance repeats itself to institute the effect of identity” (Butler 1718). As I argued in the first chapter, performative identities require a kind of audience to legitimize them through observation. Since they construct their identities through *occupational* performances, the audience for He and James is larger and more amorphous than the audiences for Randy and Nina in chapter one. Society at-large confirms their performative identities through a kind of mediated, indirect observation.

Antichrist and *The Hurt Locker* highlight the relationship between the occupational performative ‘space’ and society, which is both the observer and creator of that performative arena. As addressed in the first chapter of this thesis, *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler* are concerned with performative identities that manifest as a result of events or performances that are produced solely for an observing audience. However, as I will show in this chapter, *Antichrist* and *The Hurt Locker* are concerned with performative identities that, while observed, are primarily produced to address vital social issues (in the case of these two films, treating mental illness and reducing harm in armed conflicts). In other words, both films transform the ‘societies’ of each respective man into implicit diegetic audiences. Moreover, society’s observation of these men’s occupational performative identities is done in an indirect way. Society learns about the results of a therapist’s treatment or a soldier’s duty through news stories, public statements, legal proceedings, and other mediated, indirect ways—the public doesn’t sit in on a therapy sessions or battles. Consequentially, this clandestine (diegetic) observation in these films

has a much more subtle effect on He and James than that of Nina's and Randy's physically present audiences.

The most important yet understated effect of society's observation and confirmation of the performative identities James and He construct is the conferment of status. The duties and actions of soldiers and therapists have mortal significance—lives hang in the balance. Society has a vested interest in the success of these occupations because its continuity depends on it. That is, without mentally healthy citizens and a country safe from enemy aggressors, society's existence is highly vulnerable. As a result, society elevates the status of these occupations, which ensure its continuity. The elevated status of these occupations encourages people who have these jobs to conflate their work and their identities. Society instructs these people that their work is important, and so they are important too. In He's and James's cases, not only do they conflate their work and their identities, they construct their identities through their work. Both men frame their personal problems in the context of their work: for He, his wife's mental instability is not a major personal issue, but an opportunity for him to revalidate his performative identity; for James, a nearby bomb is not a serious threat to his life, but a chance for him to reconstruct his performative identity. Moreover, both men neglect and reject personal connections to their families in order to maintain the objectivity required to construct their occupational performative identities successfully. Therefore in He's and James's cases, society's observation encourages them to conflate their work and their identities as well as to adopt a parochial, occupation-based perspective that excludes their families and their personal problems. In other words, society motivates both men to care only about their work and to ignore everything else in their lives.

Butler's understanding of performativity does not account for the immense influence and power an audience like society exerts on individuals whose performative identities are necessary for that audience's survival. As I argued in the first chapter of this thesis, Butler's theory does not fully address the integral role audience plays in the construction of performative identities. In this chapter, I show how an implicit diegetic audience's influence can cause the construction of overtly problematic performative identities even if that audience isn't literally present on screen for the extra-diegetic audiences to see. Furthermore, I show that the problematic nature of those identities can be a necessary consequence of constructing such an identity successfully. I use the audience-performer relationship that exists between society and the societally-important occupations of the psychotherapist and the soldier in *Antichrist* and *The Hurt Locker* (respectively) to explicate these points.

Antichrist: He

Antichrist tracks the course of a psychotherapist's treatment of his wife's grief after the death of their young son. The film is divided into six distinct sections that are marked by title cards. They are: "Prologue"; "Chapter One: Grief"; "Chapter Two: Pain (Chaos Reigns)"; "Chapter Three: Despair (Gynocide)"; "Chapter Four: The Three Beggars"; and "Epilogue." The first two chapters of the film describe the therapist's treatment of his wife. The third and fourth chapters describe his wife's negative response to this treatment. In these latter chapters, the wife briefly improves only ultimately to succumb to her mental illness. She improves immediately after He learns that She might have indirectly caused their son's death. She then descends into madness because she believes that her husband is going to leave her after he subtly confronts her about his suspicions. In the end, He fails to improve his wife's condition because he approaches her illness from the logical, objective perspective society requires of his occupational performative identity, which forces him to disregard the way his more intimate role as her husband undermines these qualities.

Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen argues in her essay "*Antichrist*—Chaos Reigns: the Event of Violence and the Haptic Image in Lars von Trier's Film" that the man's parochial perspective is necessitated by an innate kind of rationalism. Thomsen notes that the film uses a Venus symbol (♀), which traditionally represents the female-gender, to stand in for the "t's" in the title. In this way, Thomsen establishes that the wife is the

Nietzschean ‘antichrist’⁸ in the film, which makes her a representative of Dionysian carnality. She writes:

Nietzsche confers on Anti-Christ the untamed natural, Dionysic forces that in Greece in the antiquities constituted the dark side of the Apollinic order. Where Apollo, the god of sculpture, represented structure, marked boundaries, plastic forms, images, conscience, thought and concepts, all that would contribute to what we today with one word call “individuation,” Dionysos, the god of wine, represented the unbound, timeless, the lack of image and reflection, music, intoxication, but also will, which interestingly enough is physical, not metaphysical . . . in addition to this opposition there is yet another opposition, namely that of male and female, as the Dionysian motif in Nietzsche is more conventionally feminine than masculine. (Thomsen)

Essentially, He embodies Apollonian idealism whereas She represents the Antichrist and Dionysian empiricism. Therefore, He approaches She’s mental instability from a fundamentally incompatible worldview. Thomsen further argues that *Antichrist* structurally expresses this incompatibility: “where the first two . . . chapters without difficulty can be related to different stages in the psychoanalytic therapy to which the man subjects the woman, the third chapter, Despair: Gynocide represents the very opposite of psychic healing in an individualistic psychological perspective” (Thomsen). In other words, the narrative initially progresses according to the stages of the man’s prescribed therapy, which is a product of his societally-reinforced Apollonian idealism, only to be undermined by the woman’s negative response to that therapy, which is itself a

⁸ I agree with Thomsen’s reading of the film in this regard and I acknowledge the film’s inherent misogyny in framing the woman in this way. However, I do not find the reading of *Antichrist* as purely misogynistic to do justice to its thematic complexity. While the film does invite this reading, it also criticizes the man’s attempt to treat his wife since he fails to rehabilitate her successfully. As a result, *Antichrist* cannot be successfully defended as either a fully misogynistic or feminist work. Because of this ambiguity, I am deliberately not addressing its gender politics. A more comprehensive analysis of the misogynist/feminist undertones in the film can be found in Xan Brooks’s article for *The Guardian*, “*Antichrist*: a Work of Genius or the Sickest Film in the History of Cinema?”

consequence of her incompatibility with that idealism. *Antichrist* cinematically explicates the incompatibility of the worldview entailed by the man's performative identity and the woman's worldview by presenting He and She as unequal throughout the film. However, the prologue of the film suggests that they might have been equals with compatible worldviews had the man not constructed a performative identity as a therapist.

The prologue of the film presents He and She in an egalitarian frame, or a frame in which they appear to be equals. In the first scene, they are having sex when Nic falls out of the window in their apartment and dies. Throughout this scene, there is no sound except for Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga." The lack of dialogue in conjunction with the dominance of the film's score emphasizes the equality of the man and the woman. Since neither character speaks, both characters' inner thoughts are inaccessible. As a result, the film presents them both as subjects of the soundtrack. Additionally, the scene is shot in black and white. The chiaroscuro quality of the scene renders the man and the woman visually similar. Finally, the fact that they are having sex physically embodies their unity and similarity as they are engaged in the same activity and appear to have the same passion for one another. Altogether, this opening montage constructs an evenly balanced image of He and She.

This initial introduction of He and She as essentially equal characters incorporates Butler's desire to reformulate feminism in such a way that it no longer focuses on the oppression of women by men, but on the violence that results from the binary categorization of gender-identities themselves. She writes, "As feminists, we have been less eager . . . to consider the status of the category itself and, indeed, to discern the conditions of oppression which issue from an unexamined reproduction of gender

identities which sustain discrete and binary categories of man and woman” (Butler 523). Here, Butler argues that feminists' focus on the differential treatment of men and women as discrete identity categories actually contributes to gender as a source of “necessary trouble” (Butler 1708). Thus, *Antichrist's* gender-equal prologue counteracts the misogyny in its title card in a Butlerian fashion. Moreover, this prologue allows the subsequent problems within the film to be seen not as the result of 'gender trouble,' but issues that stem from the dialectic between the man's performative identity and the reception that identity receives from the implied diegetic audience that observes the man's performance.

The second scene of *Antichrist* (which is the first scene of “Chapter One: Grief”) disrupts the equality the prologue creates between He and She. In this scene, He and She are walking with the funeral procession for Nic. He is incredibly distraught and visually animated as he trudges behind the hearse, which carries Nic’s coffin. She is completely static, unmoved, almost frozen. A few moments after the scene begins, She collapses overwhelmed by grief requiring her to be hospitalized. As She falls, He rushes to her side. In this way, the film deconstructs the equality of the first scene because She is ill and He is not. Moreover, He is visually grieving while She is visually neutral. The film expands this deconstruction of the egalitarian perspective the prologue presents in the third scene where She is in a hospital being treated for what her doctor (who is never shown) describes as “atypical grief.”

In this scene, He visits She in the hospital and begins to critique the treatment She receives. He explains that her doctor gives her too much medication—“way too much.” She pleads with him to “trust others to be smarter than [him] just once.” He calmly

responds that her doctor is “just out of medical school—he doesn’t know what he’s doing. I’ve treated ten times as many patients as he has.” In turn, She states, “but you’re not a doctor.” Her comment both expresses her frustration with her husband’s pretentiousness and represents a challenge to his performative identity as a therapist. However, He responds nonplussed: “No I’m not [a doctor] and I’m proud that I’m not when I meet a doctor like him [his wife's doctor].” Their interaction highlights how the man’s occupational performative identity is a source of conflict between him and his wife. Moreover, it shows how the man's performativity identity doesn't depend on his wife whatsoever.⁹ This conflict fundamentally deconstructs the egalitarian image the prologue presents because the man’s performative identity establishes him as *the* expert and his wife as *his* subject.

The man's diction in this moment demonstrates how his confidence as a therapist is the product of his vast experience. In turn, his experience reveals how he constructs his identity according to Butlerian performativity just like Nina and Randy do. Butler writes: “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler xv). The man's statement that he has treated “ten times as many patients” as his wife's doctor emphasizes his technical superiority over her doctor; however, his decision to describe the relatively greater quantity of patients he has treated also emphasizes how his performative identity as a therapist is much more robust than the doctor’s occupational identity. Moreover, his

⁹ As will be discussed in chapter three, Tommy in *The Fountain* constructs a custodial identity that depends on his wife as its diegetic audience. Like the man here, Tommy attempts to cure his wife's illness, but he does so for very different reasons.

assertion panders to society as a diegetic audience that has a desire for successful therapists. Eventually, the man discharges his wife from the hospital so that he can treat her illness himself. She initially opposes this action. In response, He says he loves her and “nothing hurts worse than to see the one you love subjected to mistakes and wrongs.” In other words, in his opinion, He can help her; her doctor can’t. He implies that he won’t make the procedural and diagnostic errors her doctor makes. He claims that his superior experience ensures that his medical opinions and decisions are going to be successful—ergo, his occupational performative identity is the one society needs in this case.

Before the man discharges his wife, she confesses to him that she feels responsible for Nic’s death. The man reassures her that it is not her fault since he was “there too [on the night of Nic’s death].” Therefore, she cannot be totally responsible since he is equally blameworthy in this way. In response, She describes how she was aware that Nic had the ability to crawl out of his crib, and so she still maintains she is especially culpable. This admission and insight into his wife’s mental state gives the man an avenue to explore through his treatment. He immediately applies his Apollonian logic to the situation and assumes that this feeling of responsibility is the cause of his wife’s mental illness. As Phillip French writes in his review of the film for *The Observer*, “he [the man] attempts to allay his wife’s guilt over the boy’s death by . . . taking her on as [his] patient” (French). French’s description of the man’s perception of the wife’s mental state as *guilty* is especially illuminating. The man applies his vast experience as a therapist to deduce what he thinks is a reasonable and accurate depiction of his wife’s mental state: She is suffering from particularly acute grief because she feels guilty about

the death of her son. This deduction appears sound so the man immediately starts treating his wife as he would any other patient presenting with these symptoms. In this way, he is performing as the ideal therapist: he trusts his instincts, and readily applies the appropriate treatment. However, he fails to consider a more sinister reason for his wife's guilt—that she is, in fact, the cause of her son's death. He ignores this potentiality because it would require him to cross a boundary his Apollonian perspective depends upon: the functional limit of his performative identity. That is, this potentiality would imply that his wife isn't sick and in need of his therapy, but malicious and evil. As noted earlier in this chapter, the man comes to find out later in the film that his wife is actually culpable in this way.

Returning once more to the hospital scene, the final line of dialogue in the scene reveals the man's absolute faith in the success of his performative identity to be problematic. He tells his wife that “no therapist can know as much about [her] as [he does].” After he makes this remark, the camera zooms in on a vase containing flowers he gave her earlier. The score becomes ominous and foreboding with strange, unsettling noises as the camera reveals the roots of the plant are rotten and dying. This shot's juxtaposition with the man's statement constructs the flowers as a symbol of his perception of his wife. While it appears to the man that he knows a lot about his wife, there is something in her that is murky, macabre, and hidden beneath the surface. Considering that the man is completely ignorant of his wife's psychotic nature, the metaphor is entirely apt. Moreover, it captures the failure of the man's performative identity succinctly: he knows how to treat mental illness, but he doesn't know his own

wife. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze describes the inherent complexity of knowing someone in social relationships:

Two people know each other, but already knew each other, and do not yet know each other. Betrayal happens, it never happened, and yet has happened and will happen, sometimes one betraying the other and sometimes the other betraying the first all at the same time. (Deleuze 101)

In other words, according to Deleuze, social constructs—like relationships or the occupational performative identity the man constructs—are tenuous, conditional, and unpredictable. A person has no autonomy over them. Moreover, they are often beyond human comprehension precisely because they are inherently human. Deleuze's point underscores the man's ignorance of both his wife's true nature as well as the effects his treatment will produce in her. The man's Apollonian perspective can't handle the nebulous, constructed way in which Deleuze argues that a person 'knows' (or can't know) another person. So, the man ignores the possibility that he does not, in fact, know the woman. The man's ignorance of his wife causes the failure of his treatment, and further emphasizes the flawed nature of his performative identity.

Antichrist's depiction of the man's actual treatment of the woman calls attention to the differences between the two characters, and highlights the way the man detaches from his role as her husband in order to be a better therapist. On the one hand, the film presents the man as rational and calm. He is in control of everything. He is stable. On the other hand, the film presents the woman as unnerved, wild, unpredictable, and unintelligible. She is impenetrable, the embodiment of chaos. The film layers another symbol on top of the two characters: in addition to being a prophet of Apollonian idealism, the man represents humanity in that he perpetually strives to give order and

meaning to his wife's illness and the problems it produces; and, in addition to embodying the Dionysian antichrist, the woman represents nature in the sense that she exists and develops in ways that are erratic and capricious—she cannot be reasoned with.

Throughout the process, He establishes rules for her to abide by in an attempt to control her behavior and, as a result, to control her illness. The first rule is no more medication. He has her flush all the pills the doctor prescribed down the toilet. After she discards her medicine, the camera cuts to a shot of her weeping loudly on the floor of her dead son's room. She tells the man "it hurts . . . I want to die too." The man wears a face of stoic neutrality (as he does throughout his treatment of the woman) and says, "I know; there's no way around that . . . [but] I'm not going to let you [die]." The man structures and rationalizes every progression of the woman's illness. He implies that her situation, while terrible for her, is very much normal and within his control. She asks if the pain she experiences will get any worse. He states, "yes, it will." This statement confirms his understanding of his wife's condition, but it also signals his detachment from it. Even though she is suffering, he does nothing to ease her pain—in fact, he does the opposite by removing all the medication that would reduce her discomfort. He understands She is suffering as his patient, but he doesn't acknowledge that she is also suffering as his *wife*. In this way, the objectivity his occupation requires supersedes his compassion as a husband. Therefore, the film shows that the man does not treat the woman as his wife; he treats her as his patient. Consequently, his identity is not an intimate construct to help her specifically, but a broader construct designed to help anyone in her condition. He is a societal resource—his occupational performative identity as a therapist is created for everyone, a set of people to whom his wife happens to belong.

During therapy, the woman describes the extent of the man's detachment from her and their relationship. She describes him as a man who has always neglected his family to maintain a singular focus on his job. She states "you've always been distant from me and Nic—now that I come to think of it, very, very distant . . . I've never interested you until now that I'm your patient." She goes on to criticize his affectless response to the death of their son as well—"you're indifferent to whether your child is alive or dead . . . I bet you have a lot of clever therapist replies to that." Again, this interaction illuminates how the man's construction of his occupational performative identity fits the Butlerian model of performativity. The woman's diction when she uses the phrases "you've *always*" and "I've *never*" highlights how he has exhibited this detachment and disinterest repeatedly in the past; the man's objectivity in this situation is not the first and only manifestation of his identity. Interestingly, the man's response to the woman's accusation (that he is unaffected by his son's death) does not attempt to refute her accusation. He simply describes how his detachment in the past was to "honor [the woman's] wish" to have time alone to work on "her thesis"—a book project on misogyny and witchcraft. Hence, he doesn't deny his detachment from her or his son's death—he rationalizes it.

The man goes on to rationalize the woman's condition as well as his own behavior throughout the rest of his treatment of her. As her grief transitions into "a new phase—*anxiety*," the woman becomes increasingly concerned that the pain she feels is "dangerous." The man reassures her this "new phase" is not dangerous; it is simply a physical manifestation of her mental unrest. As the man describes the symptoms she will experience, the film cuts to a montage of unfocused close-up shots of the different parts of her body. Each shot corresponds to a particular symptom the man describes. In this

way, the film visually demonstrates the man's theory that the problem is not the woman herself, but a malfunction of her body and mind. The man narrates his wife's symptoms as the camera shows the images of her body. This montage implies he has control over both the symptoms and her body. Later, in a moment that is both intimate and violent, he "teach[es] [his wife] how to breathe" during particularly bad panic attack she has by covering her mouth with his hand. The man's action is physically domineering and visceral. In order to heal the woman, he must control her—she must adopt the structure he creates for her even in the way she breathes. Again, this moment highlights the confidence and trust the man has in his therapeutic technique. He trusts that this very violent and controlling action will produce positive effects. However, the moment also reveals that the man must force his structure upon the woman—he must tame her in an almost suffocating manner. The man's control of the woman is inverted when they have sex. Earlier in treatment when she attempts to have sex with him he instructs her: "never screw your therapist no matter how much your therapist may like it . . . I know it distracts you, but it's not good for us." Despite this instruction, the woman attempts to have sex with the man again after she hurts herself during another panic attack. This time he relents, and has sex with her. Afterwards, he grimaces and bitterly tells her that "this won't do . . . stupidest thing I could've done *to you*." The man sees this action as something he does *to* the woman. He doesn't realize that she controls this sexual exchange. She forces him to do this with her the same way he forces her to obey the strictures of his treatment. Additionally, the woman's disobedience of the man's instructions regarding sex reveals his inability to control her actions and her desires. Hence, his therapy is not working.

In spite of the evidence suggesting his therapy is failing to treat the woman, the man presses on with the next phase of treatment. The man calls this phase “exposure.” He maintains the only way to teach the woman that her “fear isn’t dangerous” is to expose her to what she fears the most. In this case, she fears the woods surrounding a cabin they own, which they call “Eden.” The rest of the film takes place at and around this cabin. While at the cabin, the man uses a variety of different therapeutic exercises to heal the woman. He uses hypnosis, role-playing, and environment interaction simultaneously to expose the woman to her fear as well as to demonstrate the benign nature of those fears. Each technique produces strange results: the woman appears to get better, but the man becomes increasingly disturbed by her behavior and the area itself. When the couple first arrives at the woods, the woman’s phobia is so strong that she cannot stand on the ground because it feels like it’s burning to her. After several days of treatment, she easily walks through the woods and lays down on the ground laughing. The man arrives at the woods with the calm rationality he has in the couple’s apartment. However, by the end of his treatment of the woman, the man is visibly unsettled by the woods and the woman herself.

The man’s growing anxiety and the woman’s rehabilitation come unhinged when the man confronts her with evidence that she may have abused their son. After the man tells the woman that Nic’s autopsy report suggests he had a deformity in the bones of his feet, he shows her a picture of Nic with his shoes on backwards. He asks her if she knew that she had put his shoes on incorrectly. She claims that it must have been a “slip of the mind that day.” However, the man has several other photographs of Nic on different occasions with his shoes on in the same incorrect manner that he doesn’t show the

woman. Additionally, the film shows a brief flashback of the woman forcing shoes backwards on Nic's feet as he cries. The scene implicitly suggests that the woman contributed to her son's fall and subsequent death by damaging his feet in this way. The man walks out of the cabin and into a shed after the woman denies being aware of this painful 'mistake.' Soon after he enters the shed, the woman comes in and attacks him, knocking him unconscious, and piercing his leg with a drill as she repeatedly shrieks "you're leaving me, you bastard." After the man regains consciousness, the woman is completely psychotic. She tells the man she is going to sacrifice him to "the three beggars," deities from her research on witchcraft. The man manages to survive by choking the woman to death. Anthony Lane in his review of *Antichrist* for *The New Yorker* blames the man's "civilizing science" for the woman's descent into madness at this stage of the film: "civilizing science, in other words, has done its duty and withdrawn, allowing the bestial—that part of humanity which lies beyond the reach of reason—to emerge and flex its jaws" (Lane). Put another way, the man's logical treatment provokes the woman's insanity by bringing her to Eden, exposing her to her fears, and interrogating her, but withdraws without a positive, practical solution.

The events that transpire in the "exposure" phase show the man's treatment of the woman to be simultaneously successful and unsuccessful. The man's treatment is successful because it leads him to discover the actual nature of the woman's mental illness: she suffers from violent psychosis because she obsesses over the man leaving her. However, the man's treatment is also a failure because he can't cure her of this psychosis since he himself is an integral part of the obsession that exacerbates her illness. In this way, the man's occupational performative identity does violence to the woman because it

draws out the magnitude of her illness without providing any viable sense of relief to it other than her death. According to Joanna Bourke in Xan Brooks's article for *The Guardian*, "*Antichrist*: a Work of Genius or the Sickest Film in the History of Cinema?", "the man's violence is the heartlessness of rationality . . . he is a rationalist cognitive therapist, who bullies [the woman] into exposing her inner demons" (Brooks). In other words, according to Bourke, the man's violence stems from his "heartlessness" or his emotional detachment, which his occupational performative identity requires. He approaches the woman's condition formulaically—as another performance that constructs his identity—but he doesn't consider that his status as her husband could preclude him from healing her, which turns out to be the case. Brooks himself also describes the man as "the arrogant, doomed advocate of order and reason" (Brooks). Sure enough, the man's arrogance—"no therapist can know as much about you as I do"—prevents the success of his logical, Apollonian treatment. The man's non-occupational status as the woman's husband is the problem, but his occupational performative identity and its history of success require him to ignore this possibility until it is too late.

The important upshot of the performativity expressed in *Antichrist* is the continuity of the man's performative identity as long as he and his diegetic audience remain in tact. Over the course of the film, he loses his son and his wife, but his performative identity lives on. The final sequence in "Epilogue" shows the man standing on a hill as a myriad of faceless women walk through the woods towards him. This image demonstrates how there will always be more patients for him to treat as long as he is alive and there is a need for mentally healthy people. In this way, the film frames the diegetic audience—even an implied diegetic audience—as an integral component to the

continuity of the man's performative identity. As a result, the film highlights the dearth of the audience in Butler's articulation of the performative construction of identity.

***The Hurt Locker*: Sgt. William James**

There is an important critical conflict surrounding the reception of *The Hurt Locker*. According to a number of major film critics, it is an almost perfect war film that shows the struggles and successes of soldiers in a complicated conflict. According to soldiers, *The Hurt Locker* is a farce. The film portrays the business of being a soldier all wrong. It glamorizes the job and in doing so misrepresents the dangers involved making it seem like one man can win a war single-handedly for his country. Film critics A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* and Richard Corliss of *TIME Magazine* rave about *The Hurt Locker*'s ability to describe cinematically the American occupation of Iraq. Scott calls the film "the best nondocumentary American feature made yet about the war in Iraq" (Scott). Corliss praises the film as "a near-perfect movie about men in war, men at work" (Corliss). In their reviews of *The Hurt Locker*, both Scott and Corliss describe the ingenious way Bigelow creates tension and provides the adrenaline rush that moviegoers seek when they choose to watch an action film. Their high praise for the film directly conflicts with the severe criticism it receives from military experts in explosive ordinance disposal, the profession the film portrays.

Michael Kamber, a journalist and videographer who embedded with an explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) unit in Iraq during the American occupation of Baghdad, stridently attacks *The Hurt Locker* for its highly unrealistic portrayal of the daily operations of not only military explosives experts, but also soldiers' duties in general. Kamber describes how he normally avoids watching films about war and soldiers' lives because of their blatant inauthenticity; however, he says he chose to watch *The Hurt Locker* because of the positive reviews it had received. He was disgusted with the film.

He writes: “The film is a collection of scenes that are completely implausible — wrong in almost every respect. This time, it’s not just minor details that are wrong” (Kamber).

Kamber’s main issues with the film concern its depiction of Sgt. First Class William James. Kamber describes James’s actions as the most unbelievable and misleading elements of the film:

If there is one rule with the military, it is that there is strength in numbers. No one soldier, no one vehicle, goes out alone. Ever. Four vehicles and a 20-man squad is the minimum that I have worked with in Iraq. A lone Humvee would not be allowed to clear the gate at any base in Iraq. Yet, in scene after scene, the bomb disposal team, led by Staff Sgt. William James, appears to be fighting the war alone . . . The movie’s denouement — the explosive ordnance disposal (E.O.D.) team responds to a massive truck bomb in the Green Zone — is so completely wrong in every respect that it borders on farce. Insurgents did not operate freely in the Green Zone. They would never have kidnapped a soldier in an area with thousands of U.S. troops. And they would never have hung around an active investigation scene with their weapons. No American E.O.D. team in existence (or any other three-man squad) would go charging alone down dark alleyways when there are hundreds of infantrymen at hand . . . These are mere details compared to the way Sergeant James repeatedly swaggers up to bombs. As Mark Boal, the screenwriter, well knows, many I.E.D.’s in Iraq are remotely detonated. Mr. Boal actually embedded with an E.O.D. team in Iraq, so he knows the chances of recklessly approaching even a single command-detonated bomb and surviving are quite small. Yet we are made to believe that Sergeant James has disabled over 800 bombs in this reckless, cowboy-like fashion . . . More disturbing and implausible yet is the way the protagonist repeatedly endangers the lives of his team members. (Kamber)

Kamber’s deconstructive analysis of *The Hurt Locker* demonstrates how the power of the film doesn’t come from actual authenticity. Moreover, his analysis suggests the film presents an idealized, non-real conception of ‘the good soldier’ in James.¹⁰ Importantly,

¹⁰ In *Antichrist*, the authenticity of the man's therapeutic techniques hasn't been investigated or written about. However, given the film's overtly fantastical elements such as a talking fox and a tree that grows human arms, it doesn't seem as though it would be appropriate to evaluate the film's realism.

Kamber describes how James “*repeatedly* swaggers up to bombs” and “*repeatedly* endangers the lives of his team members”—that is, even the most critical opinions of the film still perceive the way James constructs his identity in a Butlerian way in the sense that his identity is comprised of a series of distinct yet repeated performances¹¹. This shows that *The Hurt Locker*'s remediates Butlerian performativity via James's characterization.

The conflict between civilian critics and military experts in regards to the quality of *The Hurt Locker* rests on each group's understanding of the film's perspective. As noted above, military experts like Kamber are certainly correct in criticizing the film's authenticity. However, the cinematic quality of a war film has little to do with authenticity. *The Hurt Locker* is authentic in visually superficial terms only: the film looks very real. Yet, the film is primarily concerned with the effects of war on the lives of individual men. The film explores the mental space where soldiers exist—it ventures into the “hurt locker,” which, according the film's screenwriter Mark Boal, is a slang term used by soldiers in Iraq meaning a nebulous bad place a soldier ends up in after a particularly bad conflict or explosion. In this way, the film isn't attempting to be rigorously authentic in the way the soldiers act or perform their duties. It strives to show how their experiences affect them, and succeeds in this endeavor. Thus, the film is a critical success because of its ability to crawl inside the psyche of these men at war not because of its adherence to authentically representing combat.

The Hurt Locker's focus on the psychological effects of war reveals the addictive properties of the intense conflicts innately a part of war and juxtaposes those properties

¹¹ Butler writes that features of a person's identity are defined through “a stylized *repetition* of acts,” which are “internally discontinuous” (Butler 179).

with the features of peaceful civilian life. By contrasting these two experiences, the film describes how soldiers can be either intensely repulsed by the bloody business of battle or perversely attracted to the dangers of armed conflict. In order to convey these psychological states cinematically, the film must not be hampered by military protocol and authenticity because a great deal of actual modern combat is a lot of waiting punctuated by brief, inexplicable moments of irrational and unintelligible violence. A character like James who conflates his identity with his role as a soldier wouldn't appear brash or have a cowboy-like swagger about him, as Kamber puts it. However, in order to explain his personality in a film, the character needs to possess traits that are over-pronounced and exaggerated.

The Hurt Locker highlights James and his devil-may-care demeanor in order to show how his identity is enmeshed with his role as a soldier. In this way, James is the perfect soldier because he isn't restrained by the mental and moral baggage that test the other soldiers' courage and commitment. James loves war—he lives for the thrill of defusing a bomb or preventing an attack. He truly comes alive in armed conflict. War has a bizarre and intriguing effect on James: while it shocks and disturbs the other members of his team, war makes James happy. *The Hurt Locker* is thus a cerebral interpretation of modern war and as such is more metaphorical than literal. The film opens with a quotation from the American journalist and political activist Chris Hedges, stating: “The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug.” The sentiment behind this quote—that there is a pleasure to be gained from the hell of war so powerful that it justifies a person's participation and death in combat—sets the tone for the narrative of the film, which can best be described as an admixture of panic and

calculation. *The Hurt Locker* wants to explore the psyche of the soldier; it isn't concerned with the reality of the physical pageantry or maneuvers of combat. As the quote fades from the screen, the end of the quote—"war is a drug"—is left lingering before the next shot appears. This epigraph resonates with the film's intrinsically critical view of society's need for the occupational performative identity of the soldier: society enables and encourages individuals to construct a singular identity as a soldier to promote its own ends even at the cost of the autonomy of those individuals. In this way, *The Hurt Locker* makes a sidelong criticism of Butlerian performativity. Essentially, the film makes the point that James's troubling performative identity is a product of society as an implicit diegetic audience. Without society's need for and approval of James's repeated performances as a soldier, he couldn't act that part—he couldn't construct that identity.

Significantly, James is starkly different than the other two soldiers on his team. He is wild and humorous where they are serious and nervous. The film emphasizes the personality clash between James and the other two men, Sergeant JT Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), in order to highlight James's superiority as a soldier. Sanborn and Eldridge are very normal soldiers: they fear for their lives, they are cautious, and they adhere strictly to the proper procedure in every conflict. James is, as Sanborn puts it, "reckless." He does everything he can to be successful even if that means ignoring the risks and the potential consequences.

The fundamental difference between the three men is their mental approach to war. Sanborn and Eldridge count down the days until they can go home; James counts up the number of bombs he has defused. A.O. Scott describes the differences between the men aptly:

Specialist Owen Eldridge is a bundle of nerves and confused impulses, eager to please, ashamed of his own fear and almost dismayingly vulnerable. Sgt. J. T. Sanborn is a careful, uncomplaining professional who sticks to protocols and procedures in the hope that his prudence will get him home alive, away from an assignment he has come to loathe. The wild card is Staff Sgt. William James, who joins Delta after its leader is killed and who approaches his work more like a jazz musician or an abstract expressionist painter than like a sober technician. A smoker and a heavy metal fan with an irreverent, profane sense of humor and a relaxed sense of military discipline, he approaches each new bomb or skirmish not with dread but with a kind of inspired, improvisational zeal. (Scott)

While all three men perform similar duties as soldiers, only James constructs his identity through his occupational performance. It is hard to imagine James as anything but a soldier because he is so effective and so joyous when he is defusing a bomb. The others are trapped by their occupations, and it seems that they, like so many others, became soldiers out of necessity, not desire.

The Hurt Locker prefaces James's introduction to Sanborn and Eldridge with a scene wherein their former explosives expert Sgt. Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce) dies during an IED explosion. The film uses this scene as a foil to James's reckless, cowboy-like approach to his work. Thompson, Sanborn, and Eldridge use a robot to identify the IED before they attempt to disable it. James never uses a robot. Thompson works in concert with Sanborn and Eldridge. James relies primarily on his own instincts and skills; he often deliberately ignores Sanborn and Eldridge. Thompson has experience, but he is still a careful soldier who fears for his safety and the safety of others. James has a great deal of experience successfully defusing bombs and IEDs, and, as a result, approaches every bomb with confidence (much in the same way that the man in *Antichrist* approaches his wife as a new patient). Thompson's humanity permeates his actions, no

matter how courageous they are. James appears alien. Sure, he is courageous, but he is also surgically precise and emotionally inert. He appears heroic in a stoic kind of way, but he also appears impossible and inhuman.

The first two scenes in which James defuses IEDs present him as an obsessive perfectionist. He is a veritable bomb genius, but he also operates like a needle junky expertly wielding a syringe and belt strap. In the course of his actions, he endangers his own life as well as the lives of Sanborn and Eldridge. James's obsession—his addiction—to defusing bombs comes to the fore in the second scene where he defuses a set of bombs wired to a car. This scene emphasizes James's recklessness as well as his obsessive genius. First, James refuses to wear his bomb suit because “there's enough bang [in the car] to send us all to Jesus,” or so he tells Eldridge, implying that the suit doesn't add any measure of safety to the situation. Second, Sanborn informs James that the entire area has been fully evacuated. He notes that the bomb can be safely detonated by a team of army engineers without any casualties. Yet, James still continues to work on defusing the bomb. James's refusal to give up on the bomb leaves his team members to wait longer than they have to in a hostile area. His tenacity also increases the likelihood that he himself will be blown up in the car. He simply cannot give up on a bomb no matter the circumstances. His belief in his talents and instincts is too strong and his obsession too great to quit. After successfully disarming the bomb, Colonel Reed (David Morse) asks James how many bombs he has disarmed. James knows the exact number: “Eight hundred and seventy-three, sir.” Reed applauds James's career and his success, stating, “That's just hot shit . . . that's gotta be a record.” While Reed praises James the camera cuts to Eldridge, one of the men whose life James unnecessarily puts in

jeopardy, who looks down, dejected. In this interaction, Reed—the authority figure—represents society and his praise confers status to James through his occupational performative identity. James is “hot shit” because of the work he does repeatedly. This moment captures succinctly the power of society as an audience over James’s occupational performative identity. Since the authority present praises James not only for his success in this one instance, but for his repeated success, it implicitly encourages his addiction, the negative consequence of his occupational performative identity. Moreover, the colonel isn’t present to see the superfluity of the danger James’s methods. In this way, the film argues that the implied diegetic audience doesn’t see the full performance, only the results. Additionally, this audience doesn’t care about the method in which the results are obtained as long as the outcome matches their expectations. As a result, James’s implied diegetic audience is similar to Randy’s present diegetic audience in that both audiences have expectations for the performers they observe although they don’t fully realize what it takes for those performers to meet those expectations.¹²

James’s extreme methods have a negative effect on both Eldridge and Sanborn because they reveal his dangerous obsession and his cavalier regard for personal safety. On the one hand, Eldridge fears James, and worries James’s actions will eventually kill him before his tour is over. On the other hand, James challenges Sanborn’s authority. Sanborn sees himself as the *de facto* leader of the team since Thompson died, and he sees James’s actions not so much as dangerous, but as rebellious. Eldridge holds out hope that Sanborn will save him from James, but it is obvious he knows James is in control. When the army doctor visits Eldridge after a mission, Eldridge tells him “my team leader is

¹² See my points about the authenticity of the violence in wrestling on pages 31-32.

inspiring . . . he's going to get me killed.” James's negative effect on his team members culminates in a short exchange between Sanborn and Eldridge while they are remotely detonating charges in the desert. Sanborn hints that they should kill James. The murder plot never comes to fruition, but the sentiment is there: James is a threat to their lives. The threat manifests itself in one of the film's later missions. James leads the other two on a harrowing and spontaneous romp through the Iraqi streets causing Eldridge to be non-fatally wounded when James misses his mark and shoots him. As Eldridge is about to be airlifted on a helicopter home towards the end of the film, he blames James for taking them out on an unnecessary manhunt just to get “[his] adrenaline fix.”

Eldridge and Sanborn have no effect on James whatsoever. He sees them only as means to an end—that end being his ability to continue being a soldier. At times, they are useful. In one scene, he guides Sanborn as he snipes several enemies who have opened fire on them in the desert while he uses Eldridge to find ammo and other supplies. Poignantly, there is a moment in this scene where James holds up a juice box for Sanborn to drink from while Sanborn continues to look down the sights of his rifle. The image doesn't capture camaraderie, but a master-slave dynamic. In heat of battle, Sanborn doesn't see James as a challenge, but as an expert who he must yield to. In this moment, he acknowledges James's superiority. Nonetheless, throughout this scene and all the other scenes of the film, Sanborn and Eldridge are simply components of the job to James. He doesn't get any more upset or happy with them than a soldier would get over his or her rifle or knife. Other people's inability to affect or connect meaningfully with James extends to his family.

James has no emotional connection to the world away from war, what he sees as the nonperformative¹³ world. During a night of drunken revelry, Sanborn finds a box of James's personal possessions. For the first time in the film, James looks very uncomfortable. Inside the box, Sanborn finds a picture of James's son. James doesn't say he misses his son or he loves him. All he has to say about his son is "he's a tough little bastard . . . nothing like me." Sanborn then asks if James is married. He describes his life at home as follows:

Well, you know, I had a girlfriend, and uh she got pregnant, so we got married. We got divorced. Or, you know, I thought we got divorced. I mean, she's still living in the house, and she says we're still together, so I don't know. What does that make her? I don't know.

During this short speech, the camera zooms in on James's face. Again, this is the first interaction where James seems unsettled, uncool. Notably, however, he doesn't describe any positive features of the people in his life at home except his wife's loyalty. Sanborn calls James's wife "dumb" for being with him. James gets angry and almost shouts, "Hey she ain't fucking dumb, alright? She's just loyal." This scene exposes the fact that the pinnacle of a person's usefulness to James is loyalty and obedience. He applies the same logic to the way he views his family as he does his coworkers. Such moments expose that, for James, personal life is an absolute afterthought, which emphasizes how thoroughly his identity and his occupation are intertwined.

¹³ In James's case, the nonperformative world is the non-diegetic world. That is, the arena of his life within the film wherein he is not enacting or constructing his performative identity. Unlike Nina and Randy, as noted in chapter one, James's performativity identity doesn't require a physical stage and a living, breathing audience to be constructed. So his nonperformative realm is less explicit than Nina and Randy's: it is the nebulous space where he cannot go about the business of soldiering.

There is only one kind of person for whom James's openly expresses affection: bombmakers. After finding the picture of James's son, Sanborn discovers a variety of bomb components in James's box. James explains that each object in the box is something that "almost killed [him]." He shows Eldridge and Sanborn components to the first two bombs he disarmed with them. When he shows them the "dead man's switch" to the bomb he defused after the area was completely evacuated he says alarmingly "this guy was good . . . I like him." It makes sense that a soldier like James would admire and have affection for bombmakers because he would not be able to construct his performative identity without them. Without the threat these faceless foes present, society wouldn't need James to do his job. As a result, he wouldn't be able to construct his occupational performative identity that he does. In this way, the men and women who make IEDs—endangering many lives, and killing many more—necessitate James's performative identity in the eyes of his diegetic audience, society. Thus, bombmakers are the only people who affect James. Although, in the film, there is one other person who affects James: a foul-mouthed young Iraqi boy named Beckham (Christopher Sayegh). Beckham sells James DVDs and horses around with him. James finds a young boy whose body has been turned into a "body-bomb" and believes it's Beckham. This causes him to venture out into the Iraqi streets at night to try to find the men responsible. It is the only time he appears to care for another person, not just a bomb. As it turns out, the boy James found was not Beckham despite his similar appearance and stature. This misunderstanding highlights James's skewed perspective—how much war has warped his understanding. This moment also subtly points out how James's occupational performative identity precludes his ability to acknowledge his identity as a husband and a

father. His heroic efforts to seek justice for Beckham can be seen as a way to exorcise his subconscious guilt over abandoning his son. James cannot allow himself to openly acknowledge this guilt though. He never considers that he could have a life at home, away from the carnage and the ambiguity of war.

Unlike James, Eldridge and Sanborn yearn for their lives at home, away from war. Before Eldridge is flown out of Iraq, Sanborn states, “see you on the other side.” This moment is shown in a series of two-shots. First, the camera shows Sanborn speaking with James looking lost at his side. Second, the camera shows Eldridge stating, “alright” and smiling as Sanborn embraces him one last time. The other side is a crucial concept for most soldiers. It is a symbol of survival and a return to normalcy. Many men don’t make it to that other side: home, away from battle and the constant threat of sudden death. After one final close encounter with an Iraqi civilian wearing a vest of bombs, Sanborn asks James how he handles the constant threat of death that comes with their job. James states, “I don’t think about it.” James asks Sanborn, “do you know why I am the way I am?” Sanborn replies, “No, I don’t.” The camera answers James’s question by cutting to a scene of James at home walking through a grocery store. This now iconic moment shows James absolutely consumed by the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of this commonplace event. He stands alone overwhelmed by the cereal aisle. For James, if this is all the other side has to offer, then he needs to go back to war. Caetlin Benson-Allott describes this image in her article, “Undoing Violence: Politics, Genre, and Duration in Kathryn Bigelow's Cinema,” as the moment when the film confirms James’s addiction to war. She writes:

In the much-discussed shot of James standing alone in a supermarket aisle, having returned from his tour of duty, his

blankness is again emphasized: he is utterly disconcerted by its plethora of breakfast cereals. As the film tells us, “war is a drug,” and this is a man suffering withdrawal symptoms, ready to return to his addiction. (Benson-Allott 43)

Like Nina in *Black Swan*, James constructs a perfect performative identity. Unfortunately, as a soldier, that means he cannot function in a peaceful environment: he needs conflict—he needs war. A.O Scott writes, “Eldridge is a decent guy, dangerously out of his element but making the best of a bad situation. Sanborn is a professional, doing a job conscientiously and well. But James is something else” (Scott). Unlike the other soldiers, James is addicted to his performative identity as a soldier. In one shot after he accidentally shoots Eldridge, the camera shows James showering in his full uniform washing the blood away. This image is *The Hurt Locker* at its most cerebral and most metaphorical: underneath it all, James is a soldier. When he strips down for a shower, he leaves his uniform and his gear on. He is a genius in the arena of violence, and as such he has no place in the world away from war. Richard Corliss calls James’s unique abilities “creepy”: “It’s a creepy marvel to watch James in action. He has the cool aplomb, analytical acumen and attention to detail of a great athlete, or a master psychopath, maybe both” (Corliss). Indeed James’s performative identity is creepy or unsettling much in the same way Nina, Randy, and He are unsettling in their performative identities. Each character is disturbing because they seem so doggedly stuck in these identities. They are compulsive creatures unable to break away from the behaviors that define them in the eyes of their (diegetic) audiences. To this end, *The Hurt Locker* concludes with James returning for another tour of duty, an addict relapsing unable to stomach life as a father and husband without the high of war.

James's ultimate return to war both confirms his addiction to his performative identity and reiterates his status as the perfect soldier. In doing so, this moment also condemns the perfect soldier. The perfect soldier is a necessity of the modern military industrial complex, which is itself a necessity of modern society. If the perfect soldier must abandon his or her family in order to construct an identity of conflict and violence, *and* society needs perfect soldiers, then society causes these people to abandon and to neglect their families. In this way, like Nina, Randy, and He, James is not in control of his identity; his audience is.

Chapter 3: At Home

Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* (2006) investigate the manner in which performative identities can be necessitated by the behavioral expectations that certain individuals expect themselves to uphold for their families. As with the protagonists of the other four films examined in this thesis, the protagonists of these two films maintain identities constructed in a Butlerian performative fashion—that is, their identities are social constructions created through the repetition of certain defining actions for either explicit or implicit diegetic audiences. Moreover, these protagonists perceive their families as the audiences that legitimize, confirm, and authenticate their performative identities; their families represent the “public” that enforces the “social laws” that shape their performances (Butler 526). *Melancholia* and *The Fountain* demonstrate the destabilization of the performative identity that occurs when that audience or “public” is mortally threatened. Furthermore, these films lay bare how the performative identity, as a “social temporality,” collapses with the death of the audience (Butler 179).

In both films, the protagonist's family is about to die. In *The Fountain*, Tommy Creo's (Hugh Jackman) wife Izzie (Rachel Weisz) has an aggressive brain tumor that ultimately kills her. Tommy, a cancer researcher, spends the last few days of Izzie's life attempting to find a cure for her disease. In *Melancholia*, all life ends when a large blue planet called Melancholia collides catastrophically with the Earth. Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) spends the days leading up to the collision attempting to prepare for the apocalypse while hoping it will not happen. Her external, impersonal actions strive to anesthetize the apocalypse. In the end, she fails to effect any change in her own or her

family's fate. In both cases, Tommy and Claire fail to connect meaningfully with their loved ones in the last few opportunities they have. Their inability to connect with their families in these final moments stems from their failure to accept that their families—their diegetic audiences—are going to die, as this acceptance would entail losing their performative identities.

In *Melancholia*, Claire is a staunch pragmatist and rationalist. She has intuitive anxiety concerning the possible collision of Melancholia and Earth, but she defers to her husband's scientific expertise. Despite this deference, she takes several precautions in case her intuition is correct: she purchases a bottle of pills so that she and her family can die painlessly, and she has her sister Justine (Kirsten Dunst) stay at her house so her whole family can be together in the end. Claire believes that with the proper preparation she can maintain a semblance of order in the face of the apocalypse. In the end, Claire's practical efforts are futile and her calm pragmatism crumbles. Throughout the film, Claire attempts to be the bastion of order in her family. She constructs her performative identity through her actions as the stable caretaker of her family. However, this identity is nothing more than a superficial artifice when the world literally comes crashing down around her. Interestingly, Justine, who overtly fails to maintain a performative identity, transcends the calamity that occurs.¹⁴

In *The Fountain*, Tommy neglects Izzie in order to attempt to save her life because, without her, his performative identity as her lover will be undone. The film

¹⁴ It's not that Justine survives this disaster, but that Justine embraces the end of her life and revels in it, unlike Claire who is consumed by panic and anxiety in the final moments of her life. Thus, Justine transcends the horror of her own death whereas this terrible consequence destroys Claire's identity as well as her physical body.

makes Tommy out to be the perfect lover; however, the film also makes the paradoxical point that the perfect lover cannot be a perfect lover because he can't accept his love's mortality—he can't accept her humanity. In this way, Tommy's performative identity takes precedence over Izzie herself. As a result, Tommy harms both himself and Izzie by squandering the last few opportunities he had to be with her. Tommy comes to regret his abandonment of Izzie.

Tommy and Claire are presented as supererogatory members of their families. Tommy doesn't just help his wife attend chemotherapy—he searches for a cure for her cancer. Claire doesn't just maintain the order of her family's lives after a disastrous wedding—she also upholds the structure and normalcy of their lives in the face of the apocalypse. In these ways, both characters exceed their families' expectations for them. However, the heightened expectations they strive to live up to are products of the social environments in which they exist. Tommy just happens to be a cancer researcher whose wife has cancer. Therefore, it is not out of the realm of possibility for him to be able to help his wife by searching for a cure to her cancer. Moreover, because he feasibly could cure his wife of her cancer, his actions might not be supererogatory for him although they would be for a spouse without his background. Claire is married to a scientist whose theory is that the world isn't coming to an end. Additionally, Claire believes that the practical measures she takes will mitigate the truly horrific consequences of the apocalypse, if it occurs. Thus, her maintenance of the family's stability is the result of ignorance (albeit self-induced) of the ensuing calamity, not in spite of it. Hence, her actions are not supererogatory whatsoever. In fact, she behaves in a singularly typical

fashion for someone in her position in the sense that she behaves in accordance with the information she believes to be true.

Just like the other four characters examined in this thesis, Tommy and Claire construct their performative identities to meet the behavioral expectations of a kind of audience—the diegetic audience. In *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler*, Nina and Randy perform for an actual audience and attempt to satisfy the audience's expectations to be entertained. In *Antichrist* and *The Hurt Locker*, the man and James perform their duties as professionals to fulfill the needs of an abstract, influential and always implied diegetic audience—society—that confers status and value based on their occupational successes as a therapist and a soldier respectively. In *The Fountain* and *Melancholia*, Tommy and Claire construct their performative identities in a way that appeases a more intimate and complex diegetic audience—their families. Tommy and Claire perceive their families as audiences that expect either salvation or protection from suffering. However, the films demonstrate that Tommy's and Claire's perceptions fundamentally misrepresent their families' expectations. Importantly, these films also emphasize how audience expectations—perceived or real, present or implied—are the primary reason for the construction of performative identities.

This chapter examines the relationship between the artificial, exaggerated expectations Claire and Tommy construct their performative identities in response to, and their loved ones' actual, less grandiose expectations. Claire and Tommy maintain, to a fault, the stricture that they must be the custodians of their loved ones' mortality. They cannot accept that they can't control death: Tommy can't accept that he can't prevent Izzie's death, and Claire can't accept that, if the world is ending and her whole family is

going to die, she can't give them a peaceful end. Their rejection of this lack of autonomy causes them to be unprepared for the deaths of their loved ones. Thus, the seemingly supererogatory actions they perform are done in vain. Significantly, the vanity of these characters' actions reveals how these actions are actually attempts to prevent the complete loss of their performative identities. The death of their families is not just a common tragedy; it represents the destruction of their performative identities. In this way, the threats made on the corporeal existence of their families, either by nature or by disease, affect Tommy and Claire so powerfully because they threaten both of their performatively constructed—and so audience-dependent—identities.

To articulate the entrenchment of Tommy's and Claire's performative identities with the existence of their families as audiences, both *The Fountain* and *Melancholia* present family members as foils to these characters. Tommy's wife Izzie and Claire's sister Justine accept mortality and do not try to fight it. Izzie, who is dying of cancer, spends her time writing a book, stargazing, and embracing the prospect of her death. She is scared, but she doesn't try to avoid her mortality. Justine, who has a preternatural awareness of events in the world and the future, comes to live with Claire and her family days before *Melancholia* collides with Earth, as noted earlier. For Claire, Justine's presence makes the prospect less ominous—perhaps, she believes Justine can prevent the apocalypse. Either way, in her time at Claire's home, Justine embraces the end, even going so far as to forecast its arrival. Both Izzie and Justine choose to welcome death, much to the chagrin of Tommy and Claire, respectively. Ultimately, Izzie and Justine are more satisfied and transcendent than Tommy and Claire. Whereas, Tommy and Claire represent identities that are imprisoned by Izzie and Justine's respective mortal bodies,

Izzie and Justine exhibit identities that are liberated from the trials of their mortal bodies.

Unlike Izzie and Justine, Tommy and Claire cannot understand that anything positive could result from the natural end of a single life or of the world because it signals the end of their performative identities.

Melancholia: Claire

During an interview with Vasu Reddy in *Agenda*, Judith Butler, talking about the distinction between Freud's definition of mourning and melancholia¹⁵, states that "the melancholic is haunted and animated by a loss that he or she cannot name and cannot grieve" (Butler 120). Butler argues that the defining feature of Freudian melancholia is an innate and unexplainable sense of loss. In his review of *Melancholia* for the *New York Times*, A.O. Scott argues that Justine embodies Freud's diagnosis of melancholia: "Freud's diagnosis [of melancholia] pretty much captures the mental state of Justine, a young woman whose history of crippling depression overshadows her lavish wedding party and threatens to blight her chances at future happiness" (Scott). Applying Butler's claim, Scott's assertion about Justine's character is actually incorrect. While Justine is in fact depressed, she can articulate the source of her depression. She explains, towards the end of the film, "the Earth is evil; we don't need to grieve for it." In other words, Justine is a misanthrope—her sadness and her antisocial tendencies stem from her perception of humanity's depravity. In this way, she does not satisfy Butler's requirement for the Freudian melancholic since she has a clearly defined sense of loss: Justine has lost her compassion for the world at-large. Contrastingly, Claire fits Butler's model, and, in doing so, demonstrates my point that the performative identity ceases to exist without the audience.

¹⁵ Freud writes: "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (Freud 244).

Throughout the film Claire repeatedly attempts to prevent the dissolution of her family. Her commitment to this end reveals her adherence to Butlerian performativity: she creates her performative identity as the glue that keeps her family intact. In this way, like Tommy in *The Fountain*, Claire constructs her identity through a performance that is bound to fail given the context of the film (the world is going to end; ergo, she cannot maintain her family's cohesion). While Tommy opposes his wife's mortality, she struggles against an entropy that consumes her family. As a result, the prospect of the end of the world is more devastating and horrific for Claire than any other character in the film because it signals the literal destruction of her family. Moreover, the death of her family is the loss of her performative identity's diegetic audience. As a result, it necessitates the dissolution of that identity. Thus, Claire's anxiety concerning the loss of her family masks an additional concern: the loss of her audience.

This indirect, inexpressible sense of loss allows Claire to fulfill Butler's requirement for the melancholic, and exposes the interdependence between her performative identity and her familial audience. Butler states that the melancholic is in a state of "disavowed loss," which is to say that "one has lost something, even though one does not know precisely what one has lost" (Butler 120). Here, Butler asserts that the melancholic is a person who can't articulate her sense of *what* or *who* she has lost. Additionally, Butler states, "the other point that Freud makes here is that the melancholic tends to incorporate some of the traits of the one who is lost, especially the one who is lost through disavowal" (Butler 120). Even before it is evident that the world is ending, Claire's family is in disarray—her parents are bitterly divorced, her husband is constantly antagonistic, and her sister is detached, withdrawn, and dysfunctional. In the wake of her

family's disorder, Claire functions solely to re-establish and sustain a sense of order in her family. However, although Claire internalizes the order her family has lost, the "one who is lost through disavowal" for her is the stability of her performative identity's audience (Butler 120). Claire is oblivious to the fact that the identity she constructs as the custodian of her family requires her family's existence to necessitate it. Thus, her identity as the steward of her family alleviates her anxiety about losing her family, but it also works to maintain the existence of her family—her identity's diegetic audience.

Claire is unable to acknowledge the possibility of losing her family. Her inability to consider this potentiality reveals her anxiety over the consequences it would have. For Claire, losing her family would reduce her world to chaos. As a result, Claire wastes away the last few days of her family's (and the Earth's) existence attempting to mitigate the effects of the apocalypse. She irrationally and pointlessly refuses to give up her performative identity as her family's caretaker by prioritizing practical measures over the uncontrollability of their (potential) mutual destruction, an outcome that identity doesn't allow her to recognize. Additionally, she struggles to accept that she has no control over the state of her family. In fact, the only fear she experiences is anxiety that she can no longer protect and preserve her family as the world teeters on the brink of destruction. Thus, Claire's fear is just a new manifestation of her performative identity—rather than shed this constructed identity and transform, Claire embodies that identity and pre-emptively mourns its loss.

The first section of the film—"Justine"—focuses on how Claire's anxiety over losing her family extends even to potential family members. During this half of the film, she attempts to facilitate Justine's elaborate wedding reception in order to ensure the

success of her marriage. Before the reception, Claire asks Justine, “so you want this?” The implication at this stage of the film is unclear, but later the film reveals that Justine really doesn’t want the attention and the ritualistic responsibility required of a bride at her wedding reception. Moreover, her lack of desire for this event ruins her marriage and the extension of her (and Claire’s) family. In this way, Claire’s question and her framing of that question in an affirmative light—she asks Justine if she wants this event and not if she doesn’t want it—exposes Claire’s concern that her family might be further destabilized by this event. Additionally, her failure to explicitly state this concern in her question demonstrates her inability to recognize the loss of the potential family she would gain through Justine’s marriage over and above her own, established family.

Throughout the party, Claire attempts to cover up Justine’s debilitating depression so that she can participate in the different events and make the appearances required of a bride at her reception. In this way, Claire functions as a buffer between Justine and the guests who attend in order to recognize Justine’s marriage to Michael (Alexander Skarsgård). Time and time again, Justine’s mental illness gets the best of her and prevents her from completing the social tasks her guests and her husband expect her to perform. In a review for the *LA Times*, Betsey Sharkey writes, “As the reception unfolds in all the traditional ways — the toasts, first dance, cake cutting, throwing the bouquet — Justine begins to disappear. To slip inside the melancholia that she hoped the ritual of the wedding, the marriage would keep at bay” (Sharkey). Sharkey’s use of the word “ritual” is particularly poignant in describing Claire’s perception of the entire event. Claire sees the reception as a series of rituals that Justine must complete in order to establish a family through her marriage successfully. Justine starts off on the wrong foot by showing up

several hours late to the reception. When Claire first welcomes Justine and Michael to the party, she approaches Justine visibly irritated and states “I won’t even bother saying how late you are.”

The film obfuscates Justine’s and Michael’s tardiness, which in turn highlights Claire’s irritation and desire for the event’s ritualistic and formal success. Marta Figerlowicz in “Comedy of Abandon: Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*” writes:

The gravity or inconsequence of Justine and Michael’s trespass could only be measured by their guests’ wait, but that wait is obscured. Rather than give you grounds for anger or frustration, von Trier lets you take in these negative feelings without a timescale that could justify or dispel them. He’s not making light of the feelings themselves, not exactly, but of *the standards of seriousness by which we might want to test their weight*. (Figerlowicz 23, emphasis mine)

According to Figerlowicz, the altered timescale the film presents in this moment downplays this lateness and magnifies Claire’s reaction. The film’s temporal alteration manipulates the significance of both the misstep and the response in the way Figerlowicz asserts. It also announces that the film wants to explore Claire’s reactions to the subsequent events presented in the film, not the events themselves. Shortly after her irritated greeting of Justine and Michael, Claire insists that this reception is “very much not [her] project.” She shifts the responsibility for the party’s success to the wedding planner; yet, the timescale of this sequence has already visibly asserted her as the event’s custodian since it is Claire—not the wedding planner—who first appears when Justine arrives, and it is Claire—not the camera—who establishes the couples’ lateness. Claire’s custodial role continues throughout the evening as Justine repeatedly fails to uphold her ritualistic duties as a bride. When Justine first tells Claire that she is struggling with the reception, Claire instructs her not to tell Michael. Essentially, Claire implicitly tells

Justine to fake it or, in Butlerian terms, to adopt a “drag” identity—that is, an identity which is “appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done . . . a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself” (Butler 1713). Justine repeatedly fails to imitate happiness while Claire repeatedly tries to cover up Justine’s failures. In this way, both women construct their identities along Butlerian performative lines—that is, through repeated actions.¹⁶ However, it is Claire who is not only the Butlerian melancholic, but also the Butlerian ‘performer’ since she constructs an identity through repetition; whereas, Justine is a kind of Butlerian mutation—she is an anti-performer, a person who repeatedly fails to construct an identity.

The cutting of the wedding cake is the most visibly clear and revealing ritual failure in establishing the dichotomy between Justine and Claire. This scene takes place immediately after Justine admits to Claire that she is “trudging through” the reception. The camera starts the sequence with a close-up of Michael’s hand holding a cake knife and server. The only sound is the indistinct murmuring of party guests who have gathered around the cake. The camera cuts to Michael’s face. He holds his hands together in front of his body in a posture of patience as he looks out into the crowd. The camera then cuts to Claire who awkwardly smiles and uncomfortably fiddles with the itinerary sheet she’s had since she first appeared in the film. There is still no sound but the murmuring crowd and no sign of Justine. The camera pans over to the crowd behind Claire—a group who aren’t speaking or smiling despite the sounds of audible indistinct chatter. Finally, the camera cuts to Justine who is taking a bath with a look of complete

¹⁶ See note 11

neutrality on her face. The significance of this sequence is that the discomfort both Michael and Claire exhibit is a result of their being watched by a crowd they are failing to appease. The crowd is present to watch and by watching legitimize Justine and Michael's marriage when they share the first piece of the wedding cake. However, since Justine isn't present, the crowd is left to observe awkwardly as Michael and his sister-in-law attempt to be patient. Michael and Claire cannot perform their ritualistic duties in this moment because an integral member of the performance is absent. The juxtaposition of Claire's visible discomfort with Justine's blankness in the tub captures the significance of the ritual for Claire and its insignificance for Justine. Justine's and Claire's mother (Charlotte Rampling) captures the relationship between the two women aptly when she states to Justine, "your sister, it seems, is somewhat bewitched by you."

A.O. Scott describes the differences between the two sisters as a matter of spontaneity: "[c]ompared with the humorless, grimly responsible Claire, Justine is impulsive, self-indulgent and charming: the flighty grasshopper to her sister's responsible, dutiful ant" (Scott). Justine's impulsiveness leads to her choosing to end her marriage to Michael before the wedding night is over. This is the last straw in a series of missteps and failures throughout the night that leads Claire to tell Justine, "sometimes I hate you so much." As the "responsible, dutiful ant" Claire can't fathom Justine's seemingly selfish, nonconforming behavior (Scott). Figlerowicz describes Claire's perspective of Justine's actions as "self-indulgent": "Justine bucks under her guests' expectations . . . The greater the gifts Justine receives . . . the more self-indulgent she seems in morosely rejecting them" (Figlerowicz 23). However, Justine's behavior can only be seen as "self-indulgent" through Claire's perception of the reception as a

“ritual.” For Claire, the entire party is not for Justine, it’s about Justine honoring her family and friends, and expanding her family. If Justine doesn’t complete the rituals required of her, then Justine’s and Claire’s potential and current family will be in jeopardy. However, the reason Justine doesn’t make these decisions is *not* that she is self-absorbed in this way; instead, she rejects the ritual of the event because she can’t bear to participate in them—the attention and the spectacle are too much for her and she can’t physically or emotionally go through with it.

Justine shuts down by the end of the evening, culminating in a sequence of her standing at a balcony overlooking a crowd of happy guests waiting for her to throw her bouquet. The sequence starts with a point-of-view shot of Justine’s perspective as she looks down at the guests. The next shot shows a medium, hand-cam shot of Justine looking morosely down at the crowd. This unsteady shot then tilts down and focuses on the bouquet. The next shot is from the crowd’s perspective looking up at Justine and Michael. Justine freezes with a dour expression on her face. After a strained pause, Claire walks up to Justine, grabs the bouquet from her, and drops it into the crowd of guests who give a cheer. This sequence illustrates Justine’s cumulative performative collapse. She cannot perform the basic rituals of a bride. This sequence also confirms Claire’s performative identity as a custodian of order. Claire understands that Justine’s actions will cause the event to fall into disarray. So, she acts in Justine’s stead in an attempt to uphold order. Despite Claire’s actions, the event still ends in catastrophe. In this way, the film foreshadows the ultimately downfall of her family, the end of her performative identity.

This first section of the film ends with Claire's unconscious admission about the triviality of her performative identity as the custodian of her family in the face of the loss of her family. The wedding planner (Udo Kier) had set up a jar full of white beans in the lobby of the house. As guests arrived, they were to submit a guess as to the number of beans in the jar in the hopes of winning some prize. After storming away from Justine, Claire enters the house presumably to go to bed. On her way, the wedding planner and the butler (Jesper Christensen) stop her to tell her that the final count of the beans has been confirmed—"six-hundred and seventy-eight." The wedding planner tells Claire that "None of the guests got it right . . . some were pretty close, but no one guessed right." Claire responds with the following statement: "incredible . . . incredibly trivial." While this contest is a small part of the event, it is only "trivial" to Claire because the purpose of the night—the extension of her family—has not been accomplished. If the reception hadn't gone so poorly, this contest would have been just as significant as any of the other rituals of the evening. Therefore, though she doesn't realize it at this moment, Claire is aware that the trappings of order—like her performative identity—become less important in the wake of greater losses. In this way, her response to the ensuing end of the world is all the more ironic as she disregards the implications of the coming apocalypse in order to keep up her role as the guardian of her family.

The second section of *Melancholia*—"Claire"—focuses on Claire's anxiety about the potential collision of Melancholia and the Earth. This section opens with two conflicts between Claire and her husband John (Kiefer Sutherland), which reveal this anxiety. Justine is coming to stay with Claire and John because, as Claire puts it, "she's ill." Justine's depression has worsened to the point where she can no longer take care of

herself. John thinks Justine is a “bad influence on [Claire] and Leo,” the couples’ young son (Cameron Spurr). John starts to walk away from the argument when he asks Claire if she has “been going online again.” This question seems unrelated to the previous conflict until Claire looks down and states that she’s “afraid of that stupid planet.” From the context, “going online” means looking at information about the chance that Melancholia will collide with Earth. Furthermore, this moment shows that Claire wants Justine to come stay with them not only because she’s suffering from depression, but also because Claire is worried that the end is near. This sparks the second conflict within this scene as John tries calmly to assuage Claire’s concern by insisting that Melancholia will not collide with Earth. John claims that Melancholia will simply “fly by” the Earth, which will be a beautiful scene to observe. In fact, he explains, “this is going to be the most amazing experience we will have in our lives.”

The rest of this section of *Melancholia* focuses on the growth of this second conflict between John and Claire as Melancholia moves closer to the Earth. On the outset John takes the position that Melancholia is harmless while Claire takes the more skeptical position. However, it is important to note that in this section of the film both take precautionary measures in case disaster does strike. John buys boxes of supplies “in case Melancholia gets really close,” or so he justifies his hypocrisy to Justine who witnesses him bringing in the supplies. He asks Justine not to tell Claire about his actions because “she gets anxious so easily,” not because it would reveal that he isn’t completely certain in his belief that they will be safe. Claire, as noted earlier, buys suicide pills after John brings in his supplies. John catches her securing them in a locked drawer and asks, “do you plan to kill us all? Maybe I should take them.” Claire shoots back vehemently

stating, “don’t you [John] touch them.” The pills are Claire’s last resort to maintain control of her family’s continuity—without the pills, Claire would have no control over her audience’s death. Instead, they would simply be taken by a world that grows rapidly more threatening and ominous each day.

Throughout the second section of *Melancholia*, Claire repeats several actions that reaffirm her custodial performative identity, and establish her family as the audience of that identity: namely, she takes care of Justine and Leo in a variety of ways. The repetition of this action is significant in establishing Claire’s performative identity because, as I note throughout this thesis, repeated actions are the only ‘defining’ actions in Butlerian performativity. Butler states, “[t]he first point to understand about performativity is what it is not: identities are not made in a single moment in time . . . [t]hey are made again and again” (Butler 116). Here Butler explicates the repetitive nature of the actions that comprise performative identities. Applying this Butlerian perspective, the actions that Claire repeats make up her identity (same goes for Randy, Nina, the man, James, and Tommy). So the custodial actions she repeats time and time again with Justine and Leo—cooking for them, helping them bathe, putting them to bed—performatively construct her identity in the sense that they occur in numerous instances over time. The first section of the film establishes Claire’s custodial identity as focused on expanding her family through Justine’s marriage; the second section of the film reiterates Claire’s identity in a context where she attempts to preserve and control the continuity of the family she already has. Importantly, Claire’s decision to buy the suicide pills can be seen as an extension of that identity: if her family is going to end, she wants

to hold onto a semblance of control, even if the only control she can have is providing a peaceful end.

During the last two days before *Melancholia* collides with the Earth, Claire's anxiety and panic become overwhelming as she begins to realize that her family and her performative identity are seriously threatened. Her family (and audience), which she works so hard to maintain, begins to slip from her when she tells Justine she's ready to help her bathe. Justine informs her that she has already done so without assistance. Immediately after this development, Claire launches into a speech about how the butler didn't come to the house that day: "You [Justine] see, it's never happened before that he didn't come into work without giving us notice." Justine asks if he has a family and suggests that "maybe this is a time he needs to be with them." Put another way, the end of the world isn't a time for Claire to worry about something so trivial. Claire and Justine's conversation in this moment exposes how Claire's calm exterior vanishes at the same time Justine regains the capacity to take care of herself. This exchange reveals a key distinction between Claire, who is constantly recreating her custodial identity, and Justine, who fails to construct any performative identity whatsoever: namely, the apocalypse delegitimizes Claire's performative identity just as it provides Justine with a source of relief. Peter Bradshaw in his review of *Melancholia* for *The Guardian* writes: "[i]t is Claire, supposedly the calm one, who succumbs to hyperventilating panic; for depressive Justine, the apocalypse is an ecstatic relief" (Bradshaw). Justine embraces the apocalypse because it signifies a cessation from the rituals of life. Unfortunately for Claire, this cessation renders her performative identity superfluous.

Melancholia presents Justine's acceptance of the end of the world as—in A.O. Scott's words—"more graceful" than Claire's pragmatism (Scott). After it becomes clear that Melancholia will collide with the Earth, Claire's practical measures are undone: she is unable to give the suicide pills to her family because John takes them all for himself. In this way, Claire's performative identity does nothing but allow her husband to avoid having to face his prediction's failure. Thus, John's consumption of the pills demonstrates the uselessness of Claire's performative identity. Significantly, in the end, it is Justine who seems collected and in control. She calmly takes care of Claire, who weeps uncontrollably, and Leo, who is blissfully ignorant, through the last few moments of their lives. She has Leo construct a crude tent made of sticks—what she calls "the magic cave"—which she tells him will protect them from the effects of Melancholia's collision with the Earth. The ramshackle structure Leo constructs is a symbol of the Butlerian performative identity: it is a haphazard aggregate of repeated components—in the case of Leo's tent, sticks—that can only superficially liberate its occupant from her corporeal existence. Moreover, it is only functional in the sense that its creator and some legitimizing observer believe it to be so. As Melancholia barrels into the Earth destroying the structure along with Claire, Justine, and Leo, the film shows that "social constructs" like performative identities cannot exist without the observing "public"—that is, without an audience (Butler 526).

The Fountain: Tommy Creo

The Fountain presents itself as a powerful love story pondering the problem of mortality and eternal love. Tommy and Izzie are in love with each other, but Izzie's aggressive brain tumor dominates their relationship. Tommy, a cancer researcher, spends all of his time and energy searching for a cure to save Izzie because he can't bear the thought of living without her. In this way, Tommy constructs his identity as the preserver and savior of their love. Because he can't accept the possibility of life without Izzie, Tommy depends on that role not only to try to save Izzie, but also to preserve himself. In this way, Tommy's dependence on his performative identity forces him to spend his time in the lab trying to save Izzie instead of spending his time with her. In the end, Tommy's performative identity fails to save Izzie. The film uses two secondary plotlines to demonstrate both how Izzie knows Tommy will fail, and how Tommy's failure destroys his performative identity. According to the film, the prospect of the death of his wife—the audience of his performative identity—is an existential threat to Tommy since he can no longer construct his identity performatively if she is gone. Thus, Tommy's noble mission to save his wife is also a selfish quest to preserve his own identity.

Early in the film, Izzie describes how a Mayan guide she traveled with once told her that his father had a tree planted over his grave so he could grow into the tree and become a part of the living world again—how death was his “road to awe”, his way to overcome his transient corporeal existence. Izzie subscribes to this doctrine, which glorifies the necessary terminus of life in death. Significantly, Izzie's subscription to this idea angers Tommy who constructs an identity in a Butlerian fashion—that is, he constructs his identity performatively. However, this performative construction depends

upon Izzie's legitimization, which, in turn, requires her to be alive. Butler's theory of the performative construction of identity asserts itself as a means to overcome the oppressive biological essentialism entailed in previous theories of human identity. For Butler, the social construction of identity through performativity liberates the person from the "normalizing categories of oppressive structures" used by "regulatory regimes" (Butler 1707). Here Butler intends to disrupt the concretizing nature of any essentialist identity theory and describe identity as non-essential, a point I will describe in more depth shortly.¹⁷ Tommy's response to Izzie's acceptance of her death, however, shows how his construction of identity is undone in her death. In this way, *The Fountain* demonstrates that the Butlerian performative construction of identity is intrinsically dependent upon the existence of a specific audience to confirm that identity.

As noted in the preceding analyses of Nina's, Randy's, He's, James's, and Claire's performative identities, the defining factors for Tommy's performative identity—in Butler's understanding of performativity—are the actions he repeats. That is, for Butler, performative identities are social constructs that are repeatedly established and instantiated through actions that are "effected with the strategic aim of maintaining" the identity itself (Butler 526). In the film, the only actions Tommy repeats are actions intended to cure Izzie's cancer. The film captures the repetition of one specific action—Tommy choosing to stay at the lab instead of going for a walk with Izzie—by showing the same exact sequence three separate times in the film. The sequence shows Tommy working at his desk in the lab. Izzie comes in and asks Tommy to "take a walk with

¹⁷ This point is also noted in the introduction. See page iv for a more thorough description of Butler's project in this regard.

[her].” Tommy says he can’t because he’s got a lot of work to do. When Izzie insists by telling him “it’s the first snow,” Tommy replies angrily and exasperatedly stating, “please Izzie.” After this seething response, Izzie walks away, not unhappy but disappointed.

Tommy realizes his rudeness and tries to chase after her, but his lab assistant stops him to inform him that he needs to be in surgery. The sequence ends here. Because this scene is repeated three times in *The Fountain*, it cinematically demonstrates how Tommy constructs his performative identity as a crusader for Izzie’s health. Moreover, it highlights how Tommy’s performative identity is deeply tied to Izzie’s survival.

The film contains three different plotlines. The summary above describes the main plotline in the film; however, there are two thematically related, but otherwise distinct stories in the film. One story concerns a conquistador, Tomás, searching for the tree of life. The other focuses on a lonely space traveler, Tom, who takes care of a dying tree. These two additional stories are born out of a writing project Izzie initiates and Tommy finishes. The conquistador story is Izzie’s contribution to the project, and the space traveler story is Tommy’s. Izzie, when she realizes she is going to die, instructs Tommy to “finish it [her story].” Tommy claims he doesn’t know how it ends, and implies that he cannot complete it. The film never shows him working on it. However, the film reveals that his section—the one involving the space traveler—does in fact conclude the project as Tomás discovering the tree of life concludes Izzie’s section without any mention or description of Tom and his mission.

The Fountain intercuts these three stories in a rhythmic pattern that decentralizes the present, and destabilizes the chronological order of the past and the future. Izzie’s conquistador storyline takes place in the sixteenth century and so represents the past. The

main storyline concerning Izzie's illness and Tommy's attempt to cure her takes place in the early twenty-first century and so represents the present. Tommy's space traveler storyline takes place in the twenty-sixth century and so represents the future. Importantly, Hugh Jackman, (who plays Tommy, Tomás, and Tom) is the only actor who appears in all three sections. In this way, the film characterizes Tommy in a disrupted fashion that mirrors the Butlerian nature of his identity construction¹⁸. A.O. Scott in his review for the *New York Times* describes the film's structure as "a circular, swirling pattern that suggests a mandala or a Mayan calendar . . . Like a story by Jorge Luis Borges, *The Fountain* dispenses with everyday assumptions about time, space and causality and tries to replace the prose of narrative cinema with a poetic language of rhyming images and visual metaphors" (Scott). Scott's analysis is accurate for the overall presentation of the film as the narrative alternates between storylines in a cyclical way that disrupts the normal passage of time by blending the storylines into one another. Yet, Scott's analysis is incorrect in regards to the temporality of the events in the storylines when examined in isolation. The primary plotline begins with Izzie alive and living at home, and ends with Izzie dead after succumbing to her cancer in the hospital. Thus, it is strictly chronological. Izzie's secondary conquistador plot begins at its penultimate scene, then reverts to its first scene and continues in a chronological arc. As a result, it only contains one scene presented non-chronologically. The film presents Tommy's secondary space traveler plot in a strictly chronological way despite its being the most fantastical storyline.

¹⁸ As I noted chapter one and note 10, Butler states identity is "instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous" (Butler 179).

This arc begins with the space traveler's orb¹⁹ moving towards the nebula Xibalba, and ends with him reaching the nebula. Therefore, the film as a whole is nonlinear and circular, but the individual plotlines themselves are, for the most part, linear and chronological.

The visual repetition of Jackman playing all three men contributes to the construction of Tommy's performative identity in the Butlerian sense. Butler's theory contends that the construction of identity takes place in repeated, stylized, visually observable acts. In *The Fountain*, the repetition of the same actor (albeit in different outfits and hairstyles) as three different characters facilitates the conflation of those three characters' identities, and, furthermore, allows the performative identity of the main character, Tommy, to contain attributes of the other two. In his essay "Performativity in Buñuel's 'The Phantom of Liberty' and 'The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,'" Ibon Izurieta applies Butler's understanding of performativity to early surrealist film. Izurieta states that Butlerian performativity renders "identity and individuality as non-essential entities" (Izurieta 754). According to Izurieta, Butlerian performativity removes the naturalness of identity. He asserts that, for Butler, identity is an effect created through a person's actions and the context in which those actions occur, and is not an *a priori* feature of the person. Izurieta describes how a character's identity in film is constructed in a similarly non-essential fashion:

Devoid of speech, the *mise-en-scene* and the semiotics of camera shots and angles materialize immediately the identity of the characters portrayed. The characters are materialized and are even interpellated visually and semiotically into specific individuals.

¹⁹ The means by which he travels.

Their sign of identity, through the costuming and visual appearance of normative categories that are iterated in the scene, establishes who they are. The materialization of their identities is further consolidated by the director's vision and by the enactment of the actor/actress. (Izurieta 756)

Izurieta essentially argues that the identity of filmic characters, as a “non-essential” entity, is a *post facto* product of the mechanical and stylistic features of the film itself. In this way, Tommy, Tom, and Tomás’s individual identities are cinematically compromised because they are enacted by the same actor. They are neither “interpellated visually” nor “semiotically” into “specific individuals” because they are visually identical and play the same role—the lover—in each storyline (Izurieta 756). As a result, the film literalizes the Butlerian construction of identity in creating these three men in a disrupted, yet visually similar way. In doing so, the film stylistically embodies the constructed nature of Tomás and Tom as products of Izzie and Tommy, respectively, as well as Tommy’s construction of his performative identity as Izzie’s lover and guardian.

The Fountain’s visual conflation of Tommy with Tomás and Tom allows each secondary plotline to alter the significance of the main plotline. Additionally, the fact that these secondary plotlines are literally created within the main plotline by Izzie and Tommy encourages a deconstructive reading of the secondary plotlines. Izzie’s conquistador plotline describes how she perceives Tommy’s mission to save her as courageous, but fundamentally misguided. Tommy’s space-traveler plotline reveals how Tommy’s performative identity dies with Izzie.

Izzie’s secondary plotline about the conquistador, Tomás, emphasizes her acceptance that Tommy’s improbable mission to save her will fail. Throughout Izzie’s work, she characterizes Tomás (and so Tommy) as a passionate, determined, yet

profoundly and harmfully mistaken man. In the story, Tomás is charged by Queen Isabella (Rachel Weisz²⁰) with the task of finding the ‘tree of life’ in New Spain (South America) in order to “deliver Spain from bondage.” The Queen tells Tomás that if he succeeds she will marry him. He accepts her charge and leaves her and Spain behind. Like Tommy, Tomás fights for his loves—his Queen and country—*in absentia*. Additionally, both Tommy and Tomás fail. Izzie dies before Tommy can save her, and although he finds the tree of life, Tomás is unable to retrieve it for the Queen. Moreover, both men’s impetus to act is to preserve the fragile continuity of their weakened or mortally threatened loves—the women who legitimize their missions and hence their performative identities. Importantly, Tomás is a world away from the woman he loves attempting to complete a mission that only seems tenuously related to its intended effect. In this way, the gulf between Tomás and the Queen figuratively represents Izzie’s perception of the distance between Tommy and her. Additionally, the uselessness of Tomás’s mission signifies her opinion of Tommy’s work as a kind of symbolic gesture with no chance of tangible success. The fact is Izzie is ready to die. She wants to spend her last days with Tommy, the man she loves, but he cannot see this nor can he accept this. Filip Vukcevic writes in a review of the film for *IGN* that Tommy “is wholly committed to his goal: he will not let Izzie die. Tragically, he forsakes the few, final moments that they have together for more time in his lab . . . He is a man driven by a passion so consuming that it hollows him out, filling the whole of him” (Vukcevic). Vukcevic’s description of Tommy’s passion as “consuming” highlights the anxiety behind it: Tommy

²⁰ Just as Hugh Jackman plays Tommy, Tomás, and Tom, Rachel Weisz plays Izzie and Queen Isabella. Significantly, the film’s visual repetition of Weisz in these roles doesn’t match its repetition of Jackman because it doesn’t include her in the space-traveler plot. Her visual repetition is cut short by Izzie’s death.

is so focused on saving Izzie's life because losing her means losing the identity he has constructs through her. He doesn't recognize that she is something other than the audience for her performative identity: he doesn't see that she is lonely and desperate to have him with her as her husband. She playfully calls Tommy "my conquistador", but there is a strained admission behind this moniker. Tommy is always elsewhere fighting battles *for* Izzie; he isn't *with* her.

Tommy's space traveler plotline allegorically presents the futility of his attempts to save Izzie, and emphasizes how Izzie's death causes the disintegration of his performative identity. Tom is a space traveler caring for a dying tree as they both journey towards a nebula that will soon explode. Considering that Tommy plants a tree above Izzie's grave as well as the relationship in Tomás's quest between a tree and saving his love, it is clear the tree in this story signifies Tommy's love—in other words, Izzie. Tom attempts to keep the tree alive, but he fails. In this way, Tom metaphorically represents Tommy's performative identity. Unlike Tommy in the main plotline, Tom dies with the tree. He travels to Xibalba with the dead tree where the nebula finally explodes, consuming the tree's remains and him. In this way, Tommy's secondary plotline links Izzie's death to the end of his identity as her "conquistador." However, even in this mediated form, Tommy doesn't want to accept this consequence. In his secondary plotline, the image of Izzie interrupts the narrative as Tom's hallucination. Tom angrily shouts at her image "leave me alone." Hence, neither Tommy nor Tom wants to face the

reality that Izzie is dying. For Tommy, Tom's death represents the end of his performative identity as well as the end of his relationship with Izzie²¹.

Returning to the circular nature of *The Fountain's* narrative structure, the film repeatedly uses the circle as a motif of both human mortality and the tangible representation of the relationship between Tommy's performative identity and his familial diegetic audience. The film's opening montage establishes the thematic significance of circles. The opening shot depicts a hand writing the lines of Genesis wherein God casts Adam and Eve from Eden and places a cherub with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life on beige paper. This shot quickly dissolves into two consecutive images. The first image contains the lines of scriptures, but with concentric circles around it. The concentric circles, which surround the words, look like the rings of a tree. It is as if the camera presents a cross-section of the tree, and these lines of scripture are at its heart. This reading provides important insight into the impossibility of Tommy's attempts to prevent Izzie's death because these lines of scripture finalize humanity's mortality—humans will never be immortal because God cast them out of Eden. The second image also has the lines of scripture superimposed on it. This image depicts a globular blue jewel surrounded by golden circles. Initially, the image is ambiguous, but the camera

²¹ The fact that losing Izzie is equally traumatic for Tommy is significant because it distinguishes his performative identity from the man in *Antichrist's*. Both Tommy and the man use their medical expertise to assist their sick wives, and so the two men appear similar. However, the man chooses to treat his wife because of his occupational hubris—his wife could just have easily stayed in the hospital and continued to take her medication. In Tommy's case, he is the leader of a team of cancer researchers, and he doesn't attempt to directly treat his wife. He tries to find a cure for her, but he still insists that she sees her own doctor, and he attempts to heed her doctor's orders. In these ways, while they have similar kinds of projects (healing their wives), the man from *Antichrist* and Tommy approach their work from very different places. Tommy fears that he will lose his wife and his performative identity; the man uses his wife's illness to reconstruct his performative identity. For Tommy, Izzie is his performative identity's audience; for the man, his wife is part of the performance.

zooms out to reveal it is the center of golden mandala with a crucifix on top of it. The shrine unites the planetary image of the jewel with the iconography of the cross. The next several shots reveal Tomás and several other conquistadors praying before the mandala-crucifix. Later on, Tomás takes out a small leather pouch and smells it causing the film's score to grow louder as Tomás's face dissolves away to reveal the Queen smiling with wide shining eyes, and circular earrings. This shot cuts to Tomás who accepts a ring from the Queen. The camera then cuts to a crane shot above the heads of the Queen and Tomás as Tomás walks away revealing a circular pattern on the floor which dissolves back to the mandala-crucifix. The camera then shows Tomás take the ring out of the leather pouch. After looking quickly back at the shrine, he hesitates then puts the ring back in the pouch. These last few images of the film's opening sequence highlight the symbolic value of circles as intermediaries for the sources of social constructs like myths, religion, and performative identities. The opening concentric circles literally internalize scripture to show how mortality gives rise to the two mythological trees in the film, which transcend the human condition (the tree of life, and the tree which symbolizes Izzie). The mandala-crucifix connects religion and the mystery of the cosmos. Ultimately and most importantly, the ring connects two separated lovers, Tomás and the Queen, and legitimizes the former's quest.

In *The Fountain*, each man in the three storylines engages with a ring in a different way; however, the ring always represents the man's connection to his *raison d'être*. In the film's main storyline, Tommy loses his wedding ring during an experimental surgery in which he fails to find a cure for Izzie. This moment figuratively foreshadows how Tommy will lose Izzie's support and confirmation of his performative

identity because she is going to die. In Izzie's conquistador storyline, Tomás has a ring that he never wears. The Queen instructs Tomás to put on the ring when he reaches Eden; however, he fails to put on the ring because the tree of life consumes him during a strange, supernatural death sequence. In this way, Tomás's relationship with the Queen is never fully established. Applying Izzie's view of her relationship with Tommy to this storyline, it is clear that Izzie believes Tommy's mission to save her consumes him, and precludes him from maintaining the continuity of their love without her. In Tommy's space traveler storyline, Tom has a ring tattooed on his finger in addition to numerous rings and circles tattooed along his arm which signify the passage of time. The permanence and embodied nature of Tom's tattooed ring suggest his relationship is similarly permanent. In this way, Tom and the tree—Tommy's performative identity and Izzie—are viscerally connected: without the tree, Tom cannot exist; without Izzie, Tommy can't successfully construct his performative identity.

Coda: A Positive Perspective on the Future of Butlerian Performativity

This thesis has explored the nature of the relationship between the performative construction of identity and audience. The most important conclusion this investigation has led to is the profound dependence that performative identities have on audiences—that is, observing agents who confirm or reject the authenticity or reality of those performative constructs. In showing this, this thesis has levied a measured critique of Judith Butler’s articulation of performativity. According to the robust critical theory developed through the six twenty-first century films I have examined, Butler has not fully integrated and evaluated the role of ‘the audience’ in the performative construction of identity.

At this point, it is helpful to return to Butler’s comparison of seeing a transvestite on stage with seeing a transvestite on a bus, which was first analyzed in the introduction. Butler uses this example in her work to distinguish her understanding of performativity from theatrical performativity. In her conception, the transvestite on the stage does not construct an identity performatively, whereas the transvestite on a bus does. Butler writes:

Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. (Butler 527)

For Butler, the transvestite in the first context can be de-realized because of the assumption of the falsity of a person’s actions on the stage. However, the transvestite on the bus cannot—or, at least, is not—de-realized in this way because a person’s actions in the mundane social environment entails the assumption of truth. In this way, Butler implicitly acknowledges the transformative power of the audience, or the observing agent. In her example, it isn’t the transvestite whose performance changes; it is the observing

party whose context changes. Thus, in this example, Butler expresses—albeit indirectly—that the burden of confirming and a legitimizing performative acts lies with the observer, or, applying my label, the audience.

The entailment of the audience within Butler's conception of performativity requires a more careful application and deployment of the concept. With this new conceptual baggage, performativity does not universally liberate identity. It only restructures the formulation of identity onto softer ground. Rather than enmeshing identity with a person's biological and genetic makeup, identity becomes, as Butler intended, a social construct. However, this development does not make identity so malleable as to warrant any alteration whatsoever. Moreover, the audience doesn't force individual performers to construct a perfect replica of its expectations either. In this way, the audience doesn't shape every detail of the performative identity, but has a great influence over the general nature of that identity. Importantly, this is exactly how Butler contends that identity is constructed. In her interview with Vasu Reddy, she states:

I accept neither the social determinism view nor the classical liberal one. We cannot become anything we want. . . . there is one reading of *Gender Trouble*, which suggests that a person can become one thing one day and then something radically different the next. I don't think that's true. There is another reading of *Gender Trouble* that concludes that we are fully constituted, we are fully constructed and that means that there is no freedom. I do not think that is true either . . . (Butler 119)

Butler goes on to state that these readings of her theory are “understandable misunderstandings, since they subscribe to the two oppositional moments within the framework that [she is] trying to displace” (Butler 119). In this way, what is true for Butler is that the system that constructs human autonomy as a function of human identity is false in the sense that a person's autonomy isn't a feature of her identity; her identity is

a product of her behavior no matter what degree of autonomy she has (if any). Thus, Butler explicitly describes how her theory is not devised to completely liberate identity nor is it devised to portray identity as absolute, necessary conformity. My addition of the affirming audience into the construction of the performative identity succinctly captures the subtle balance within Butler's own theory. My intervention in Butler's theory has shown that while performative identity is free from biological essentialism, it is not devoid of outside influence altogether.

It is important to note (again) that my analysis has not dismantled the power of Butler's theory on gender *per se*. As I noted in my introduction, I don't contest her theory in this way nor have I intended to. In fact, I deliberately chose not to read into the gender politics of any of the films, even in the cases where a given film such as *Black Swan* or *Antichrist* begs to be read in such a way. The goal and intention of this project is to show that many twenty-first century films have amassed a comprehensive reformulation of the performative construction of identity that addresses an area that Butler's theory didn't sufficiently address and needed to be addressed.

The implications of this thesis for future work on performative identity construction as well as on twenty-first century film are two-fold. First, Butlerian performativity functionally requires an observing agent to confirm identity as a social construct. Second, Butler's work on liberating gender is not undermined by this requirement—in fact, I believe it is strengthened because it encourages society as a whole to act collectively in liberating the gender terms 'man' and 'woman' from the static, stubborn binary ascribed by biology. In this way, the audience can have an overtly positive influence by encouraging and confirming social goods rather than social ills.

Additionally, this thesis strongly cautions the zealous, dogmatic followers of the performative construction of identity described in Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

In future analyses of both performativity and film, the dialectic structure of performativity must be properly acknowledged and incorporated. That is, the influence of the diegetic audience on the performative construction of identity can no longer be left out of the conversation. Moreover, film should be seen as the ideal medium through which to examine performativity given the innately visual nature of both (film and performativity). Therefore, as the human understanding of performativity is reshaped and revised, film analysis ought to be an integral part of the process.

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