

BITTERSWEET SENSATIONS: SPECTATORIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE
EROTIC MELODRAMA

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By

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Abstract

The erotic melodrama is a fun – and at times, captivating – subgenre by virtue of the sexually-charged relationships that it foregrounds. These relationships are portrayed as briefly-lived, exhilarating and dangerous “trips” experienced by the illicit couples that stumble into them. I argue that Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), Adrian Lyne’s *9 ½ Weeks* (1986) and Patrice Chéreau’s *Intimacy* (2001) are exemplary instances of this subgenre. These three films drew me in through the intense sensations and emotional memories they vividly evoked. This thesis was inspired by the desire to uncover and articulate how and why these films moved me. A phenomenological account of my emotional and physical investment in these three films – whereby a detailed and reflective account of my filmic experiences is developed – offers a way to clarify and express these profound filmic experiences. This singular account of filmic engagement will, in turn, provide the foundation for a more expansive, speculative account of spectatorial engagement with the erotic melodrama.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the result of having been greatly affected by three particular films: Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), Adrian Lyne's *9 1/2 Weeks* (1986), and Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* (2001). On the surface, their subject matter appealed to me: each featured the rise and fall of a sexually-charged relationship. But these films were also profound: each depicted these illicit relationships in a splendid manner. I felt "done to" by each of these films. They were deeply felt on an emotional and physical level, and I found myself completely enthralled by them. On an emotional level, these films elicited ups and downs, intrigue and disillusionment, euphoria and depression – as each of the three relationships progressed from start to finish. And on a physical level, there was an almost tangible quality to these films – I could touch them and they touched me back. It seemed clear enough to me *then* that these films were unique. There was a potency to them that I couldn't quite articulate. These films were intuitively grasped. It is, therefore, the aim of this thesis to *attempt* to articulate "what happens" in the viewing of these films – to give "voice" to the many things that are felt, experienced and essentially taken-for-granted. This aim seems closely related to the "commitments" Stanley Cavell sets himself in *The World Viewed* in relation to the films he examines, which are "first, to allow obscurities to express themselves as clearly and fervently as I could say," and "second, to be guided by the need to organize and clarify just these obscurities and just this fervor..."

¹ So, in line with Cavell's "commitments," I would begin by expressing – with equal fervor – my encounter with each of the three films, and from there, develop a speculative

¹ Stanley Cavell, "More of *The World Viewed*," in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979), 162.

account of spectatorial engagement with the erotic melodrama – the subgenre to which I argue *Last Tango in Paris*, *9 ½ Weeks*, and *Intimacy* belong. It is the aim of this thesis to develop such an account through the ideas developed by various phenomenological theorists – which will, in turn, help account for the ways *my* experience of the erotic melodrama may plausibly extend to someone else’s. In this way, the concepts developed by these theorists and philosophers will assist in clarifying the “obscurities” and richness of one’s potential engagement with these films.

But how does one begin to write about their experience of film? Of what potential value is the spectatorial account developed in this thesis? With regards to the first question, it seems necessary to address the distinction between the “viewer” and the “spectator” which, according to such film theorists as Michele Aaron, are not the same thing:

The viewer, according to cultural studies, is the live, breathing, actual audience member, coming from a specific socio-historical context. This viewer exists in sharp contrast to the spectator as ‘subject’, a product of the ideological machinations of cinema, of 1970s’ film theory’s classical model of spectatorship. One could argue that bridging the seeming chasm between the spectator and the viewer represents the terrain of spectatorship studies.²

Although this problem or “chasm” that exists between the spectator and viewer will not be fully resolved within the space of this thesis, it can certainly be said that – to *some small extent* – it will be worked out insofar as I am attempting to bridge my own filmic experiences with those of *other* flesh-and-blood viewers. The account of filmic experience offered in this thesis is developed from the perspective of a flesh-and-blood female Canadian *viewer*, living in the first decade of the 21st century. As such, I have

² Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 1-2.

access to films (old and new) on VHS and DVD, and possess the necessary home viewing technology (television, VCR, DVD player) to enable a privatized viewing experience. This is the context within which I am developing this account of filmic experience. But this account goes deeper insofar as I also engage with these films on an emotional and carnal level. For instance, the three aforementioned films elicit sensory and emotional memories that render the filmic experience all the more compelling – which is to say that I meaningfully engage with these films. Thus, I will attempt to describe my experience to the best of my ability, with the aim of recapturing the richness of those viewing experiences. And from this personal experience, I intend to develop a more expansive account of the potential ways in which other viewers may engage with these films. And it is through the concepts developed by the phenomenological philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty – and his successors, Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, and Sue L. Cataldi (phenomenological theorists whose works are predicated on Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology) – that I intend to expand on this singular account. But because I am the only *actual* living, breathing viewer whose filmic experience is being taken into account, this thesis will develop a *speculative* account of the ways in which others (viewers similarly situated in the first decade of the 21st century) potentially engage with films like *Last Tango in Paris*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. Thus, a *viewer’s* account will propel an account of *spectatorial* engagement with the three aforementioned films. Sobchack expressed this very process in her explanation of a phenomenological description: “...although [a phenomenological description] may begin with a *particular* experience, its aim is to describe and explicate the *general* or *possible* structures and meanings that inform the experience and make it potentially resonant and

inhabitable for others.”³ Herein lies the potential value that this account may contain: the fact that it may resonate with and speak to the reader (or readers) – male *and* female alike. This approach contrasts with a gendered account of film spectatorship – such as that offered by a psychoanalytic approach to female film spectatorship, in which the hypothetical, “psychical” female subject is deprived of agency and subjectivity, and assumes a masochistic relationship with the cinematic image. In this vein, Mary Ann Doane points out that “in films addressed to women, spectatorial pleasure is indissociable with pain.”⁴ But even Doane expresses the desire for theories of spectatorship to move beyond the “pincers of sexual difference,” pointing out that “women spectators oscillate or alternate between masculine and feminine positions...and men are capable of this alternation as well.”⁵ Perhaps a phenomenological approach will prove effective in surpassing this gender binary and moving from a hypothetical model to a more compelling account of film spectatorship that speaks to the experience of both male and female viewers. The issue of gendered film spectatorship will be addressed in greater detail, later in the chapter. It will first be necessary, however, to provide an account of the erotic melodrama. A closer look at this subgenre and its conventions will serve to acquaint the reader with *Last Tango in Paris*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* (that is, until these films can be examined in greater depth in the following chapter).

Prior to my discovery of the “erotic melodrama” as a subgenre that properly categorizes *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks*, and *Intimacy*, these three films displayed several

³ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

common features that united them in my mind as a striking trio. It is not surprising that *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* have been dubbed the “*Last Tangos*” of their decade in reviews at the time of their release: in a sense, *Last Tango in Paris* provides a template according to which subsequent erotic melodramas can be understood. Each of the three films depicts the evolution of a briefly-lived, sexually-charged heterosexual relationship. Each film deploys the following narrative structure: a man and woman (who are either in a sanctioned relationship or are in a period of transition from a prior relationship), randomly meet in an urban setting and are immediately attracted to one another; a short-lived relationship ensues, consisting of a series of intense sexual encounters – which develops into an obsession; once the relationship impinges upon and disrupts one or both of their lives, a decision must be made to either prolong or end the relationship; while the relationship comes to its fated end, both parties are left to suffer the weighty emotional after-effects; the lives of the two parties involved will presumably never be the same, as they may never fully recover from the impact of their all-consuming affair. Slight variations on this narrative structure exist across a range of erotic melodramas dating from *Last Tango in Paris* in 1972, and ranging across European (French, Italian, British, German) and American productions.⁶ In addition to the narrative structure these three films share, their apparent quality distinguishes them from other erotic melodramas: all three films exude sophistication on the level of performance (as each possesses an outstanding cast), screenwriting, and their look – which normally indicates a higher production value. It is also true that all three films contain softcore content – as is typical of the erotic melodrama in its depiction of the illicit, anonymous heterosexual relationship. And, as

⁶ I state that the erotic melodrama dates back to *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), as it predates the film that Linda Ruth Williams proposes as the start of the erotic melodrama – namely, *Emmanuelle* (1974). The former constitutes a clear example of the erotic melodrama.

Linda Ruth Williams points out, “the softcore aesthetic has often been defined in terms of expensive-looking illusion, which marries simulated sexual content with decent scripts, passable performances... and varied sexual scenarios.”⁷ The erotic melodrama’s fusion of softcore content and “art” will be addressed in greater detail later, when tracing its historical roots.

I’d first encountered the term “erotic melodrama” in Linda Ruth Williams’s *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, a study primarily devoted to the DTV (direct-to-video) erotic thriller in contemporary American cinema.⁸ Williams devoted the final chapter of her book to a brief account of hybrid forms of the erotic thriller – in which the “erotic melodrama” (also referred to by Williams as the “sexual melodrama” and the “erotic romance”), occupied a modest portion. Williams names the mainstream films of Adrian Lyne (*9 ½ Weeks*, *Indecent Proposal* (1993), *Unfaithful* (2002)), Zalman King (*Two Moon Junction* (1988), *Wild Orchid* (1990), *Red Shoe Diaries* (1992)), and Sam Pillsbury (*Zandalee* (1991)) as prime examples of the erotic melodrama – but I would argue that the subgenre extends beyond these films and filmmakers (to include such films as *Last Tango in Paris* and *Intimacy*, for example). As a subset of the erotic thriller, Williams points out that the erotic melodrama has much in common with it, including its willingness to “push sexual spectacle to a softcore limit,” while making a distinction

⁷ Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 331.

⁸ It should be noted that DTV signals the role that technological developments (VHS and DVD formats, home viewing technology, etc.) and shifting distribution practices (cable and satellite TV, the Internet, and so on) have played in facilitating increasingly privatized viewing experiences of sexually explicit films. The fundamental role that these technological advancements have played in the shift from public to private viewing practices will be addressed in greater detail in the development of this thesis.

between the two subgenres by adding that the erotic melodrama, unlike the erotic thriller, contains “little criminal *noirishness*... erotic melodramas take romance as their prime coordinates” whereas “erotic thrillers are tainted by porn.”⁹ These sexual spectacles, which constitute a common feature of both subgenres, are prompted by the female sexual quest.¹⁰ Although the female sexual quest is a prominent feature of both subgenres, sex is often fused with crime in the erotic thriller – whereas, erotic melodramas “ditch the murder-mystery of the erotic thriller in favour of a romanticized female sexual quest, so that the woman’s story usually rests on a ‘will she/won’t she?’ issue regarding partners and choices.”¹¹ Williams points out that by foregrounding the heroine’s point of view throughout her quest for sexual fulfillment, as well as tending towards recurring themes of choice and sacrifice, the erotic melodrama is shown to have a great deal in common with the woman’s film of the 1940s. As such, the woman’s film of the 1940s can be seen as a predecessor to the erotic melodrama. It will thus be useful to proceed with a closer look at the commonalities that link the erotic melodrama with the woman’s film of the 1940s, beginning with their thematic tendencies.

Mary Ann Doane references Molly Haskell’s claim that the themes of the woman’s film of the 1940s can be broken down into four categories: sacrifice, affliction, choice, and competition. This ‘sacrifice’ can manifest itself in the woman’s film of the 1940s in one of the following ways: the heroine’s self-sacrifice for her children; the sacrifice of her marriage for her lover; her lover for her marriage or for his own welfare;

⁹ Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 390.

¹⁰ Also referred to as the “awakening-sexuality model” in David Andrews’s *Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in its Contexts*. This model is predicated on the awakening of female sexual desire, and stems from a European art film tradition.

¹¹ Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 129.

her career for love; or love for her career.¹² ‘Choice’, according to Haskell, manifests in the woman’s film of the 1940s as a choice between two male suitors. These themes are reflected in the erotic melodrama when the heroine typically decides to walk away – and essentially free herself – from her all-consuming affair. Although the relationship is sexually-driven in the beginning, and continues over a series of sexual encounters, it inevitably evolves into something that is increasingly emotionally complex. The relationship inevitably takes its emotional (and sometimes physical) toll on both parties. As the illicit relationship progresses, everything in the heroine’s life falls into disarray. As it gains in emotional complexity, it becomes increasingly difficult for the heroine to focus and maintain balance in her life. The appeal and energy of the illicit relationship eventually gives way to exhaustion and disillusionment. This downward spiral is echoed in an interview with Bertolucci, in which he says: “Every sexual relationship is condemned. It is condemned to lose its purity, its animal nature; sex becomes an instrument for saying other things... Every relationship is condemned to change, anyway.”¹³ In the case of *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks*, for instance, the heroine is drawn to her illicit partner’s mystery and intensity, making their encounters exhilarating in the beginning. But when this exhilaration gives way to emotional exhaustion, and the heroine becomes increasingly disenchanted with her illicit partner and their relationship – which have consumed her to the point of not being able to focus on anything or anyone else – she chooses to break free, to reclaim her life and salvage her well-being. In such cases, the heroine sacrifices her lover and source of sexual adventure. There are, of course, variations on these choices and sacrifices in other examples of the erotic melodrama,

¹² Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 35.

¹³ Gideon Bachmann, “Every Sexual Relationship is Condemned: An Interview with Bernardo Bertolucci,” *Film Quarterly* 26 (1973): 7-8.

including the heroine's choice to end the illicit relationship through self-sacrifice (*Zandalee, Red Shoe Diaries*), or simply choose to end it and return to their sanctioned partners and relationships (as in *Intimacy* and *Unfaithful*). Conversely, the heroine may choose to *prolong* the illicit relationship, which *could* mean sacrificing her sanctioned partner (*Two Moon Junction, Wild Orchid, Lie With Me* (2005)). A notable difference between the woman's film of the 1940s and the erotic melodrama seems to be that the heroine can choose *herself* over her sanctioned and illicit partners – or, for that matter, self-sacrifice: in *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* the heroine chooses to salvage herself, her *own* well-being and autonomy. In the following excerpt, Williams distinguishes the erotic melodrama from the woman's film of the 1940s:

Various discussions [of the woman's film of the 1940s] posit an emphasis on female suffering and familial relationships, the dichotomy between bondage and freedom, domesticity and choice, and the undermining or reinforcement of stereotypes. However, the erotically charged female sexual quest film replaces suffering with desire, overlapping with romance in its focus on the dangerous enticements of unknown sexual pleasures.¹⁴

I would argue that desire is often fused with a degree of suffering in the erotic melodrama, and does not necessarily replace it. This is particularly evident in examples where the heroine eventually decides to end her affair; to sacrifice her lover for her sanctioned partner. In such cases (particularly in adultery films¹⁵ -- *Unfaithful*), her sexual encounters are fused with a heavy sense of guilt, and this guilt compels her to abandon the relationship – and in extreme cases, leads to her self-destruction. I would

¹⁴ Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 390.

¹⁵ Tanya Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 123. Krzywinska's description of the "adultery narrative" is reminiscent of the description provided by Linda Ruth Williams of the erotic melodrama – and, in fact, Krzywinska makes reference to many of the same titles, including *Zandalee* and *Unfaithful*. The adultery narrative centers on an illicit relationship, which "demonstrate overtly or covertly the costliness of both fidelity and infidelity, and their impact on self-identity." She breaks the adultery narrative down as follows: The Meeting; The Affair; The Choice or Crisis; and The Ending.

also argue that the erotic melodrama is not beyond female stereotypes, as many of its heroines assume the roles of wives and nurturers, and exude an idealized mode of femininity.

It is not possible to address the commonalities between the woman's film of the 1940s and the erotic melodrama without also acknowledging that both subgenres are/were geared towards female audiences. In her study of the woman's film of the 1940s, Mary Ann Doane points out that in that decade of Hollywood filmmaking, film producers assumed that film audiences would be predominantly female, as many young men had gone to serve in the Second World War.¹⁶ Thus, the anticipation of female audiences in the 1940s resulted in an increased number of films that addressed women – which, in turn, became increasingly central to the film industry.¹⁷ Similarly, roughly forty years later, on the cusp of the video age (late 1970s) when home viewing technology and cable TV provided privatized alternatives to cinemagoing, women were being targeted as primary household consumers of softcore erotic content.¹⁸ It was thought that this appeal to female audiences could be achieved through the feminization of both subgenres. The following strategies were incorporated: the commodification of femininity; the foregrounding of female subjectivity; the foregrounding of “feminine” problems; and a “feminine” aesthetic.

¹⁶ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ David Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in Its Contexts* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), 86. Again, the role that technological advancements have played in the shift from public to private viewing practices as well as in the *types* of films produced and distributed (with increasingly explicit sexual content) will be addressed in greater detail in the development of this thesis.

Doane notes that the commodification of femininity in the woman's film was manifested in the glamour of female stars, who also glamorized objects in the *mise-en-scène*, and instilled in the female "spectator-consumer" the desire to buy a "proposed ideal of feminine beauty."¹⁹ Doane adds that this commodification of femininity also entailed a space in which the ideal female body could be displayed: for instance, a "decked-out" home with nice furniture and appliances.²⁰ David Andrews elaborates on how, in the feminization of softcore genres in the age of video and cable TV, consumerist values were prompted through the 'postfeminist'²¹ tie-in of female agency with "constant body maintenance"²² – perpetuating this notion of traditional femininity. Both Doane and Andrews identify this commodification of femininity as instilling within the female "spectator-consumer" a false sense of agency and choice. Both subgenres are also feminized through their consistent efforts to incorporate female subjectivity – and this is notably achieved by foregrounding the heroine's point of view. Other cinematic structures of subjectivity employed in the woman's film (and equally applicable to the erotic melodrama) are voice-over, flashbacks, dream sequences and hallucinations.²³ Soft

¹⁹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle*, 10-11. Andrews cites feminist theorist Tania Modleski in defining postfeminism as "the appropriation of feminist thought for non-feminist purposes." Andrews elaborates: "This postfeminist "appropriation" is mostly limited to an advocacy of female agency, choice, and self-respect. Rather than developing such rhetoric into a coherent critique, softcore uses it as one of several tools to "feminize" the genre – to construct it as an apolitical, "female-friendly" space that conflates untraditional ideas of female empowerment with traditional feminine stereotypes and ostensibly feminine idioms."

²² *Ibid.*, 164.

²³ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 34. However, in her essay "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," Doane stresses – particularly in relation to the medical discourse narrative (a subgroup of the woman's film of the 1940s) – the inability of the woman's film to consistently represent female subjectivity. Within this medical discourse narrative, the female protagonist is inflicted with a physical and/or mental illness and is treated by a male doctor, who stands in as her interpreter, thus controlling female subjectivity. There are recurring instances of this in the erotic

focus photography is yet another stylistic means through which feminine subjectivity is conveyed in both subgenres. According to Andrews, Hollywood employed soft focus photography to convey female immorality in the midst of the Depression era, when cinema was becoming increasingly eroticized.²⁴ Soft focus is also a softcore feature that signifies female eroticism and female subjectivity in the erotic melodrama.²⁵ As well, domestic images of a woman in front of a mirror or relaxing in her bathtub (*Two Moon Junction*, *Red Shoe Diaries*, *Unfaithful*) – or even masturbating (*Last Tango*, *Emmanuelle*, *9 ½ Weeks*, *Two Moon Junction*, *The Piano Teacher* (2001), *Lie With Me*) – are intended to provide the sexualized heroine with psychological/emotional depth, positioning her as a desiring *subject* in the erotic melodrama (and not solely an *object* of desire). This female subjectification, which positions women as subjects both inside and outside the diegesis, can be traced back through American sexploitation in the late 1960s to an even older European art film tradition of the “awakening” of female desire.²⁶ According to Doane, “female” problems in the woman’s film take on the following forms: domestic life, family, children, self-sacrifice, the relationship between women producing in the workplace and reproducing at home.²⁷ Although many of the elements listed as “female problems” emerge in the erotic melodrama in the familiar forms of choice and sacrifice, the heroine is fundamentally faced with the problem of being sexually unfulfilled (hence her sexual quest). Finally, one other way in which both subgenres were feminized is in the fusion of female fantasy and masochism. Doane

melodrama – most notably in Zalman King’s *Red Shoe Diaries*, in which a male narrator tells his dead fiancée’s story.

²⁴ Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle*, 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46, 54.

²⁷ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 3.

claims that the woman's film raises the following question: "How can the notion of female fantasy be compatible with that of persecution, illness and death?"²⁸ She then elaborates on how narratives within the woman's film – presumably those in which the theme of sacrifice arises – "assume a compatibility between the idea of female fantasy and that of persecution – a persecution effected by husband, family, or lover."²⁹ In such cases, suffering and desire seem to go hand in hand. Doane then alludes to the seemingly inherent link that is made between female sexuality and physical/mental illness, in which the female body becomes the site of illness and pain instead of a site of sexuality (serving as a demonstration of patriarchy's regulation of unchecked female desire).³⁰

This all relates back to the female spectator, who occupies a masochistic position in relation to the woman's film, as their "spectatorial pleasure is often indissociable with pain... Freudian scenarios describing identification with respect to the woman frequently hinge on the specific example of pain, suffering, aggression turned round against the self – in short, masochism."³¹ There is a similar occurrence in the erotic melodrama, in examples where the heroine occupies a masochistic role in her illicit relationship (*Last Tango, Bad Timing* (1981), *9 1/2 Weeks*, *Wild Orchid*, *The Piano Teacher*, *Unfaithful*). In such examples, pleasure, pain and humiliation are indivisible. In narratives in which adultery is committed, the heroine's sexual quest is laced with guilt and remorse, weighing down the latter half of the narrative with her display of suffering (*Red Shoe*

²⁸ Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 293.

²⁹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 36.

³⁰ Doane, "The 'Woman's Film'," 292.

³¹ Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 16.

Diaries, Zandalee, A Walk on the Moon (1999), *Unfaithful*). As well, there is the appearance of semi-consensual rape across many of the aforementioned erotic melodramas (including *9 ½ Weeks*), in which the heroine's consent is delayed. According to Andrews, this "represents a salient idea of female fantasy."³² The female spectator's experience might then, hypothetically – in line with the Freudian model of female spectatorship that Doane outlines – also elicit pleasure-in-pain.

In addition to the psychoanalytic account of female film spectatorship outlined above, other accounts of female spectatorship have been generated from studies of the woman's film and the melodrama, in which the hypothetical female spectator's relationship with the image is also characterized as excessive, absorbing and passive. In such accounts, "she" is unable to distance herself from the image. Jan Campbell, in her study of female film spectatorship and the melodrama, develops a female spectatorial account that is predicated on hysteria (hysterical mimesis). Campbell claims that hysteria is "a staging of affectual emotion," that "women's bodies create an interactive, even emotional mise-en-scène,"³³ and that the melodrama is a "bodily narrative which...mimetically moves between the spectator and filmic image as a sensory and tactile 'copying' or participation with the 'other'."³⁴ Linda Williams even notes the mimetic relationships that spectators develop with "low" body genres – namely pornography, horror, and melodrama – claiming that they are characterized by their "lack

³² Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle*, 63-64.

³³ Jan Campbell, *Film and Cinema Spectatorship: Melodrama and Mimesis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 126-127.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

of esthetic distance” and “sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion.”³⁵

Although I believe it is necessary to have at least addressed these accounts of female film spectatorship in light of the fact that the erotic melodrama – and its “predecessor,” the woman’s film of the 1940s – was designed to appeal to a female audience, *it is not the aim of this thesis to develop a gendered account of film spectatorship in relation to the erotic melodrama.* That is to say, it is not the aim of this thesis to develop a narrow account of female film spectatorship. As I’ve indicated earlier in the chapter, my experience of *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks*, and *Intimacy* will be developed into a more expansive account of film spectatorship that may speak to both male and female viewers. In this spirit, Vivian Sobchack states that “...the lived-body is never merely or wholly male or female... To initially take it up in such terms is an essentializing act... the lived-body is excessive and ambiguous in its materiality, and its production of existential meaning.”³⁶ Having established this, I am not denying my status as a female viewer. However, it seems rather limiting to conceive of experience – be it life experiences or cinematic experiences – as essentially male or female, masculine or feminine. As Sobchack points out, we’re far more complex, excessive and ambiguous in nature to be categorically understood as merely or wholly male or female. And this concept extends to one’s experience of film. As *human beings*, equipped as we are with personal histories, a wealth of sensory and emotional memories and prior life experiences, we are all prone to engaging with and being “done to” by films in ways that transcend one’s gender. It is in this sense that a phenomenological description/approach to one’s filmic experience may

³⁵ Linda Williams, “Films Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44 (1991): 5. NOT to be confused with *Linda Ruth Williams*, another film theorist whose work *also* happens to focus on sex and cinema. A funny little coincidence, to be sure.

³⁶ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 144.

prove especially adequate in accounting for the ways in which we meaningfully engage with films.

Having established the subgenre to which the three aforementioned films belong, as well as having established the aim of this thesis in relation to accounts of female film spectatorship, I will now continue with a brief historical account of the erotic melodrama's cinematic roots – beyond the woman's film of the 1940s. According to Linda Ruth Williams, the erotic melodrama dates back to the brief period of 'porno chic', in which hardcore pornographic features were being shown in mainstream American theatres. It was around then that a new breed of "hip, high-profile" softcore, which Williams claims might well have begun with Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (France, 1974), emerged.³⁷ *Emmanuelle* is the story of a young, naïve, married woman who embarks upon a sexual quest with a series of strangers. Her sexual quest is almost spiritualized as each anonymous encounter leads her further down the path to self-discovery. Prior to Jaeckin's film, however, is Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (France, Italy, 1972), another European film in which the naïve, young female protagonist enters into an anonymous sexual relationship with a significantly older and embittered widower. Although this film contains simulated sex acts, it is not a softcore feature, *per se*: "Used generally, 'softcore' refers to any feature-length narrative whose diegesis is punctuated by periodic moments (typically between eight and twelve, though more is not exceptional) of simulated, nonexplicit sexual spectacle. The dichotomous mix of narrative and 'number' lends softcore its identifying format and rhythm."³⁸ It is in this

³⁷ Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 391.

³⁸ Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle*, 2.

way that *Last Tango* differs from *Emmanuelle*: whereas *Emmanuelle* is a true-to-form softcore feature in which the narrative is frequently interrupted by these sexual “numbers,” *Last Tango* is only *sporadically* interrupted by sex acts – and this applies to *9 ½ Weeks*, *Intimacy*, and all other titles referred to as “erotic melodramas” within this thesis. These films build on the emotional dimension of the illicit relationship and provide insight into the lives and histories of the two parties involved. Sex, then, becomes – as Bertolucci put it, “an instrument for saying other things.”³⁹ *Last Tango* is a cynical, meditative film that takes sex/love relationships as its philosophical focus: relationships, whether sanctioned or illicit, are inevitably doomed. The serious and sophisticated treatment of erotic relationships that emerges in *Last Tango* – and continues on through *9 ½ Weeks* to *Intimacy* – has its roots in a very influential upsurge of European art films that date back to the late 1950s.

I will lead into this upsurge of European art films of the 1950s and 1960s with the breakthrough that occurred in British cinema in the late 1950s. At this time, British cinema had entered a period of social realism, in which a “harder and more serious approach to adult themes” appeared⁴⁰ – namely, in relation to the depiction of the drama of human relationships. And, as Jeremy Pascall and Clyde Jeavons point out: “More realism meant more explicit themes – particularly in the spheres of sex and violence – and the breaking of old cinematic taboos...”⁴¹ Of equal importance is the fact that television took hold as the main form of mass entertainment in 1950s Britain *and*

³⁹ Bachmann, “Every Sexual Relationship is Condemned,” 7.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Pascall and Clyde Jeavons, *A Pictorial History of Sex in the Movies* (London; New York; Sydney; Toronto: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1975), 150.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

America, thus presenting cinema with the task of appealing to adult audiences – which meant looking to more *mature* subject matter. (On the American front, Jody W. Pennington points out that because television was a family-oriented medium in the 1950s, “indecent laws for broadcasting were stricter than the Code,” thus, “studios could also differentiate their product by marketing some films as *mature* or for adults.”⁴² Consequently, as Tanya Krzywinska notes, “Films such [as] *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Baby Doll* (1956), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) and *Written on the Wind* (1958) were made specifically for an adult audience.”⁴³ Thus sex became a strategic way for the struggling American film industry to distinguish its products from television and lure audiences back to the cinemas.⁴⁴ In this way, these technological developments were fundamental to the development of a more permissive cinema – which would eventually lead to the development of the erotic melodrama. As Krzywinska points out, “the primary driver for these developments [the representation of sex in the media] is a commercial imperative that arises, at least in part, from changes in media technology (television in the 1950s; video in the 1970s, and satellite and internet in the 1990s).”⁴⁵) British social realism often depicted the sexual problems of ordinary, working-class men and women – including sexual frustration, menopause, adultery, abortion, etc. Pascall and Jeavons note that one particular British film, Jack Clayton’s *Room at the Top* (1958), was practically the first feature film to receive both an X certificate (for adults only) *and* critical

⁴² Jody W. Pennington, *The History of Sex in American Film* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 10.

⁴³ Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 14. It should be noted that *Written on the Wind* was actually released in 1956, not 1958.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

acclaim.⁴⁶ The film's success encouraged other respectable directors to take on bolder themes within a working class setting⁴⁷ – including Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, and Karel Reisz. Other breakthrough British films included Jonas Cornell's *Hugs and Kisses* (1966), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1967) and Anderson's *If...* (1968), as they all featured full frontal female nudity. Pascall and Jeavons note that as British filmmakers became increasingly confident in the handling of erotic themes, and as censors became increasingly impressed by the artistic integrity of their films, sex became evermore prominent and overt in British cinema. Ultimately, however, it was the films that emerged from Continental Europe in the 1960s – in mainly Italy, Scandinavia and France – that truly set the bar for the serious depiction of erotic themes.⁴⁸ Notable directors from Continental Europe included Ingmar Bergman (*Through a Glass Darkly* (1961)), Vilgot Sjöman (*I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), *I Am Curious (Blue)* (1968)), Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni (*L'Avventura* (1960)). According to Pascall and Jeavons, they “set world cinema trends in the ‘sixties from both an artistic and an erotic point of view.”⁴⁹ And, as Krzywinska points out, the influence of these racy, trend-setting European films on American cinema was evident, as “[t]he [more permissive American cinematic] trend also responded to the financial success of foreign imports...”⁵⁰ The themes that were of primary interest to these Continental European filmmakers were love and sex in human relationships. The films of Bergman and Fellini in this decade exuded the meditative, pessimistic tone of *Last Tango* in their depiction of the uglier side of love, sex, and desire. As well, some featured simulated sex (*A Stranger*

⁴⁶ Pascall and Jeavons, *A Pictorial History of Sex*, 156.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 161, 172, 173.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁰ Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 14.

Knocks (1960), *I Am Curious (Yellow)*). Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, Sjöman's *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) and Mac Ahlberg's *I, a Woman* (1965) may be viewed as forerunners to the erotic melodrama for their serious (and sometimes morbid) exploration of female sexual desire. The efforts of these adventurous filmmakers epitomized the *fusion of art and eroticism* (which could be understood as the "serious exploration of overtly sexual themes"⁵¹), for which they were held in high regard.⁵² *Last Tango* seems to have stemmed from this European art film tradition and this precise fusion. And it is this fusion that continues through *9 ½ Weeks* to *Intimacy*.

Having now briefly outlined the cinematic history from which the erotic melodrama stems – thus providing a better idea of what comprises this subgenre, while serving as a set-up to *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* (that is, until this brief historical account can be elaborated in the following chapter) – it will now be necessary to return this chapter to the present with a consideration of the viewing context within which this speculative account of spectatorial engagement is being developed. As this account is predicated on / expanded from a singular account of filmic engagement (i.e. an account of my emotional and physical engagement with the three aforementioned films), the viewing context within which I experienced these three films must be taken into account insofar as it dictates – to whatever extent – how I experienced them.

⁵¹ Pascall and Jeavons, *A Pictorial History of Sex*, 169.

⁵² Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 14. Similarly, in the aforementioned American 1950s "adult melodramas" – namely, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Baby Doll*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Written on the Wind* – the integration of sex or sexual themes in an established cinematic form rendered them acceptable: "The strategic placement of sexual material within the context of more traditional melodramatic forms was instrumental to the acceptance of such films by the mainstream industry."

How might one, situated as I am in the first decade of the 21st century, experience these films? The availability of these three films on DVD and VHS made my viewing experiences possible, as I did not (and in the case of the first two titles, *could* not) view any of these films at the time of their respective releases. This relates to what Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire have referred to as the “end of simultaneity,”⁵³ which can be understood as never actually watching a film at the time of its release, but, rather, *arriving at it in one’s own time*, according to an individualized schedule (or script). In actual fact, Jancovich and Faire develop the concept of the end of simultaneity in relation to television programmes; however it easily extends to the experience of older films that could not – in the case of viewers such as myself – have been viewed/experienced at the time of their release. And this extends to the way in which a film’s original viewing context is potentially dwarfed by its “extensive afterlife,”⁵⁴ in which its meaning, effect and value is subject to change for viewers over time. Both concepts – namely, the end of simultaneity and a film’s extensive afterlife – are quite significant insofar as they indicate the varied, complex relationships and deep connections that younger viewers can develop with older films. With this in mind, Jancovich and Faire critique reception studies – and by extension, Janet Staiger as the “figure most directly associated with it” – as its approach suggests that the “meaning of films need to be understood as the product of specific assumptions and knowledges of historical conditions,” ignoring “the ways in which the meanings of texts change over time. As a result, reception studies can sometimes amount to little more than a historically concrete version of reader-response

⁵³ Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire, *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 190.

⁵⁴ Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (California University Press, 2006), 8.

criticism in which the task of the critic is to unearth the ‘appropriate’ competences necessary for the interpretation of film.”⁵⁵ Indeed, Staiger herself expresses her “insistence on context as the best explanation for what happens during the experience of a text.”⁵⁶ And by “context,” of course, Staiger means the historical period in which a spectator (she uses the terms spectator, reader, viewer and audience interchangeably⁵⁷) engages with a film – or film text. But, as Jancovich and Faire insist, this is limiting. Krzywinska points out that it is “all too easy to make generalised and over-simplified connections between history...and a given film,”⁵⁸ naming “decadism” as a tendency to treat each decade as distinct from the next, associating specific experiences or appropriate responses with that decade. She follows this up by stating that it is “reductive to assume that a given period is unified in terms of experience and culture. At a local level, individual experience is diverse.”⁵⁹ Indeed, there cannot be a prescribed way of engaging with or deriving meaning from a film, regardless of the decade – certainly not in the day and age in which we now live, where we not only develop meaningful relationships with films from preceding decades (as well as the current decade), but also experience them through the convergence of media. James Lyons and John Plunkett, in their book *Multimedia Histories: From the Magic Lantern to the Internet* (a compilation of essays on media convergence), claim that in “contemporary media practice, ‘convergence’

⁵⁵ Jancovich and Faire, *The Place of the Audience*, 7.

⁵⁶ Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, (New York; London: New York University Press, 2005), 82. Staiger, at the start of her book, also offers definitions of reception studies by other theorists – one of which, by Jonathan Culler, states that “reception studies is not a way of interpreting works but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretive assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods.” (2)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

stands for the dominance of fusion and transferability between different forms.”⁶⁰

Richard Grusin – in one of the essays in Lyons and Plunkett’s book – observes the following: “At our current historical moment there is almost no sense of a medium that exists in itself, but rather only media that exist in relation to or in collaboration with other media.”⁶¹ From a technological standpoint, there appears to be no limit to the ways in which viewers may experience film these days: movie theatres, terrestrial TV, cable TV, satellite TV, desktop and laptop computers, youtube and various other Internet sites, iPods and cell phones (which, along with laptops, enable a mobile viewing experience) – and the list goes on. In my particular case, most – if not all – of the films that I’ve watched in the last two to three years have been on my Mac desktop, which is equipped with a DVD player. This is a perfect example of media convergence. This basically constitutes the means by which I viewed most – if not all – of the titles mentioned in this thesis. Otherwise, I viewed films on a television screen with a DVD player or in VHS format with a VCR. Jancovich and Faire point out that the choices one makes with regards to how one views a film is a “matter of the experiences that one values and the relationship that one wants to establish to a particular type of film.”⁶² In the case of *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*, a privatized home viewing experience was preferable and made them more enjoyable for me. My experience with these films could be understood as a “one-on-one”; an intimate experience.⁶³ After all, this is the type of

⁶⁰ James Lyons and John Plunkett, introduction to *Multimedia Histories: From the Magic Lantern to the Internet*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), xxiii.

⁶¹ Richard Grusin, “DVDs, Video Games and the Cinema of Interactions,” in *Multimedia Histories: From the Magic Lantern to the Internet*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 215.

⁶² Jancovich and Faire, *The Place of the Audience*, 194.

⁶³ Of course, it is interesting to consider what my relationship with *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* would have been like if I’d been old enough to experience them on the big screen at the time of

experience that DVD technology, VHS cassettes and VCRs enable, in which one may enjoy erotically-charged films without embarrassment, within the more relaxed and “safe” space of the home.

Other features of home viewing and home viewing technology that will be factored into this speculative account of spectatorial engagement with the three aforementioned films include interruptions associated with the domestic space, time-shifting, and repeat viewings. Barbara Klinger notes the fact that distractions are often associated with home viewing and often counted against it. Klinger notes the tendency to perceive home viewing (and the myriad distractions associated with it) as somehow breaking with “the quality of the cinema” that the theatrical experience is supposed to provide.⁶⁴ Although distractions exist in the home and may interrupt (indeed, are part of) the home viewing experience, there is equal potential for distractions in a movie theatre. The difference seems to be that in the latter case, distractions (noisy, obnoxious strangers, the annoying crackling of snacks, unpleasant odors, etc.) are not within the viewer’s ability to really control – whereas the home *is* a relatively more controlled environment. And, in the latter case, one cannot pause the film in the event of an interruption, whereas, in the former case, one has the option of maneuvering around distractions and interruptions by pausing and resuming a film. And this extends to the fact that home

their theatrical release. I think it can be safely said that the “intimacy” that I enjoyed with these films would not have been afforded in a theatre full of strangers. Now, of course, with all three films available and in my possession on DVD, I do not have to “share” them with anyone, so to speak. I can watch them when I want, and how I want without feeling self-conscious or distracted by others. Although I am not claiming that a privatized viewing experience was the “right,” “proper” or “superior” viewing context for these particular films – as opposed to a theatrical experience – it was certainly *ideal*.

⁶⁴ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 3.

viewing technology allows for time-shifting and the re-ordering of time: one can view films whenever and however one desires – which, with VHS and DVD (for instance), can entail watching as much or as little as one likes before pausing or putting a film on hold for another time, at one’s leisure (thus, re-ordering time, not saving it). In other words, with home viewing technology, one’s personal schedule is accommodated – as opposed to having to accommodate the showtimes set by one’s local cinema. And one cannot discount the role that the remote control plays in one’s home viewing experience. Klinger describes the ways in which one can “refashion” a film according to one’s desires – which, with DVD players/DVDs and VCRs/VHS cassettes, can entail repeating or skipping straight to a favorite scene (or favorite *scenes*), skipping over least favorite scenes, fast forwarding, freeze framing, etc. As for repeat viewings, there are many possibilities. Klinger elaborates on the ways in which one’s experience with a particular film can be enriched with each viewing – thus, *changing* with each new viewing. Thus, there is no question as to the growing complexity of one’s viewing experience these days: whereas film was once a shared experience (in which, for instance, the same films were screened to a public at a given time, at a local theatre), it is now very difficult to account for the diverse filmic experiences that have been made possible by recent technological developments. It seems, in light of the technological advancements that have allowed for these varied forms of filmic experience, that the most suitable and effective approach to beginning to gauge one’s filmic experience is via phenomenology.

Let us now step back and consider all that this chapter has addressed up until this point. It should be noted that, as this chapter serves as an introduction to this thesis – and

more specifically, to the speculative account of spectatorial engagement that is at the core of this thesis – it needs to address two main things: the films that this account is focused on – and by extension, the subgenre to which they belong (erotic melodrama); and the methodological approach to this account. Up until this point in the chapter, the conventions and cinematic roots of the erotic melodrama have been elaborated upon. Presumably, the reader now has a clearer conception of the three films that were made the focus of this thesis, as well as an idea of how the erotic melodrama came to be. This chapter has also addressed the viewing context within which this account is developed, and in so doing, has begun to account for *how* I might have experienced *Last Tango, 9 1/2 Weeks* and *Intimacy*. This leads us to a consideration of the methodological approach to this account. It has already been established that a singular account of filmic experience will be developed into a more expansive, speculative account of spectatorial engagement through the concepts offered by the aforementioned phenomenological theorists and philosophers (all of whom will be addressed in greater detail, shortly). Thus, the remainder of this chapter will *elaborate* on this process: it will clarify, to some extent, what phenomenology is (according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty), as well as what a phenomenological approach to film would entail; it will also explain how particular concepts offered by the aforementioned theorists and philosophers will be used in the upcoming account of filmic experience.

Although this thesis acknowledges that viewing contexts are not divorced from affect, I am far more interested in the ways in which *Last Tango, 9 1/2 Weeks*, and *Intimacy*, in and of themselves, move me – and therefore potentially other viewers. As

my experience of these films was quite powerful (and, in many ways, unique), this thesis is primarily driven by the desire to investigate *how* and *why* these films affected me – beyond the viewing context. How and why was I physically and emotionally moved? How and why might these films move others? How and why were these films meaningful to me? – and, by extension, how and why might these films be meaningful for others? Phenomenology seemed the most obvious and logical approach to these questions and to the development of a speculative account of the potential ways viewers meaningfully engage with these films.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was my point of entry into phenomenology. When he addresses the question of *what* phenomenology *is* in one of his major works, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he claims that it has by no means been answered. He does, however, provide accounts of how it *could* be understood across two of his major works – namely *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Primacy of Perception*:

It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is...⁶⁵

...the description and comprehension of the phenomenon itself fall to phenomenology.⁶⁶

It is a question of replacing habitual concepts, to which we pay no careful attention, by concepts which are continuously clarified and are therefore far less likely to remove us from experience as it is lived.⁶⁷

Although the above excerpts are brief, they provide a very *basic* account of what phenomenology is, as well as what might constitute a phenomenological approach to

⁶⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception*, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), vii.

⁶⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 66.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

film. If phenomenology – on a very basic level – can be understood as the faithful description of our experience of phenomena, then a phenomenological approach to film would constitute a faithful description of everything that one experiences during a viewing. Vivian Sobchack describes a phenomenological approach as that which “seeks, in a given case, the meaning of experience as it is embodied and lived in context – meaning and value emerging in the *synthesis* of the experience’s *subjective* and *objective* aspects.”⁶⁸ Therefore, a phenomenological approach to film can also be understood as an attempt to articulate or express the ways in which the meaning and value of one’s experience of a particular film or films (subjective) plausibly extends to those of others (objective).⁶⁹ In the third quote above, Merleau-Ponty alludes to the importance of concepts and words that vividly reproduce one’s experience of phenomena. Laura Marks put it very eloquently when she described this task as making “the dry words retain a trace of the wetness of the encounter.”⁷⁰ In accounting for my experience of *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks*, and *Intimacy*, I would seek to make words work for those experiences – so that they retain the weight and essence of those experiences. And in the process of expanding this personal account into a speculative account of the potential ways in which others may engage with these films, the ideas of various phenomenological theorists and

⁶⁸ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 2.

⁶⁹ Here, “subjective” refers to aspects of a particular viewer’s experience, whereas “objective” refers to aspects of a more general structure of filmic experience that is shared by – or common to – many viewers.

⁷⁰ Laura U. Marks, introduction to *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, by Laura U. Marks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), x. This “task” that Marks refers to is the task of translating from one medium to another; from film and/or video to words. This is also reminiscent of the “commitments” that Cavell sets himself in *The World Viewed* – mentioned in the beginning of this chapter – in the sense that the “task” that Marks speaks of is also to fervently tease out and clarify the obscurities of one’s complex and meaningful audiovisual experiences.

philosophers – such as Merleau-Ponty, Marks, Sobchack and Sue L. Cataldi – will be of great use.

A key concept that emerges in the works of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack and Marks is *flesh*. It is stated in the translator's preface to Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, that "the concept of flesh emerges as the ultimate notion of Merleau-Ponty's thought; it is a prototype for Being universally."⁷¹ However differentially situated we all are, we all have flesh in common, and presumably all experience and retain the various textures of the world with it. Multisensory experiences of the world are somehow transmitted to, and elicited by, my experience of film. It can be said that I *make* these films powerful and meaningful by virtue of all that I "bring" to a viewing: for instance, I come "equipped" with sensory and emotional memories of the ups and downs of intimate relationships. My body has previously absorbed and stored away sensations and textures that are recalled and reawakened in the viewing of these films. (Having said this, I do not mean to suggest that viewers cannot meaningfully engage with these films if they have not had comparable experiences to those depicted within them.)⁷² I am equally engaged by the emotional dimension of these three films as I am able to intuitively grasp the subtleties of the performances and the affectively-charged spaces within them (though physical and emotional engagement should not necessarily be understood as separate). In accounting for how this happens – that is, *how* I engage physically and emotionally with these films – the concepts of the aforementioned theorists and philosophers will be called

⁷¹ Alphonso Lingis, translator's preface to *The Visible and the Invisible*, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), liv.

⁷² Although it can be argued that these films may be *more* affectively charged for viewers who *have* had such experiences and *are* in possession of such sensory memories.

upon. Sobchack makes use of Merleau-Ponty's "reversibility" thesis to develop her own elaborate account of one's tactile experience of film. In such an instance, the viewer commutes seeing to touching⁷³: s/he touches and is touched by the screen, experiencing the film as both "here and there." Marks elaborates on one's tactile relationship with film through the notion of mimesis, whereby the subject takes on the world's qualities through close material contact with it. Marks claims that our relationship with the world is fundamentally mimetic, and that the cinema is a mimetic medium, "drawing us into sensory participation with its world."⁷⁴ Cataldi makes use of Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis to elaborate on one's emotional experience of films, in which certain scenes are *emotionally felt* as both "here and there".⁷⁵ As far as films elicit memories, both Merleau-Ponty and Marks have developed very interesting and useful accounts of memory that are applicable to audiovisual experiences. For instance, Merleau-Ponty describes how the past is put into play through the "association of ideas." Another concept of his that may be useful in the domain of memory is "the visible of the second power," in which "things" that are perceived in the present have the "internal equivalent" of something from the subject's past (films can stand in for these "things"). When these two concepts are translated into the experience of film, they can be understood as moments from each of the three films that summon a presence or essence of the viewer's past experiences. Marks's take on memory is similar in that she describes memory as

⁷³ This also recalls the notion of "haptic visuality," which Marks describes as the eyes themselves functioning like organs of touch (in both *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*).

⁷⁴ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2000), 214.

⁷⁵ Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 110.

encoded in senses, and that the cinema elicits or triggers these sensory memories. This concept of memory logically extends to *why* I engage emotionally and physically with these films. I am, in large part, engrossed by these films *because* they recall previous experiences of emotionally- and sexually-charged relationships – which have had a part in shaping who I am. The why of spectatorial engagement stands to be very personal, and consequently variable.

Of course, it is also true that viewers' relationships with films *change* over time. This is true insofar as viewing practices and technological advancements are concerned, as well as the fact that *people* and their tastes and values inevitably change over time. Thus, as everything is in constant flux, this whole spectatorial account is subject to change. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty even makes mention of the pains one must go through in order to articulate that which is perceived – the familiar, the taken-for-granted – just to constantly *redefine* it. As Sobchack put it, “The lesson of a phenomenological description is that it is never complete.”⁷⁶ And this relates directly to Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, which is “philosophically grounded on the carnal, fleshy, objective foundations of subjective consciousness as it engages and is transformed by and in the world.”⁷⁷ Just as one does not maintain a fixed relation to the world (by virtue of the fact that people gradually transform through accumulated life experience), one does not maintain a fixed relation to films; it inevitably evolves. In other words, the meaning and value of films change as both viewers and technological conditions of reception evolve. That being the case, this thesis captures a unique instance

⁷⁶ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 43.

⁷⁷ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 2.

in my ever-changing relationship with these three films: at this point in time, their subject matter greatly appeals to me in that it speaks to personal experiences that continue to fascinate/haunt me, and have played a part in shaping who I am. This thesis will explore and attempt to clarify the ways in which these three films (and others like them) – as they stand – are deeply felt by me, and potentially felt by others. And there can be no doubt as to the reality that, as time passes and one’s repository of sensory and emotional memories deepens, one’s relationship with certain films will inevitably gain in complexity – not to mention the ways in which technological developments will have compounded the complexity of these filmic experiences. Nevertheless, this speculative account of spectatorial engagement is a worthwhile and potentially valuable undertaking if, as Sobchack very eloquently put it, it can “describe and explicate the *general or possible* structures and meanings that inform the experience and make it potentially resonant and inhabitable for others.”⁷⁸ And in the development of such an account, this thesis will also explore a subgenre whose recorded scope is limited (mostly only taking into account the Zalman King staple and the films of Adrian Lyne). The erotic melodrama will be considered from an angle that recognizes its potential affective power – particularly in the case of *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. Having now introduced the erotic melodrama and addressed the methodological approach to the upcoming account of filmic experience, we will proceed with a more in-depth look at the three aforementioned films.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

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1. A CLOSER LOOK AT AN ALLURING TRIO OF FILMS

At the outset of this chapter, it bears mentioning that everything that comprises this thesis – and in particular, Chapter Three, in which a singular account of filmic experience is developed into a more expansive, speculative account of filmic experience – stems from, or is indicative of, a “bigger picture” that exceeds the scope of this thesis. For instance, it could be said that the decision to focus the upcoming account on *Last Tango in Paris*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* is less a coincidence than it is indicative of a more extensive dialogue that bound these three films as a trio prior to the conception of this thesis. As well, the intensely personal foundation of this thesis echoes a larger scholarly endeavor to integrate personal experience into a philosophical and theoretical discussion of film. As this chapter serves as a set-up to the elaborate account of filmic engagement, it will examine the three aforementioned films and their relationship to one another in greater depth. In other words, this chapter will begin with a consideration of the bigger picture or larger historical context / dialogue that unites these three films – and in so doing, will lead into a consideration of my personal relationship with these films (through which they are also united as a striking trio). (This, of course, will constitute an *elaboration* of the brief historical overview and personal reflections provided in the introductory chapter.) Chapter Two will consider the inherent difficulties of developing such an elaborate account of filmic experience. This includes the difficulties incurred by the viewing context within which it is developed, as well as those incurred by the phenomenological approach, itself – which, within the context of this thesis, would entail a faithful description of my filmic experiences. And it is these experiences that form the

very personal foundation of this thesis, which incurs its own set of difficulties within the context of this scholarly project. Firstly, however, as this thesis is predicated on my experience of three particular films – namely *Last Tango in Paris*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* – it seems only logical to recall the ways in which they are bound as a fascinating trio. What is it about *these* three films that makes them so compelling? Why were *these* three films made the focus of this thesis? As has already been established in the introductory chapter, I can see how the three aforementioned films are in dialogue with each other, from both an historical and personal standpoint. Prior to my discovery of these films and the subgenre to which I argue they belong, a rich and interesting cinematic history – spanning over 60 years – wove them together. In addition to this, film critics and theorists have treated these three films as a trio in reviews and essays that have linked *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* with *Last Tango*. What ultimately unites them in this thesis, however, is the fact that they profoundly engaged me in ways that few other films have. And it is this profound engagement that will be addressed in the development of this speculative account of spectatorial engagement. For the purposes of examining *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* and their relationship to one another in greater depth (thus ultimately assessing *why* they were made the focus of the upcoming account), however, it will first be useful to reiterate and elaborate on the longstanding cinematic ties through which these three films initially formed a dialogue.

It is possible to see how these three films are in dialogue with each other by tracing them – and, in essence, the erotic melodrama – back to their cinematic origins. As the three films constitute examples of the European (*Last Tango*, *Intimacy*) and American

(*9 ½ Weeks*) strains of the erotic melodrama, it seems only logical to look back on the history that ties them together. In the 1950s, on both European and American fronts, increasingly risqué cinematic trends were emerging in response to the competition brought on by television. As television's target audience was the family unit, this new cinematic trend – which entailed the “serious” treatment of erotic themes (i.e. sexual frustration, adultery, impotence, abortion, etc.) – was geared towards appealing to and luring more *mature* audiences to the cinema. In American cinema of the 1950s, this trend took on the form of the “adult melodrama” – films such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Baby Doll*, *Written on the Wind*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* – in which “a psychological line of approach to sex was taken that was couched within the established and industrially legitimated language of the melodrama, providing thereby a convenient way of dealing with sexual themes in a visually non-explicit way.”⁷⁹ And on the European front in the latter half of the 1950s, British films began to emerge that demonstrated a serious – hence, “artistic” and acceptable – approach to erotic themes in a working-class setting. It is also true that in the latter half of the 1950s – in addition to the incentive brought on by television to look to racier material – British cinema had entered a period of social realism, in which, “[m]ore realism meant more explicit themes – particularly in the spheres of sex and violence – and the breaking of old cinematic taboos...”.⁸⁰ Thus, parallel developments in the 1950s in both European and American cinema demonstrated a move towards a bolder, more permissive cinema. However, as the 1960s unfolded, European cinema would prove itself to be a few steps ahead in terms of its approach to sex: “...European filmmakers were often able to go further in showing their characters’

⁷⁹ Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 14.

⁸⁰ Pascall and Jeavons, *A Pictorial History of Sex*, 145.

sex lives than their American counterparts.”⁸¹ Certainly, the films that emerged from Continental Europe in the 1960s were a case in point.

In many respects, the films that emerged from Continental Europe in the 1960s (from, specifically, Italy, Sweden and France) profoundly influenced both American mainstream cinema and sexploitation films – leading, eventually, to the development of the American strain of the erotic melodrama. Jeremy Pascall and Clyde Jeavons point out that the “liberated film-makers of Continental Europe continued to set world cinema trends in the ‘sixties from both an artistic and an erotic point of view. The trick – still only half understood in Britain and America – was to make art and eroticism go hand in hand.”⁸² They continue by noting that:

The importance of these master film-makers [i.e. Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni and their peers] to the English-speaking cinema was threefold: they expanded the artistic and erotic possibilities of movie-making and inspired emulation; they demonstrated that art, as well as sex (but usually the two combined), could equal profits; and they helped to eradicate the more senseless repressions of British and American censorship...⁸³

The decade of the 1960s was a period of transition for American cinema – propelled, in part, by the influence of these bold European filmmakers. This transition included the mid-1960s demise of the Production Code, which, as Jody W. Pennington notes, “supposedly signaled a revolution in nudity and sex in American cinema.”⁸⁴ Pennington also makes a clear link between European films and the increasingly liberal approach to sex in American mainstream cinema of the 1960s by noting that the “box office and critical success of European films and underground films as well as sexploitation and

⁸¹ Pennington, *The History of Sex*, 30.

⁸² Pascall and Jeavons, *A Pictorial History of Sex*, 161.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Pennington, *The History of Sex*, 17.

pornographic films convinced many Hollywood filmmakers that there was an audience for films with more... explicit representations of nudity and sex.”⁸⁵ And on the racier end of the American cinematic spectrum, sexploitation filmmakers such as Radley Metzger and Joe Sarno were greatly influenced by the “European art film tradition entailing the “awakening” of female desire”⁸⁶ According to David Andrews, Mac Ahlberg’s *I, a Woman* – which depicts a young woman’s sexual quest – featured an “awakening-sexuality model” that was particularly influential on Metzger and Sarno.⁸⁷ In his illustration of the film’s profound influence on these sexploitation filmmakers, Andrews quotes Bart Testa:

“...*I, a Woman* defined the erotic film by jettisoning exploitation plots and assuming an art-film model. The expedients seem simple: implant erotic experience in the subjectivity of its [female] protagonist”... This feminized aspirational film inspired verisimilitude, tolerance, and artfulness in sexploitation depictions of awakening female desire.⁸⁸

According to Andrews, Metzger sought to distinguish his films from his “lowbrow rivals” by foregrounding female agency through the awakening of female sexual desire.⁸⁹ The distribution of sexploitation – the works of Metzger and his peers – had also crossed over to the art house circuit, where European art films were imported and had been screening since the 1950s.^{90 91} This strategy was intended to bolster the status of these sexploitation films to that of art films. One could argue that Metzger’s efforts to distinguish his films through his European-influenced, “feminized art-porn hybrid,”⁹²

⁸⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁶ Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle*, 46.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 15, 35.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 35

⁹¹ Pennington, *The History of Sex*, 22.

⁹² Andrews, *Softcore in the Middle*, 35.

represent the start of what would *later* develop into the American strain of the erotic melodrama. The influence that these European films of the '50s and '60s had on American cinema is significant insofar as it illustrates a dialogue that had begun between the two. It is also significant insofar as it intriguingly anticipates the influence that *Last Tango in Paris* reputedly had on *9 ½ Weeks* – in the way that the former is somehow “echoed” in the latter, constituting an extended dialogue between European and American cinema. *Intimacy* is very much a part of this dialogue as it, too, constitutes an instance of *Last Tango*'s residual influence.

As is indicated in the introductory chapter of this thesis, *Last Tango* provided a sort of template according to which subsequent erotic melodramas could be understood. The basic narrative structure that appears in *Last Tango* is echoed in *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*: each depicts the rise and fall of a briefly-lived, sexually- and emotionally-charged heterosexual relationship. On this basis alone, it is possible to see how these three films – each from their respective decades and countries of production – are in dialogue with each other. Several critics and theorists have referred to *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* as the “*Last Tangos*” of their decade. For instance, Adrian Wooton, a critic that reviewed *9 ½ Weeks* the year of its release, referred to it as a “Last Tango in Manhattan”⁹³ – bearing only a superficial resemblance to Bertolucci's film (I would, however, disagree with Wooton's seemingly hasty critique).⁹⁴ Even Adrian Lyne was

⁹³ Adrian Wooton, “Nine ½ Weeks,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 53 (1986): 180.

⁹⁴ Wooton critiques *9 ½ Weeks* on the basis that it is an essentially shallow film. He claims that it is a glossy film that sports all the latest trends in fashion, furniture and music (of its time, of course), while merely posing as a melodrama of *Last Tango*'s caliber through the illicit relationship that it foregrounds. Thus, in Wooton's view, it is in this way that *9 ½ Weeks* bears only a *superficial* resemblance to Bertolucci's film.

quoted as having compared his film to Bertolucci's: " "It might be for the 80s what Bertolucci's *Tango* was for the '70s." "95 And *Intimacy*, in a review at the time of its release, was dubbed by one particular critic as a "Last Tango in Lewisham," as it "echoes Bertolucci's arthouse *succès de scandale*." 96 And Linda Williams (not to be confused with Linda Ruth Williams) referred to *Intimacy* as a sort of revision of *Last Tango* through its depiction of an anonymous, torrid sexual liaison.⁹⁷ These are but a few brief examples of the tendency that has been to group these films together, however inadvertently via *Last Tango*. It can certainly be said that *Last Tango* laid the groundwork for engaging, meditative, high-caliber erotic melodramas such as *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. It takes such care in weaving the emotional dimension of its featured illicit relationship through the exquisite performances of a talented cast; the creation of affective spaces via skillful cinematography and *mise-en-scène*; the illicit couple's heavy philosophical dialogue (in which they exchange ideas about love, sex, marriage and family); the intensity of the illicit couple's sexual encounters; the pacing and evolution of the illicit relationship; etc. In addition to this, each of these films offers a variation of the female sexual quest in which the heroine chooses to abandon the illicit relationship in the end. This careful approach to the depiction of the illicit relationship and its emotionally-charged world – however varied from one film to the next (as each is distinct in terms of its look, script, cast, etc.) – is present in *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. Therefore, the "influence" that *Last Tango* can be said to have had on *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* – reflected in the films' aforementioned commonalities – foregrounds one of the ways in which these films are in dialogue with each other, uniting them as a striking trio.

⁹⁵ Todd Groemling, "Video Review: *9 ½ Weeks*," *Popular Music and Society* 14 (1990): 113.

⁹⁶ Richard Falcon, "The Limits of Sex: Last Tango in Lewisham," *Sight & Sound* 11 (2001): 20.

⁹⁷ Linda Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act," *Cineaste* 27 (2001): 21.

This historical overview of the longstanding cinematic ties that exist between *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* has served to illustrate the aforementioned bigger picture that bound these three films as an interesting trio prior to my discovery of them.

However, while my eventual discovery of these films was part of a bigger process of discovery – whereby critics and theorists also saw these films and, through their own observations, established links between them – it was my profound engagement with each of these films that ultimately united them as a compatible and intriguing trio for this thesis. These three films are intimately and uniquely bound through the intensity with which I emotionally and physically engaged with them. These particular films struck me in ways that few other films of this subgenre – namely, the erotic melodrama – have.

Having now established the cinematic history through which these films are “dialoguing,” I will move on to a consideration of how my meaningful engagement with these films constitutes a *personal* extension of this dialogue.

Each of these films drew me in from the first minute and seduced me through the intense physical sensations and emotional highs and lows that were elicited as each of the illicit relationships progressed from start to finish. Each film was greatly intriguing as each elicited emotional and sensory memories of previous relationships and the romantic and sexual encounters that comprised them. In this sense, these films acquired their allure through their ability to elicit that which is familiar and fascinating to me: they reawakened and summoned bittersweet memories and sensations that continue to haunt

and thrill me.⁹⁸ But what made these three films particularly captivating was the *intensity* of the sensations they elicited – an intensity I hadn’t previously experienced with other films. And it was this elusive intensity that ultimately propelled this thesis – the desire to articulate how and why these films were felt so deeply on an emotional and corporeal level. That being said, the task of accounting for my viewing experiences – which perpetually gain in complexity – presents an enormous challenge. If I can do justice to the experiences I have had with these three films in the development of a more expansive, speculative account of spectatorial engagement, then I’ll have presumably fulfilled the aim of this thesis. Before proceeding with the task of accounting for these filmic experiences, however, I feel that it is necessary to first address the inherent *difficulty* of such a task, in light of its complexity. This complexity exists on two levels (though one is not wholly distinct from the other): the *viewing context* from which this account is being developed – from, namely, a privatized, home viewing experience in the 21st century – which entails the end of simultaneity, time-shifting, repeat viewings, the “refashioning” of films via home viewing technology, etc.; and the *filmic engagement* that is experienced on both emotional and corporeal levels. Reiterating the viewing context from which this account is developed will provide a starting point from which to further elaborate on this complexity.

⁹⁸ That being said, these films may equally appeal to those for whom these sensations are new and unfamiliar – for those who have not previously experienced the types of relationships depicted in these films.

2. THE COMPLEXITIES, LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL GAINS OF A SINGULAR ACCOUNT OF FILMIC ENGAGEMENT

To reiterate what has already been established in the introductory chapter of this thesis, I have access to a vast array of older films on VHS and DVD. This is a luxury, insofar as I am afforded the choice of viewing any number of films – from current and preceding decades, and from various countries of production – in the comfort and privacy of my home. This is also a luxury insofar as I am able to arrive at films *in my own time*, and not concern myself with rushing to see a film before the end of its theatrical run (as was the predicament of viewers prior to the video age) – hence the “end of simultaneity.” In the case of *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks*, however, I did not have the option of seeing them on the big screen, as I hadn’t even been born in the former case, and would have been but 2 years old in the latter case. And, technically, I hadn’t even heard of *Intimacy* until 2005, and only actually sat down to watch it (after coming across it haphazardly at my local DVD rental outlet) in the spring of 2008. However, given the *types* of films in question – namely, erotically-charged films that are both physically and emotionally arousing – my preference would have been to experience them alone and in the privacy of my apartment. As is also mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire state that the choices one makes in terms of one’s viewing practices are “still a matter of the experiences that one values and the relationship that one wants to establish to a particular type of film.”⁹⁹ I have formed what I consider to be an intimate relationship with these three films – and part of this entails a privatized viewing experience. It is true that my first two viewing experiences of *Last Tango* were shared: I

⁹⁹ Jancovich and Faire, *The Place of the Audience*, 194.

first viewed it on VHS with my father when I was 11 or 12 years old, and I revisited the film roughly ten years later in a film studies course with my peers.¹⁰⁰ However, after having revisited *Last Tango* in the film studies course and being completely enchanted by it, I wished to experience it alone and on my own terms; to have it all to myself, so to speak. I now own all three films on DVD and possess the necessary home viewing technology to enable a privatized viewing experience. And one of the things that DVD technology allows – and home viewing technology, in general – is repeat viewings.¹⁰¹ This is a perfect instance of the way in which the complexity of this account is compounded: *each* viewing of a film becomes *part of* the latest viewing experience. That is, I'll remember what I previously experienced with a film in the process of revisiting it; the latest viewing will trigger sensory and emotional memories of previous viewings. Each viewing then becomes inseparable from the latest viewing experience. This, of course, applies to *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. As I have viewed each film several times, the account that I provide will not be – indeed, *cannot* be – of a *single*, self-contained viewing experience. In accounting for my *latest* viewing experience of each film, the sensations and memories evoked by previous viewings will inevitably be

¹⁰⁰ This film studies course was incidentally held in an auditorium that was usually filled to capacity, with a projector and big screen – the closest I'd ever get to a “theatrical” experience of it.

¹⁰¹ That isn't to say that viewers could not *revisit* a film in theaters prior to the video age – or in *this* day and age, for that matter, if one so desired. Certainly, however, there is a difference between revisiting a film in theaters and revisiting a film with the home viewing technology that has been made available over the last 30 years (in my case, a VCR and DVD player are used to revisit films – the latter of which is built into my Mac desktop computer). The fundamental distinction lies in the degree of control that the viewer possesses over his/her re-viewing. Home viewing technology allows for the accommodation of one's personal schedule, whereas the viewer in question would have to accommodate a theater's showtimes. Home viewing technology allows the viewer to pause or stop a film, to fast-forward or skip ahead – whereas a viewer is denied (for lack of a better word) these options in a movie theater. In short, home viewing technology allows for a higher degree of “interactivity” and control. Again, the way in which a viewer goes about revisiting a film – in this day and age – is all a matter of his or her desired viewing experience.

factored in – illustrating what Barbara Klinger rightly refers to as the “multilayered responses of viewers” that revisit films.¹⁰² Within the context of this thesis, this multilayered response would entail *all* that is elicited by the latest viewing experience of each film: this includes the emotional and physical responses elicited by the viewing itself, as well as the sensory and emotional memories of previous viewings – and the way in which the two are subtly interwoven into a complete experience. Of course, these two “levels” or layers of filmic experience are not easily distinguished – hence the potential difficulties of this elaborate account. Klinger further develops the concept of viewers’ multilayered responses in her elaboration of the richness and potential of repeat viewings: “...rereading indulges in a kind of play that remakes the text into a plural text – ‘the same and new.’ This play opens the text to a potentially intense refashioning, which... represents an active process of appropriation.”¹⁰³ The concept of a text being made into a “plural text” could be understood as a film that develops into something increasingly meaningful – and, consequently, evermore complex – over the course of multiple viewings. For instance, on the surface, *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* struck me as finely-executed, enticing works that took a serious look at the ups and downs of illicit sexual relationships. However, these films acquired depth through a personal investment over the course of several viewings. I came to realize that – over and above their subject matter, which appealed to me – these films were also very engaging because they recalled the emotions and sensations of previous relationships. It can be said that the sensory and emotional memories with which I was equipped from previous relationships greatly intensified my experience of these films. Revisiting *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*

¹⁰² Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 151.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 156. In her elaboration of the potential uses of repeat viewings, Klinger refers to Roland Barthes’s “paradoxical description of rereading as saving “the text from repetition.””

became a means through which I could meditate on experiences of my own, as well as relive or summon certain thrills, bittersweet sensations and emotional memories. In addition to this, there was also an apparent affinity between the pessimism these films exuded vis-à-vis love and sex in human relationships and my own observations; these films foregrounded a certain philosophy about the fate of relationships that rang true to me. There was thus a great appeal to returning to these films: I'd bonded with them through their ability to summon and give expression to cherished and haunting moments in which I'd lived life so intensely. And it was through the *personalization* of these three films¹⁰⁴ – in which they'd become “my own” through repeat viewings – that they were consequently *refashioned*. (In a discussion of the “refashioning” of films via home viewing technology, one cannot overlook the remote control. Klinger and Jancovich and Faire acknowledge the role of the remote control in the refashioning of films – although Klinger more explicitly addresses its role in the refashioning of films. However, the refashioning that I am referring to here is more indicative of the process by which a film is modified through a viewer's incorporation of personal experiences.) In the case of my experience with *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*, a certain familiarity and intimacy has formed over the course of multiple viewings in which memories of previous relationships have become inextricably fused with them, remolding them. At this point, I cannot extricate myself from these three films; they are extensions of me, and I of them. This refashioning of films recalls the varied and complex relationships that viewers can develop with older films – which, in turn, rejuvenates these older titles, making them new

¹⁰⁴ Klinger elaborates on the “personalization” of films as the process through which films become “part of viewers' daily lives, even part of their autobiographies,” through repetition.

again.¹⁰⁵ This is a condition of the end of simultaneity and the extensive afterlife of films on DVD and VHS: films that are discovered at a later time by younger viewers (such as myself) are potentially reborn through the personal significance that s/he bestows upon them. Bearing all of this in mind, the account that is developed over the course of this thesis will constitute an instance in my ever-changing relationship with these films, which perpetually gains in complexity with each new viewing. All of this is to say that the many layers of filmic experience that begin to emerge from a consideration of the viewing context illustrates – at least in part – the complexity of the forthcoming account. In addition to the viewing context, however, a consideration of the difficulty incurred by the *approach* to this account of filmic experience is also in order.

Another complicating factor behind this speculative account of spectatorial engagement is a conundrum that dwells within the very *aim* of a phenomenological description – that is, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In order to begin to delve into this conundrum, it will be necessary to reiterate one of the excerpts that was offered as part of a very *basic* definition of phenomenology in the introductory chapter: “It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is...”¹⁰⁶ This calls attention to the subject’s task – or, challenge – to describe their experience of phenomena *as it is* – implying a minimal degree of tampering in the transfer of the immediate experience to the written word. In the case of this thesis, this task would entail a faithful description of my latest filmic experience of *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. In an attempt to recapture the richness of those experiences, I would naturally strive to provide as faithful

¹⁰⁵ Within the context of the end of simultaneity, these “older films” refer to titles that could not be viewed at the time of their respective theatrical releases.

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

and plentiful a description as possible. However, in the process of breaking down and articulating those experiences, *reflection* – and, thus, a degree of detachment and alteration – is inevitable. But, as Merleau-Ponty himself observes in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The experience of one’s own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, Merleau-Ponty identifies the act of reflection as counter-productive insofar as it removes the subject from the fullness of the experience they are supposed to be describing. He elaborates further on the distancing effect of reflection, as well as the limitations of words that are used to describe that which is reflected upon, in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

It is necessary to comprehend perception as this interrogative thought which lets the perceived world be rather than posits it... [Philosophy] asks of our experience of the world what the world is before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it has been reduced to a set of manageable, disposable significations; it directs this question to our mute life, it addresses itself to that compound of the world and of ourselves that precedes reflection, because the examination of the significations in themselves would give us the world reduced to our idealizations and our syntax.¹⁰⁸

What Merleau-Ponty describes in relation to a subject’s perception of / reflection on the world is equally applicable to a viewer’s perception of / reflection on films. It can thus be said that a similar gap exists between *viewing* a film (as is it perceived in the moment) and *reflecting* on that viewing experience (an after-thought of the moment). Although Merleau-Ponty voices the downside of a reflective procedure whereby a moment is inevitably altered, and stresses the need to understand and conserve a moment as it is given to us in “mute” or “direct” experience, he is well aware of the paradox that

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 198-199

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 102.

complicates this aim. Reflection is inevitable.¹⁰⁹ The present perpetually eludes us as it slips into the past; there is no way to return to the immediate experience of phenomena. It would seem that the closest one can get to a “return” is *through* reflection. Therefore, the most that one can hope to achieve through a phenomenological approach to film is an account that vividly evokes the viewer’s filmic experience on both an emotional and sensory level – thus summoning forth the experience from across the time that has since elapsed. Then, of course, there is the task of actually providing a written account that vividly evokes those filmic experiences. When Merleau-Ponty refers to the “reduction” of worldly experiences to words that fail to adequately convey them, he is addressing the potential of words to drive the experience farther away. And in so doing, he is calling attention to the challenge of a phenomenological approach to film: in the development of a singular account, I need to ensure that my words are in the service of those filmic experiences, and not vice versa. In light of the fact that I can only stretch my vocabulary so far, however, the singular account that I provide will inevitably have limitations; it will be imperfect. That being the case, how will I reanimate these filmic experiences in the account that I provide? The only answer appears to be: as eloquently as I can, and with as much fervor as I can muster – in essence, as best I can. In addition to providing a faithful description of one’s experience of phenomena, Merleau-Ponty points out that a phenomenological account will also ask *how* and *why* a particular experience will trigger

¹⁰⁹ A certain degree of *mediation* is inevitable in the transfer from the immediate or “mute” experience to its written expression. Something will always be lost in the transfer – and consequently, a written account of any experience will always be incomplete. But, as Sobchack points out in *Carnal Thoughts*, our experiences are always already mediated by our lived bodies and modes of perception. In this vein, Sobchack quotes Gary Madison: “...the subject is present to and knows itself only through the mediation of the body, which is to say that presence is always mediated, i.e., is indirect and incomplete.” (188)

certain emotions and sensations¹¹⁰: “Phenomenology... without assuming that emotion is either psychical or physical... will simply ask what emotion means and toward what it is tending.”¹¹¹ “...[I]n a neutral phenomenological way, we need a clarification of the internal meaning of the phenomenon, which phenomenology can furnish.”¹¹² In other words, in the process of articulating a filmic experience, a phenomenological approach to film would also seek to probe said experience and uncover the reason(s) for its significance. How and why were *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* so deeply felt on an emotional and physical level? In order to achieve such clarification, it would appear, once again, that reflection is called for – as Vivian Sobchack has acknowledged: “As a *research procedure*, phenomenology calls us to a series of systematic reflections within which we question and clarify that which we intimately live, but which has been lost to our reflective knowledge through habituation and/or institutionalization.”¹¹³ This “research procedure” is easily geared toward an approach to filmic experience: that which is taken for granted and “left behind” in the process of viewing a film – such as the emotional and physical responses that a film elicits and the reasons for their elicitation (i.e. how and why the viewer in question was emotionally and physically moved) – is uncovered, broken down and made clear through a series of reflections.¹¹⁴ Sobchack

¹¹⁰ Though, it should be said that *how* a viewer responds to a particular film is not wholly or necessarily distinct from *why* s/he responds to it.

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 61.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹³ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 28.

¹¹⁴ This reflective process reveals yet another layer of remove from the filmic experience itself. In *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack claims that a phenomenological reflection reveals two modes of vision: *operative*, in which vision is “passive, spontaneous, seemingly pre-given” and “taken for granted” (the subject/viewer does not actively work at it) – this is reminiscent of Sobchack’s description of “direct experience,” in which life, as is lived in the moment, is seemingly transparent as the subject/viewer is not giving thought to the “modes and processes of perception and expression”; and *deliberate*, in which vision is “active, reflective, reflexive and constitutive.” As I had my thesis in mind during my latest viewing experiences of *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks*, and

expands on the reflective procedures of existential phenomenology through the practice of *radical reflection*:

Thus, the radical reflections of existential phenomenology... turns toward the world as it is lived, and toward a clear and insightful acceptance of the responsibility we have... for the meanings that we choose, accept and live.¹¹⁵

Through a process in which “one proceeds from phenomenological intuition, to analysis, to description,” the radical reflection of phenomenology attempts to *reanimate* the taken-for-granted and the institutionally sedimented... it turns us toward the origins of our experience of phenomena...¹¹⁶

It seems fair to claim that a viewer’s real-world experiences will determine, to an extent, the meaning of a film – and the degree to which it is meaningful. Films are thus imbued with the “personal coloring” of viewers, so to speak. The process of uncovering the *reasons* for a viewer’s physical and emotional engagement with films through a radical reflection on the origins of a viewer’s filmic experiences stands to be deeply personal, as it could reveal a great deal about him/her (values, tastes, memories of experiences that range from good to bad). The question as to *why Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks, and Intimacy* were deeply felt on an emotional and physical level has been answered, to an extent, in my brief mention of the fact that my own personal experiences have provided – or equipped – me with a great emotional and physical sensitivity that has allowed me to profoundly engage with these films. My personal experiences have, to a great extent, informed my emotional and sensual engagement with these three films. Sobchack

Intimacy, and as I had seen them all several times before, I was mindful of all that I was experiencing – and had previously experienced with them. Therefore, I employed deliberate vision. However, the remove that accompanies deliberate vision is not only inevitable but necessary insofar as it allows for an understanding of a subject/viewer’s experience; an understanding of how and why, for instance, a film is experienced on an emotional and physical level. It is that necessary distance that allows for the written expression of an experience: a degree of awareness of one’s bodily and emotional responses is necessary in order to be able to articulate them.

¹¹⁵ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 27.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

describes this as the process through which what is seen is “thickened by the subjective and value-laden side of vision that exceeds and enfolds vision’s visible productions.”¹¹⁷ And the question as to *how* these films were deeply felt on an emotional and physical level marks the point at which the account of my filmic experiences (subjective) is developed into a more expansive, speculative account of spectatorial engagement (objective). Sobchack articulates this process very well when she says that a phenomenological description will proceed from a singular account of experience to “‘unpack’ and make explicit the objective and subjective aspects and conditions that structure that experience as the kind of meaningful experience it is,”¹¹⁸ becoming “potentially resonant and inhabitable for others.”¹¹⁹ The concepts contained within the works of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, Laura Marks and Sue L. Cataldi will serve to explain how I – and potentially other, similarly-situated viewers – physically and emotionally engage with these three films (and by extension, the erotic melodrama). The works of Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi – which foreground the physical and emotional dimensions of viewers’ filmic engagement¹²⁰ – are particularly useful in delineating the structure of filmic experiences, as well as illustrating the profundity, beauty and potential power therein. They provide an excellent and lively basis from which to better understand the multifaceted nature of viewers’ filmic engagement, as well as the ways in which certain films become meaningful events in the lives of viewers.

¹¹⁷ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 181.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Although, it is true that Marks’s work more specifically emphasizes the haptic dimension of *video art*.

Of course, it is not possible to proceed with this phenomenological account – which employs reflective procedures that are aimed at uncovering the origins of viewers’ (and in this case, *my*) filmic experiences – without addressing the inherently *personal* dimension of such a task. As has already been mentioned, it is not possible to delve into why a work is meaningful without revealing a great deal about the *person* for whom the work in question is meaningful. It has already been established – in the process of clarifying what a phenomenological approach to film entails – that the upcoming account will elaborate on the sensory and emotional memories that were elicited during my latest viewing experiences of *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. These memories – and in particular, the emotional memories that are elaborated upon – are deeply personal.¹²¹ Herein lies another way in which this elaborate account incurs difficulty – and is, in some ways, problematic: the scholarly merit of this thesis may be called into question on the basis of the extensive and (at times) explicit descriptions that I provide of certain personal experiences.¹²² Of course, these experiences are elaborated upon within the context of this account; they are, in essence, blanketed by my thesis – which is, itself, a scholarly work.¹²³ The context notwithstanding, however, the incorporation of my personal experiences into this account places me in a difficult – and in some ways, paradoxical – position. On the one hand, as this *is* a document that is developed for, and within, the constraints of a scholarly institution, I must take care to balance the personal with the

¹²¹ That is, although one can generalize that the elicitation of emotional and sensory memories is not uncommon, the emotional memories elaborated upon in the upcoming account cannot be generalized insofar as they are *mine*. They reveal a great deal about *me* and are, consequently, personal. These are, for the most part, emotionally-charged memories of my ill-fated “romantic” relationships.

¹²² Although, this raises the question of how “scholarly merit” is measured.

¹²³ That is, this thesis is a document that is developed within – and for – an academic institution. It is a necessary and substantive component of my Masters degree. On this basis alone, does it not constitute a scholarly work?

theoretical. These constraints also imply certain formalities: I must also be mindful of maintaining a formal tone throughout this paper. For instance, in the midst of describing a memory or sensation, this account is prone to informal address through the heavy use of “I.”¹²⁴ The upcoming account may also be (mis)construed as informal and even inappropriate by virtue of the degree to which I am inserted into this account (through the personal experiences that are elaborated upon in relation to the three films). On the other hand, personal reflections are an inevitable part of a phenomenological approach to film. In the process of providing a faithful description of my filmic experiences, I am bound to be thorough in order to reanimate those experiences – and if that entails providing explicit details of some of the sensations and memories that were elicited, so be it. Earlier on in this chapter, I promised that my filmic experiences would be recounted with as much fervor as I could muster. That being said, if this account were to hold back in any way – if I were to shortchange the reader by withholding details, and simply offer a dry, safe account of my filmic experiences¹²⁵ – I would be copping out on the very aim of a phenomenological description, which seeks to recapture the fullness of one’s experience of phenomena (in this case, the fullness of my filmic experiences). Although the descriptions I provide of my physical and emotional engagement with these three films are extensive and, at times, explicit, they serve a purpose: in addition to vividly evoking my filmic experiences for the reader, they provide the grounds for a more expansive, speculative account of spectatorial engagement – which is at the core of this thesis. These descriptions provide the basis – or launching pad – for the concepts and theories offered

¹²⁴ Although, it is true that this personal pronoun is *already* in heavy use in this thesis.

¹²⁵ By safe, it is meant an account that is mostly sparing in detail, offering a sanitized (articulation) of my filmic experiences; an account that is cold and somehow detached. The reader would likely feel distanced from my filmic experiences through such an approach to this account, which defeats the purpose.

by Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi that explain how my filmic engagement plausibly extends to other viewers. In this way, it can be said that this thesis is *a scholarly text informed by my personal experiences*. But what is more is the fact that this thesis points to a larger, preexisting body of scholarship that incorporates personal experience into a discussion of film. This thesis is part of a larger body of scholarly texts informed by personal experiences. Thinking back to when I began my M.A., I knew I was interested in finding out what drew me to certain erotic films that depicted the rise and fall of illicit relationships – such as *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks*, *Damage* (1992), *Unfaithful* and *Lie With Me*. And my search for scholarly literature that elaborated on the process by which viewers meaningfully engage with films (as I had with the aforementioned titles) eventually led me to Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology¹²⁶ – which, in turn, led me to the works of Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi. Thus, my profound experiences with the aforementioned films prompted me to look into theorists who utilized personal experience (usually theirs) as a valid (and valuable) means of elaborating on more general structures by which viewers physically and emotionally engage with films. Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi, in particular, voiced – each in their respective ways – the role that our personal lives play in our engagement with films, which I found both fascinating and essential to an understanding of how we engage with films. These theorists used their personal experiences as the basis for theoretical and philosophical discussions of film (and video).¹²⁷ This became, for me, the ideal basis from which to consider filmic engagement and develop a more expansive account of spectatorial

¹²⁶ That is, insofar as phenomenology provided a philosophical rationale for an elaboration of my filmic experiences.

¹²⁷ This is especially true of Sobchack's *Carnal Thoughts*, Marks's *Touch*, and Cataldi's *Emotion, Depth and Flesh* – the works that are referred to consistently throughout this thesis.

engagement. Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi provided concepts and reflections through which my profound engagement with these films could be clarified and understood – for both myself *and* others. And these same concepts (explained in detail in the upcoming account) serve to delineate the ways in which my filmic engagement potentially extends to other viewers. Thus (backtracking to the aforementioned “problematics” of the personal dimension of this thesis), it can be said that the personal and theoretical *are* linked through the expansion of this personal account of filmic engagement (subjective) into a speculative account of spectatorial engagement (objective). The personal dimension of this thesis is essentially balanced with the theoretical insofar as it is developed *in tandem* with the concepts offered by Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi. And although it may feel, at times, that the personal experiences described in the upcoming account push the limits of acceptability, they are an inevitable part of a phenomenological approach to film – and as such, have a place in this thesis.¹²⁸

Having now addressed the difficulties and complexity of the forthcoming account (thus providing an idea of what the reader will encounter), it should be noted that even if it is successful – that is, even if the descriptions I provide of my filmic experiences and the concepts of the aforementioned theorists and philosophers ring true and resonate with the reader (or readers) – nothing within it is *fixed*, as my relationship with these three films will inevitably evolve. My life, who I am, my tastes and all that I cherish that holds

¹²⁸ The intent, here, is not to be cheeky. The purpose of addressing the difficulty incurred by the personal foundation of this thesis is to show that while I am aware of its potential risks (within the context of this paper), it is, nevertheless, purposeful. This thesis is not being used to as an excuse to rant about my personal life; rather, this thesis is acknowledging the role of one’s personal experiences in their filmic engagement.

meaning for me, is in flux. As Sobchack points out: "...the phenomena of our experience cannot be reduced to fixed essences; rather, in existence they have provisional forms and structures and themes and thus are always open to new and other possibilities for both being and meaning."¹²⁹ As our lives and our bodies change, and as our emotional and physical experiences and memories accumulate and shift in form over time, our relationships with films will surely take on new meanings and forms. Therefore, the account developed in this thesis is unique insofar as it is a window into a very particular period of my life, in which *Last Tango, 9 1/2 Weeks* and *Intimacy* are particularly striking. As they now stand, these films are meaningfully engaging by virtue of the sensory and emotional memories they elicit (which, as they stand, are strangely fresh and quite powerful). It is entirely plausible that had this thesis been developed years ago or years later, it would have turned out to be a completely different project.

¹²⁹ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 2.

3. A SINGULAR ACCOUNT OF FILMIC ENGAGEMENT

Everything that has been developed up until this point has served as a set up to the upcoming account of filmic experience. Having now established the dialogue that weaves *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* into an compelling trio of films for this thesis, as well as having established the potential difficulties incurred through a phenomenological approach to these films (and the viewing context within which I am developing this account), we are now in a better position to move forward with this account. This is true insofar as the reader now has a better idea of what to expect from this account in terms of its complexity, limitations – but also its potential gain (i.e. its potential to speak to, and resonate with, the reader). It would first be useful, however, to provide a summary of *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. A summary is a poor substitute for the films themselves, but I cannot presume that the reader (or readers) has (have) seen all three films – therefore the film summaries will at least provide a reference point throughout the account.

Last Tango depicts the rise and fall of the briefly-lived, illicit relationship that develops between Paul (Marlon Brando) and Jeanne (Maria Schneider). Paul is a tormented, embittered middle-aged widower (his wife has just committed suicide). Jeanne is introduced as a naïve, twenty-year-old woman in search of an apartment that she and her boyfriend can share (her boyfriend is a rather annoying, pretentious, young filmmaker). At the start of the film, Paul follows Jeanne to an apartment building she's decided to look into. The two find themselves in the same flat, where Paul proceeds to

seduce and fuck Jeanne (presumably deflowering her).¹³⁰ They continue to meet regularly at the flat for sex, play and heavy philosophical banter. Paul forbids any mention of their lives outside the flat – and even forbids mention of their real names – claiming that it is all “bullshit.” Their philosophical banter usually revolves around love and relationships – basically, all of the things that Paul rejects and refuses to divulge about himself. Over the brief period of their liaison at the flat, Paul attempts to keep Jeanne at bay, emotionally, withholding the personal details of his life that she so craves. Paul maintains a cynical exterior, mocking Jeanne’s naïve ideals, which she, in turn, resents. During a particular encounter at the flat, Jeanne expresses a naïve sentiment about family values, for which Paul humiliates her sexually. The relationship weighs her down emotionally, and her curiosity and enthusiasm turn to disillusionment. Eventually, Jeanne becomes engaged to her boyfriend. Shortly thereafter, she returns to the flat only to discover that Paul has evidently gone, causing her to despair. And as Jeanne leaves the flat for the last time, Paul approaches her suddenly, professing his love for her, revealing his name and spilling the details of his depressing life. He wants to begin anew with her. By this time, however, Jeanne has been worn down and has no desire to resume their relationship. This is followed by a game of cat and mouse, in which Paul chases Jeanne to her parents’ flat.

¹³⁰ Reluctant as I am to use the terms “fuck” or “fucking” – for fear that they are too strong or inappropriate within the context of this paper – the sex depicted in these films cannot be properly categorized as “making love.” And to say, for instance, that Paul proceeded to “seduce and have sex with Jeanne” somehow doesn’t sound right, either. There is an aggressivity to his first sexual advance that seems properly captured by the word “fuck.” And the same can be said for the sex depicted in *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* (save for *maybe* the last sexual encounter between Jay and Claire in *Intimacy*). As reluctant as I am to use the word “fuck” or “fucking,” I am equally reluctant to use the terms “making love,” “having sex” or “fornicating.” And even to state something like “Paul proceeded to seduce and make *wild* or *passionate* or *violent* love to Jeanne” is corny-sounding. It is also true that these erotically-charged films force us to confront strong words like “fuck” and “fucking” – as well as the act these crude terms refer to.

Jeanne retrieves a gun from a drawer in her father's study and shoots Paul. Paul dies on the balcony of the flat, and Jeanne rehearses what she will tell the police.

9 ½ Weeks follows Elizabeth (Kim Basinger) through the rise and fall of her briefly-lived, sexually-charged relationship with John (Mickey Rourke). Elizabeth is recently divorced and works at an art gallery. She randomly encounters John, a Wall Street investor, a couple of times in the city (New York) before they begin their illicit liaison. John is very mysterious and strangely charming (smooth but intense), which appeals to Elizabeth. A few dates in, John makes it very clear that he has no interest in any other facet of her life (her work, her friends) and that he wants it to be exclusively about the two of them. Their first few encounters, though erotic, do not involve sex. For instance, on the night of their first official date, he asks her to undress so that he can blindfold and tease her with ice. On another date, he requests that she sit with her eyes closed on her kitchen floor, while he cooks and feeds her various things (that range from pleasurable to painful; from pasta, strawberries and Jello to cough syrup and jalapeño peppers). Their first true sexual encounter (true in the sense that they actually have sex) is the result of an outburst: John threatens to spank Elizabeth for having gone through his personal effects, at which point she lashes out at him – only to be overpowered. It is then when they have sex (though, it qualifies as a semi-consensual rape, given the rough nature of the encounter and the fact that her consent is delayed). Their relationship continues over a period of several weeks, with each sexual encounter gaining in intensity. At the peak of their relationship (when it is most exciting), it is revealed that John is evidently married, and that Elizabeth is his unknowing mistress. The relationship begins

to spiral downward when John takes their sexual games to new, undesirable heights (sadosomachistic role play, in which John is the sadist). By this time, the relationship has begun to emotionally exhaust Elizabeth. But once she feels that John has pushed her too far – and long after their relationship has hindered Elizabeth’s concentration and ability to function at work – she decides to end the relationship. In an attempt to dissuade Elizabeth from leaving, John begins to open up about his life, claiming he’s never met a woman quite like her – and that he loves her. Elizabeth stands firm, however, and leaves. Elizabeth wanders away from his apartment – and their relationship – an emotional wreck.

Intimacy depicts a briefly-lived affair between a recently divorced bartender, Jay (Mark Rylance) and an unhappily married woman and failed actress, Claire (Kerry Fox). In the beginning, neither party knows anything about the other: their lives are unknown to one another. The only thing that is known is that Claire returns each week (on Wednesdays) to Jay’s flat for sex, pure and simple. As soon as they’re finished, Claire collects her clothes, dresses and leaves, without a word. Jay is genuinely curious about Claire. One afternoon, after they’ve had sex, Jay impulsively follows Claire across town (across London). He discovers that she is an actress (albeit a small-time actress who is the lead in a no-budget Tennessee Williams play, held in the basement of a bar¹³¹). More importantly, he discovers that she is married when he meets her husband, Andy (Timothy Spall), and their son. Later that week, Claire spots Jay in the street and follows *him*. She ends up following him back to the bar. Realizing, in that moment, that Jay has most likely discovered she is married and could potentially expose their affair to her husband, she

¹³¹ The play is “The Glass Menagerie,” in which Claire plays the part of Laura.

flees. Jay and Claire meet the following Wednesday, but neither mentions what they've found out. Andy, at this point, does not suspect their affair, and is actually growing fond of Jay, who has made a habit of stopping by the bar. One night, Jay waits for Claire after a performance at the bar and confronts her, venting his frustrations about all that she's concealed from him. Andy ends up discovering the truth about Jay and Claire. In spite of her infidelity and everything that has gone wrong, Claire decides to stay with Andy and end her affair with Jay. During her last visit at Jay's flat, she informs him of her decision. Jay softens up and asks that she consider staying with him. It is rather obvious that Claire has meant more to him than a weekly lay; he has become emotionally invested in her. After Claire reasserts her decision to return home to Andy, she and Jay have sex one last time – this time, it is somehow more tender, more emotionally-driven. Once they are finished, Claire leaves Jay's flat, presumably for the last time.

Although I have already claimed that previous relationships have informed my physical and emotional engagement with these three films, it should, perhaps, be clarified that I have never experienced anything *exactly* like the relationships depicted in these films. That is, I have never been in a relationship exactly like Paul and Jeanne's, John and Elizabeth's, or Jay and Claire's – nor have I had comparable experiences to some of these characters, like Paul (someone who is deeply perplexed and hurt by his spouse's suicide, infidelity and secrets), or Claire (whose marriage has flatlined, and is consequently driven – or compelled – to visit another man, on a weekly basis, for sex). That does not, however, prevent me – nor should it prevent others – from profoundly engaging with these films on many levels. There are, as I indicate throughout this chapter, many points

of entry into these films. Sobchack, for starters, claims that we (viewers) all possess *cinematic intelligibility*, which is “based on the intelligibility of embodied vision.”¹³² She claims that cinematic intelligibility is assumed by viewers, “even if it assumes and assures no single interpretation.”¹³³ And this concept is echoed in Marks’s *The Skin of Film*, in a quote by Henri Bergson in the midst of her discussion of how memory is encoded in the senses: “...perception appeals to the “intelligence of the body.””¹³⁴ What all of this appears to mean – this “cinematic intelligibility” and “intelligence of the body” – is that we are able to grasp what films show us (i.e. representations of various physical acts and interactions, representations of characters tasting, touching, feeling, etc.) through the carnal and sensory knowledge we have previously acquired through our real-world experiences. We are able to touch and feel what we see, to taste what we see, and to smell what we see, by virtue of the sensory and carnal information that we have stored through our real-world experiences. And, of course, this extends to our emotional experiences, which are not divorced from our bodies.¹³⁵ As Sobchack claims, “Our perceptual encounter with the world, self, and others occurs prior to and provides the grounds for our perceptual encounter with film.”¹³⁶ Therefore, much of what is depicted in the three films is (presumably) physically and emotionally grasped or translated by viewers – with varied degrees of intensity – regardless of whether or not they have actually experienced that which is depicted. This concept will be developed in greater detail over the course of this account.

¹³² Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 6.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 146.

¹³⁵ Merleau-Ponty has already been quoted as saying that phenomenology does not assume that emotion is either wholly physical or psychical. This is echoed by Sue L. Cataldi in *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*.

¹³⁶ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 54.

It is true that when I think of these three films, there are particular scenes or moments that leap to mind. Indeed, I will not describe what I experienced every minute of each of my latest viewings of *Last Tango*, *9 1/2 Weeks* and *Intimacy*. Given the scope of this thesis, I shall have to be selective. I will account for particular, momentous scenes from each film. More specifically, I will describe the scenes/moments that particularly moved and engaged me on a physical and emotional level. I will provide a description of each of these momentous scenes, which will be interlaced with an account of my responses to them. The concepts of the aforementioned theorists will then be incorporated to explain my engagement with these scenes. Once again, however, it should be noted that the descriptions provided of the selected scenes are elaborate and lengthy. However, it is felt that the detailed descriptions of the scenes that moved me are needed to, first, engage the reader and, second, provide points of reference for my emotional and physical engagement with the three films. And now, without further ado, I will proceed with the account of my filmic experiences of *Last Tango*, *9 1/2 Weeks* and *Intimacy*. I will begin with an account of *Last Tango*'s introduction of Paul and Jeanne.

The opening of *Last Tango* is quite significant (and considerably loaded) in that it introduces both Paul and Jeanne, and leads right into their first sexual encounter at the flat that becomes their regular meeting place. Paul is first shown wandering under an overpass on an overcast day, grief-stricken and teary-eyed. Moments later, a bright-eyed Jeanne passes him by – taking brief notice of him in his pitiful state before continuing onward. Paul follows Jeanne to an apartment building, which advertises an available flat.

Paul somehow gets ahead of Jeanne and waits for her in the dark flat. Once Jeanne enters the main room of the flat and parts the curtains to let in light, she is startled to discover Paul, who has wedged himself between a protrusion in the wall and the fireplace. He is seated in this little space, with his back to Jeanne and the light that streams in. He and Jeanne express an interest in renting the flat, but neither one is sure. The two begin to wander around the big, dusty, dimly-lit space, which is cluttered with draped furniture, broken mirrors and various other objects. Paul's presence, up until now, is felt as incredibly heavy. When Jeanne first discovers him in the flat, for instance, he appears as tattered, heavy and motionless as the furniture. He perfectly blends with the subdued color of the flat (faded yellow and brown), and it almost seems as if it would require a tremendous effort to move him, as if he were planted in place – weighed down by his grief. And there is something in the way Paul carries himself – and even in the way he walks (moving slowly, shifting his weight from side to side with every step he takes) – that conveys a great emotional weight, which is felt in my chest and in the pit of my stomach. As I watch him move about the flat in his dejected state, I am aware of a weight in the pit of my stomach and a tightness in my chest, which brings me down, making it harder to breathe. The aura of heaviness that Paul exudes is reminiscent of Jay in *Intimacy*, whenever Jay reminisces about his family, prior to leaving them. There are only two flashbacks in the whole film of Jay's "previous life" with his family in their home, and in both flashbacks, Jay is often shown alone, walking or sitting around the flat, exuding a deep sadness, and even mild anxiety. At this point in the film, it is known that Jay recently walked out on his family – and the flashbacks show Jay in an emotionally wrecked state, when he has apparently resolved to leave his family. An especially striking

moment in one of the flashbacks is when Jay walks around his family's flat, drinking in the space one last time before packing up and leaving them. He walks around like he is carrying lead weights in his shoes and invisible weights on his shoulders. He is then shown sitting – at first on the staircase of the flat, looking at his son's little shoes after he's packed his things, and then finally on the front steps of the flat, smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. He hunches forward, his eyes glossed over and red with tears, his hair is disheveled – looking so pitiful, so small. There's a tinge of guilt in his eyes.

Watching Jay in this flashback causes my chest to constrict, making it hard to breathe. I feel this way when I am depressed, and I do get depressed every so often – sometimes for reasons I can pinpoint, and other times for reasons I cannot. When this mood overtakes me, I feel glued to the spot; paralyzed. I'm so weighed down by this horrible feeling that it requires a tremendous effort to do the simplest things. This recalls the concept that our “perceptual encounter with the world, self, and others occurs prior to and provides the grounds for our perceptual encounter with film.”¹³⁷ Indeed, our real-world experiences equip us with sensory and emotional memories that allow us to meaningfully engage with films, to varied degrees. It is through our affectively-charged experiences – through which we acquire and store emotional memories – that we develop emotional intelligence, which allows us to grasp or somehow intuit the emotional spectacles encountered in life and onscreen. As Merleau-Ponty says: “If it is conceded that in man the emotional life is ‘shot through with intelligence’ we mean that simple representations can take the place of the natural stimuli of pleasure and pain, according to the laws governing the association of ideas,”¹³⁸ which “brings past experience into play.”¹³⁹ This

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 154.

emotional intelligence – which entails an emotional awareness of others and oneself, that enables one to recognize and intuit the emotions of others – that is applied to real-world experiences over the course of one’s life is also applied to one’s experience of film. My previous emotional experiences inform the way I perceive and engage with films on an emotional level.¹⁴⁰ The scenes just described from *Last Tango* and *Intimacy* evoke – for *me* – the weighty sensation of depression (retained or absorbed through prior experiences) through the gestures and facial expressions of Paul and Jay.¹⁴¹ What each character communicates visually through the subtlety of their emotional gestures and facial expressions is understood on a gut level. That is not to say, for instance, that I understand or know Paul’s grief, that I have suffered a similar loss that allows me to emotionally align myself with him and feel his grief. Rather, something in Paul’s aura – in the way he carries himself, in the way he walks, in the expression on his face, in the tone of his voice – strikes a familiar cord in me through the heaviness that is suddenly felt in the pit of my stomach and the tightness in my chest. I recognize these debilitating sensations as those associated with moments of depression. On the other hand, as has already been mentioned, a viewer need not necessarily have an emotional reference (such as depression) or equivalent in order to emotionally engage with the two scenes just described from *Last Tango* and *Intimacy*. In the midst of an affectively-charged scene, a viewer could also “blindly apprehend” the emotional state of characters. Cataldi claims

¹³⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁰ And this extends to *cinematic intelligibility* – “the intelligibility of embodied vision” – insofar as emotions are also embodied. That is, emotions are felt by our bodies; are perceived with our bodies. As well, our perception of film also appeals to our emotional intelligence – to our reservoir of emotional memories.

¹⁴¹ Béla Balázs in the chapter entitled “The Face of Man” in *Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art)* delves into the art of film acting and how human facial expressions and emotional gestures are understood. This will be mentioned later, in relation to affectively-charged scenes that have yet to be accounted for.

that “to “blindly apprehend” an emotional significance is to “understand” it by way of opening onto the conformatively expressive possibilities of one’s own bodily powers.”¹⁴² She adds that “this ‘blind apprehension’ has also to do with our bodies’ ‘catching on’ to emotional meanings by conformatively overlapping or ‘lending itself to’ a spectacle.”¹⁴³ Therefore, without having even previously experienced an emotion comparable to that of a particular character onscreen, a viewer could conceivably open him or herself up to that character so as to feel him/her. In other words, for instance, a viewer watching the opening of *Last Tango* could conceivably feel horrible and upset while watching Paul in his dejected state – and somehow “understand” him by way of feeling a knot in the pit of his/her stomach or experiencing, to whatever extent, the emotional heaviness that Paul exudes. The viewer in question could, then, conceivably understand – or, blindly apprehend – the affectively-charged scenes from *Last Tango* and *Intimacy* through the sensations and emotions that they evoke. In the midst of such powerful scenes, the viewer could conceivably open him/herself up to something that they have, perhaps, never felt before – to discover previously uncharted emotional realms, further developing his/her emotional self-awareness. Such an occurrence would also serve as an indicator of the viewer’s meaningful engagement with the film in question – by virtue of being emotionally moved. Cataldi claims that emotional experiences “involve perceptions of meaningful change – ‘in’ a situation and ‘in’ ourselves in relation to that situation,”¹⁴⁴ and that the “felt phenomena of being moved...is...a core, prototypical sense of ‘emotional depth’: emotional experience cannot take place without some such dis-

¹⁴² Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, 95.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

‘orientation’; some such dis-positioning.”¹⁴⁵ Thus, films that have the ability to move or emotionally displace a viewer (cause an emotional shift or change) may very well constitute emotionally profound experiences – or events – *in themselves*. This was, indeed, my experience of *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* insofar as they deeply moved me and became filmic “events.” The two scenes just described provide a starting point to my emotional engagement with these three films (although this account has not yet touched on *9 ½ Weeks*, it soon will). This account will continue with my emotional and physical engagement with the sex scenes depicted in these three films.

As these are erotically-charged films, an account of the sex scenes and the responses they elicited – some of which were quite intense – is inevitable. In *Last Tango*, during that same scene in which Paul and Jeanne are wandering around the flat for the first time, Paul makes his first sexual advance on Jeanne. A strange tension – perhaps sexual tension – has built up between the two of them in the brief time they have spent wandering around the flat. At one point, Paul shuts the door to the flat and slowly approaches Jeanne. He has an air of subdued confidence (perhaps arrogance), as if he somehow knows that Jeanne will be responsive to his advances (or perhaps he doesn’t care and is prepared to take her, anyway). It is in this brief moment, when Paul is approaching Jeanne, that I feel my heart beating harder and faster: there is an intensity about him that I am not altogether comfortable with, as if he has hit bottom and is acting in reckless disregard for Jeanne. There is something unsettling about his advances. Paul pauses in front of her momentarily, and then lifts her up and carries her across the main room – and all the while, Jeanne is totally compliant, going with it. He lets her down

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

against the wall at the other end of the room, where they begin to passionately kiss (Jeanne's back is up against the wall, and Paul presses himself against her). Paul reaches between Jeanne's legs – she is wearing a short dress underneath a long fur coat – and tears off her panties, quickly tossing them away. It should be noted, however, that I only discovered – maybe three viewings ago – that Paul is actually ripping imaginary panties off of Jeanne. A sound effect is inserted of material being ripped – but the panties are revealed to be non-existent when Paul tosses away an invisible pair (which is somehow embarrassing). I was previously too caught up in the intensity of this moment to notice. In any case, once the phantom panties are discarded, Jeanne wraps one leg around Paul's waist, and then the other, and they proceed to have sex against the wall. Their sex, however, is somewhat awkward. For starters, I find myself needing “cues” as to when penetration occurs in these simulated sex scenes – and in the case of this scene, no clear cues are provided.¹⁴⁶ And although there appears to be some thrusting, with both parties breathing heavily, moaning and crying out in pleasure (or, in Jeanne's case, pain – provided she *is* being deflowered), there is this odd absence of rhythm and an obvious lack of pelvic contact that makes the sex less “believable” (both bodies are essentially hidden behind Paul's trench coat, but Paul's hips reach back while Jeanne appears to be hanging off of him). But, still, for the purpose of the scene, I am able to “fill in” the distance between their bodies by simulating the sensation of penetration with the cues of pleasure that are provided (*i.e.* hard breathing, moaning, shouting, and the semblance of rhythm). The “lack of believability” that was felt during Paul and Jeanne's first sexual

¹⁴⁶ In the case of simulated heterosexual sex scenes, these “cues” include a male character reaching down for his penis, as if to insert it into his partner's vagina or anus. As well, a vocal indication of penetration – a loud moan, exhalation – would constitute a cue.

encounter was also felt in *9 ½ Weeks*, when John and Elizabeth first have sex – for similar reasons.

In this particular scene, Elizabeth is infuriated with John for instructing her to raise her skirt so he can spank her – as punishment for having gone through his things in the brief time she was left alone in his apartment. She attempts to slap him, but he blocks her. This turns into a brief but intense struggle in John’s dining room, in which Elizabeth is ultimately overpowered. He lifts her up and pins her down on her back, on the edge of his dining room table. He pulls up her skirt and tears off her panties (an actual, visible pair), grabs hold of her forearms and pulls her against him. The “cue” of penetration appears to be in the medium shot of Elizabeth letting out a loud moan, while sliding up and then down the table. But the reverse medium shot of John reveals that Elizabeth’s hips are being pulled against his stomach, while *his* hips reach back. Like Paul, John appears fully clothed – hidden beneath his trench coat – but the lack of pelvic contact is still obvious. Although their sex is a little shaky and disorienting at first, there is some obvious and consistent thrusting that makes it easier to follow – and more physically arousing – than the sex described in the opening of *Last Tango*.¹⁴⁷ However, the highly stylized, glossy aesthetic of *9 ½ Weeks* results in a certain degree of remove from the sex acts depicted.¹⁴⁸ It takes away from the rawness of the sex in that everything – even the somewhat disquieting sex that was just described between Elizabeth and John – appears

¹⁴⁷ Although it is implied that Jeanne and Paul have sex several times throughout the film, there are really only two sex scenes: Paul and Jeanne’s first sexual encounter in the beginning of the film; and the infamous “butter scene,” in which Paul anally rapes Jeanne, using butter as a lubricant.

¹⁴⁸ Everything is carefully controlled – from the lighting and editing to the music and choreography of John and Elizabeth’s beautifully sculpted bodies.

glamorous. John's modern apartment, with all its chic furniture and appliances, is carefully designed as a very "sexy" place for their sexual liaisons (this is especially true in the scene where Elizabeth performs a striptease for John to Joe Cocker's "You Can Leave Your Hat On," which has the feel of a music video). Even the grungiest of spaces become sexy locales for John and Elizabeth's sexual encounters. In other words, the sex acts depicted in *9 ½ Weeks* are elaborate and glossy to the point that their believability – hence, potency – is somewhat compromised. But where the sex in *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* is somewhat lacking – in terms of their overall ability to really stir intense sensations through the rawness and believability of the sex they depict – *Intimacy* is ample.

Right at the start of *Intimacy*, Jay awakens to the sound of a ring at his front door. Claire is at the door. It is clear that Jay and Claire know each other, though it isn't clear *how* (during my first viewing, based on their awkward and seemingly stale dynamic, I assumed they were recently divorced, or separated). Jay and Claire make small talk while he prepares them coffee. Shortly thereafter, they descend into the basement with the coffee. There, they begin to passionately kiss on the carpeted floor, pulling at each other's clothes. Their desire registers in the intensity of their kissing and overall body language: they are breathing hard and fast, pulling each other close, undressing themselves as they go – all over the basement floor. Their desire is uninhibited and raw – they do not hold back, nor do they pace themselves. Jay is completely naked and is revealed to have an erection, while Claire is nude from the waist down. She straddles and kisses him while he is sitting up – and the rhythm of their breathing, as they hold each

other close in this position, elicits an intense physical response from me – one of total arousal. In this moment, I can feel Jay’s erection pressing against me, throbbing between my legs. The intensity of this sensation was unlike anything I’d ever experienced with a film containing softcore erotic content. It was particularly potent when I first viewed it. And then, there comes a point where Jay and Claire are completely naked – their naked bodies are *actually* shown, whereas in *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks*, there is always *at least* one body (usually the male protagonist’s) that is partially or completely clothed in the act of sex. Claire straddles Jay a second time, kissing him and stroking his erection. Jay interrupts their rushed foreplay to put on a condom. Moments later, he is on top of her, reaching down (as if to position his penis at the entrance of her vagina), and a moment later, he begins to thrust. This really does look – and feel – like sex: clear cues of penetration are provided, they are completely naked, their bodies are close together, rocking back and forth (Claire’s legs are wrapped firmly around Jay’s waist, which is pressed against hers) – and they both moan and breathe hard to the rhythm of their thrusting. The “remove” that is described in relation to the sex depicted in *9 ½ Weeks* is absent here: if anything, there is a *lack* of distance between the writhing, desiring bodies onscreen (my computer screen) and my own. This is, in large part, due to the aforementioned elements in the sex scene just described. But what is more is the fact that *Intimacy* is not a highly stylized, glossy-looking film: it has a truly “natural,” earthy aesthetic that does not flatter either of the characters’ bodies or glamorize the basement in which their sexual encounters take place (in fact, Jay’s flat is rather depressing-looking: it is a mess of clothes, dishes and boxes of his stuff – and in the daytime, the weak light that enters against the faded blue wallpaper makes it feel all the more depressing,

accentuating his melancholy). I'm sure this natural aesthetic and the uncompromised rawness and believability of Jay and Claire's sexual encounters partially account for my intense carnal engagement with the scene just described (and this applies to the sex scenes that follow in this film). Certainly, the sex depicted in *Intimacy* is far more graphic and intense than the sex depicted in *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks*.¹⁴⁹

After watching the sex scene just described from *Intimacy* for the *first* time, I remember feeling “done to” and somewhat spent – as if my body had experienced a rushed sexual encounter. My breathing grew heavier and my heart started to race as my whole body joined in Jay and Claire's passionate and lusty encounter. And the potency of this scene persisted in my latest viewing of *Intimacy*. Jay and Claire's every breath, kiss and touch sensitized my body. I felt like I was participating in their urgent foreplay, feeling their bodies rubbing up against each other through my own. As I described above, in moments when Claire is straddling Jay, I could feel Jay's erection, throbbing between my legs. As well, I could feel Jay's penetration of Claire and the thrusting that ensues until Jay climaxes. The potency of this scene is greatly informed by my own carnal experiences, which are absorbed by my body and later summoned from my repository of

¹⁴⁹ Of course, it could be said that the viewing context of each of the three films factors into this. Technical advancements from the time of *Last Tango*'s release in 1972 have enabled an increasingly privatized viewing experience. And these technological advancements coincide with the erotic melodrama's increasingly explicit sexual spectacle, which is evident in its evolution from *Last Tango* to *Intimacy*. You go from a film that contains purely simulated sexual content to a film that – in addition to its more potent simulated sex scenes – contains an unsimulated sex act (Claire/Kerry Fox performs fellatio on Jay/Mark Rylance). Next to the sex depicted in *Intimacy*, *Last Tango* will seem and feel (to a viewer situated, as I am, in the 21st century) comparatively tame. Also, a viewer who can revisit *Last Tango* with home viewing technology is far more likely to spot and verify something like Jeanne's phantom panties – which detracts from the realism, or believability, of that sex scene. I scanned backward a few times to verify this little detail when I first discovered it with my DVD copy.

sensory memories. As Sobchack herself points out, "...we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium."¹⁵⁰ This is echoed by Marks when she notes that cinema "appeals to contact – to embodied knowledge and to the sense of touch in particular..."¹⁵¹ The visual and aural cues that are provided of Jay and Claire's intense pleasure (the contact of their naked bodies, hard breathing, cues of penetration) engages my whole body, vividly evoking sensations of previous sexual encounters. For instance, the clear cues of penetration that are provided in this scene cue the sensation of penetration that is remembered by my body and activated in this moment. This recalls Marks's concept of "tactile memory," which, she claims, is encoded audiovisually.¹⁵² Tactile and/or carnal memories are elicited by the audiovisual cues provided in this scene. As a result, the sex scene described from *Intimacy* was particularly intense, physically speaking. However, as I indicated in my description of the first sex scene in *Last Tango*, it is possible to "fill in the blanks" of Jeanne and Paul's less believable sex and physically engage with it, nevertheless. The "blanks" refer to the lack of clear cues of penetration, the distance between their bodies – and anything that detracts from the believability of their sex. I was still able to engage with the sex scenes depicted in *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* – albeit to a lesser extent (or, with less intensity) – by drawing upon sensory memories of previous carnal experiences. That being said, one needn't necessarily have carnal experiences to draw upon in order to sensually engage with these scenes: the viewer could also proceed to animate these scenes through his/her tactile imagination. Marks claims that one need

¹⁵⁰ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 63.

¹⁵¹ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 129.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 130.

employ his/her sensory memories and tactile imagination in the completion of *haptic images*, in particular – which “refuse plenitude” (on account of being so obscured through extreme close-ups, soft focus, graininess) in order to encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image.^{153 154} I would argue, however, that a similar approach to the sex scenes in *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* – which are *not* haptic in nature – is useful and applicable, insofar as we are forced to make them whole; forced to “fill in” and, in a sense, compensate for what we don’t see.¹⁵⁵ Although my experience of the sex scenes from *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* were not as effortlessly or vividly evocative of sexual sensations as *Intimacy*, they were still physically engaging insofar as I was invited (or inclined) to give them substance and “flesh them out” with my eyes.¹⁵⁶ And in exercising one’s tactile imagination – to, for instance, imagine or try to simulate the carnal encounters depicted in these three films within one’s own body – one stands to grow evermore aware of the potential capabilities of his/her body. With this in mind, Marks quotes theorist Bernard Berenson: “The stimulation of our tactile imagination awakens our consciousness of the importance of the tactile sense in our physical and mental functioning, and thus, again, by making us feel better provided for by life than we were aware of being, gives us a heightened sense of capacity.”¹⁵⁷ This “heightened sense of capacity” alludes to an awareness of what our bodies *could* do, but haven’t necessarily done or experienced. We could, for instance, simulate the sensation of some bodily task

¹⁵³ Ibid., 171, 172, 177.

¹⁵⁴ Marks, *Touch*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Technically speaking, the sex scenes in *Intimacy* do not show us *everything* – i.e. penetration shots. It contains *softcore* sex scenes, which means that although not a lot is left to the imagination, we are still required to imagine what little *is* denied us, visually.

¹⁵⁶ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 59. Sobchack points out that our vision is always already “fleshed out.”

¹⁵⁷ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 165.

before actually physically accomplishing that task. This concept is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's claim that "it is never our *objective* body that we move, but our *phenomenal* body."¹⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty is here alluding to the fact that our bodies are already mobilized by perception.¹⁵⁹ It is therefore possible to exercise our phenomenal bodies in our imagination and feel with them – thus acquiring new sensory experiences. Naturally, this concept extends to one's filmic engagement. Our bodies are also mobilized by what we visually and aurally perceive in films. Films seem to be an ideal way to exercise our phenomenal bodies: while a viewer's objective body is planted in place, his/her whole sensorium is activated by the imaginary scenarios depicted onscreen. And by exercising one's phenomenal body through these imaginary scenarios – by physically engaging with scenes through one's tactile imagination – one may begin to expand and refine the existing scope of one's sensorium by opening one's body up to new forms of contact; new physical depths, as experienced through films. Thus, a viewer who has no carnal experiences to draw upon prior to viewing *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and/or *Intimacy* could conceivably employ their tactile imagination and experience something new with their bodies – i.e. simulate the contact of the desiring, thrusting bodies that are seen and heard onscreen. (Although this was not my experience with these three films, I have had this experience before with other films that contained softcore erotic content. These experiences preceded my revisiting of *Last Tango* and my initial viewings of *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*.) The intensity of a sex scene like the one described from *Intimacy* could be thought of as a sort of vivid sensory preview of a sexual

¹⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 106.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

encounter.¹⁶⁰ Of course, the concept of employing one's tactile imagination is just one of the ways in which a viewer could potentially physically engage with the sex scenes depicted in these three films. My own physical engagement with these sex scenes – with the one described from *Intimacy*, in particular – is accounted for in greater detail by Marks and Sobchack.

The concept of engaging with a film via one's carnal knowledge and sensory memories or one's tactile imagination reinforces what Marks and Sobchack have each pointed out – namely, that cinema appeals to the intelligence of the body (which all viewers supposedly possess). Both theorists offer models that account for viewers' corporeal engagement with film. Marks draws upon the concept of mimesis in order to account for one's bodily relationship with films. She claims that mimesis is “a form of representation based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment.”¹⁶¹ This is reminiscent of the concept of tactile memories being summoned by audiovisual cues (which is developed above) insofar as a viewer's mimetic relationship with the image is, to an extent, based on their previous sensory experiences. My sensory experiences – which are absorbed and remembered by my body (and formed into sensory memories) – are activated by what I see, sensitizing me to the things and people I see around me. For instance, if I see and hear someone stub their toe, I will wince in pain as an unpleasant (phantom) sensation throbs in my toe. If I see someone eating ice cream, I will taste it – its coolness, flavor, texture and all. My previous sensory experiences sensuously animate

¹⁶⁰ It can be argued, however, that in spite of the fact that I can draw upon sensory memories of previous carnal encounters, I am not engaging in sex anymore than a viewer who lacks these sensory references and has to imagine what it feels like.

¹⁶¹ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 138.

the things I see, pulling me into a closer bodily relationship with the visible world. This concept also extends to film. Marks claims that cinema is “a mimetic medium, capable of drawing us into sensory participation with its world.”¹⁶² My mimetic relationship with film allows me to translate what I see and hear into what Marks calls a “sensuous experience” – for instance, feeling the contact of Jay and Claire’s bodies through my own in the sex scene described above. In this particular scene, I *was* drawn into sensory participation with Claire and Jay’s sex. The idea is that when our bodies are in mimetic sympathy with what we see, we feel it; our bodies take on the tactile qualities of what is seen.¹⁶³ And this relationship between the visible and the tangible – in fact, the whole concept of mimesis – echoes Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis, according to which “every perception is doubled with a counter-perception.”¹⁶⁴ The doubling of one’s perception could be understood as the following: when I see, I am also seen; when I touch something, I am also touched; I am both the perceiver and the thing perceived; I am both active and passive; I am both here and there. As well, according to Merleau-Ponty and the logic underlying his reversibility thesis, the visible and the tangible reciprocate one another. Provided that my eyes are also “organs of touch,” I touch and feel what I see – and I, in turn, am touched and felt by the thing seen. The structure of this experience is echoed in the phenomenological structure of filmic experience that Sobchack elaborates on – which is predicated on Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis. She claims that a viewer

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁶³ This concept does not merely extend to our tactile bodies, but to our sense of taste and smell, as well. For instance, in *9 ½ Weeks*, in the scene where John is feeding a blindfolded Elizabeth, I could taste and smell what she was eating and drinking (strawberries, Jello, rottini pasta, a jalapeño pepper, cough syrup, champagne, honey). I knew the texture, taste and smell of these foods. In any case, Marks makes a point of noting that our experience of the world and of film are multisensory.

¹⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 264-65.

“both touches and is touched by the screen – able to commute seeing to touching and back again without a thought and, through sensual and cross-modal activity, able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience as onscreen or offscreen.”¹⁶⁵ My physical engagement with the first sex scene in *Intimacy* – according to the underlying logic of the reversibility thesis – could be understood as a blurred boundary between my body and the bodies onscreen. Indeed, the boundary was blurred. I felt both of their figural bodies – that is, I felt Jay’s body against Claire’s (and, at one point, *in* Claire’s), and Claire’s body against Jay’s – and my own body, responding to the sight and sound of their lustful bodies. This would constitute an instance of being simultaneously “here” (seated in front of my computer, watching the sex acts depicted onscreen and feeling them with my body) and “there” (with Jay and Claire, participating in their carnal encounter). And, again, the dividing line between seeing and being seen, as well as touching and being touched, is blurred here; confused. Of course, this structure of filmic engagement is indicative of a certain degree of investment on the part of the viewer in the film s/he is watching. Certainly, I was heavily invested in this scene and was deeply moved by it, as a result.¹⁶⁶ Its dazzling interplay of bodies was deeply felt on a physical level, to be sure – but this scene had already captured me through its complex interplay of emotions. In fact, the sex scenes in each of the three films were affectively-charged. And it is the emotional dimension of these scenes that I will proceed to address.

¹⁶⁵ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 71. I replaced Sobchack’s “cinesthetic subject” (which seemed like a loaded term) with “viewer” for the sake of simplicity. Sobchack actually claims that “the *cinesthetic subject* both touches and is touched by the screen...”

¹⁶⁶ By indicating my investment in *Intimacy*, I do not mean to shortchange *Last Tango and 9 ½ Weeks*. It just so happens that I was more physically engaged by the sex scenes in *Intimacy* and am consequently more inclined to elaborate on that physical engagement through the theories offered by Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack and Marks.

Although the relationships depicted in these three films are sexually-driven, they become evermore emotionally complex. Neither party in any of the three illicit relationships is completely emotionally “detached” from the other. In fact, both parties are somehow emotionally invested or affected from the get-go, resulting in sex scenes that are emotionally weighty. The first sex scene in *Last Tango*, for instance, is not so much sexually titillating as it is emotionally provocative: it is as if Paul is trying to transfer some of his pain (the weight of what he has suffered as a result of his wife’s suicide) through his coarse seduction of Jeanne. Once Paul has climaxed, they collapse onto the floor and roll apart. Jeanne lays panting on her side, her eyebrows furrowed. Paul lies on his stomach, propped up on his elbows with his face in his palms. He doesn’t appear to be crying – rather, he appears to be weighed down by that same grief he exuded moments before his seduction of Jeanne. This moment – in which sex is immediately followed by a gut-wrenching feeling instead of relief or euphoria – is intuitively grasped on an emotional level. This reminds me of a horrible feeling that would sometimes come over me once the rush of sex wears off with someone I know I shouldn’t have slept with. This often happened with a particular ex-boyfriend, with whom I had a rather painful on-again-off-again relationship. During an off-period (which constituted most of our association), I’d find myself at his apartment, wanting to see him but having little to say. We’d make small talk, then we would inevitably have sex – as this was comfortable and familiar territory for us. Immediately afterward, I’d feel awful – as if I let myself down. Toward the end, these “off-periods” felt like a limbo, which dragged on and made it all the more difficult for me to move on from him. The gut-wrenching, heavy feeling that

followed our sex was the result of feeling like I'd lost a battle; like I stupidly indulged in something I shouldn't have. I've also experienced this heavy, sick feeling in moments where sex was a temporary release from a stressful and/or lousy day (or week), at work or school. The moment the rush of sex wears off, my horrible, lousy day rushes back to me, full force, weighing me down. I am, therefore, able to emotionally "color" this moment where Paul seems glued to the floor, with his face buried in the palms of his hands, with an experience of my own: I recognize myself in Paul's post-coital state. This is a perfect instance of what Merleau-Ponty describes as certain objects (in this case, a scene from a film) bearing the "internal equivalent" of something from the past. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence... Thus there appears a "visible" of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first... It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see it*."¹⁶⁷ The moment just described from *Last Tango* bears, for me, the emotional – or, internal – equivalent of those heavy, unpleasant post-coital downers that I just described. Watching Paul in that moment caused me to feel heavy at heart and slightly nauseous, as I felt in those moments with my ex-boyfriend. And in so doing, it *did* stir a carnal formula of those emotional experiences. After all, emotional experiences are *also* embodied. As Cataldi points out, in her elaboration of the intermingling tendencies of emotional and tactile perception: "The feeling that is felt is a distinguishably embodied... and kinesthetically styled... expression of emotion, apprehension. This felt feeling of apprehension is tactually informed."¹⁶⁸ Having established that, the concept of an affectively-charged scene bearing the internal

¹⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 164.

¹⁶⁸ Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, 130.

equivalent of a past experience will be developed in greater detail later in the account. I will proceed with an account of my emotional engagement with the sex scenes in *9 1/2 Weeks*.

In this film, John was a big factor in my emotional engagement with the sex scenes in that he made me uneasy. John is presented as this very mysterious and strangely alluring man that Elizabeth is immediately drawn to. But John also gives off a mildly melancholic vibe; he comes across as somewhat lonely. In this respect, it is as if he has chosen Elizabeth as a playmate: someone to pass the time with in decadent ways. I only really picked up on this melancholic feeling in my latest viewing (though, I'm sure I was aware of it on some level in previous viewings). There is an intensity about his interest in Elizabeth that – while flattering and alluring – also comes across as somewhat strange. This strange, melancholic, sexy intensity that John exudes is ever-present in the scene where he and Elizabeth first have sex. The lead-up to their sex always made me tense – a tension that persisted in my latest viewing of it. In the scene preceding their sex, John essentially steps out of his apartment in the middle of a date with Elizabeth, requesting that she stay behind and wait for him. It seems as though he is gone for hours. Elizabeth fiddles with the television, lies in bed, and finally moves on to John's closet – which contains clothes, photographs of John, and various other items. Within seconds of opening his closet, John phones Elizabeth and indicates to her that he is aware she's been going through his things (how he knows is unclear, as he is shown calling from a phone booth). He presses her to confess over the phone that she has been a “nosy-parker,” and when she does, he hangs up on her. The entire scene that follows (the sex scene) is

tainted by John's creepy, voyeuristic game. I remember thinking: what is this guy's *problem*? I was made uncomfortable by him – by the circumstances surrounding their first sexual encounter and the mood that had been set. In this respect, John's apartment had become a tainted space. And eventually, this space becomes the site of Elizabeth's emotional breakdown. The uneasiness elicited by John's "tainted" apartment in this scene (and in all the scenes that follow in this particular space) is reminiscent of what Cataldi refers to as "affective space." She describes it as follows: "Affective space is the space in which emotional percipience is felt to be "there" somehow: hesitantly advancing (working up courage) or obtrusively loitering about (a lingering depression)... it is the space in which we are, emotionally in touch – open to the world and aware of its "affect" on us."¹⁶⁹ This concept is applicable to the onscreen space of John's apartment insofar as I was aware of my uneasiness, all through the first sex scene. John had spoiled the allure of his apartment and all its fancy furnishings – as well as his mystery – by turning his dining room into a site of struggle (even if Elizabeth went with it after her initial struggle) and revealing himself to be a bit of a creep. But, then, this space was already sort of tainted by virtue of having seen the film several times before, and consequently knowing what comes next. Therefore, it wasn't as though I was neutral about his apartment until their first sex scene in my latest viewing. It had already been tainted by all that I already associated with it. It always seemed like a trap: it was a place where John could pull Elizabeth in for what seemed like days on end, smother her with his eerie attentiveness, and then frighten and humiliate her with his sadomasochistic foreplay. It is a place where Elizabeth is emotionally worn down – a place where she so often relinquishes control at the expense of her well-being. This space somehow gives off an unhealthy vibe, causing

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

a mild feeling of sickness to creep up on me. His apartment almost feels like it could swallow her whole – just as her relationship with John completely consumes her. All of this is to say that I am distinctly aware of an uneasiness that comes over me in this scene, which I believe to be the cumulative effect of all the events that have tainted this particular space.

The concept of affective space is equally applicable to *Last Tango* and *Intimacy*, insofar as the meeting places in each film (i.e. the flats in which the illicit couples meet) are also emotionally tainted – or colored – by the male protagonists. The mood of each flat is somber and depressing, and this is in large part due to the heaviness and melancholy that Paul and Jay exude, respectively. It is as if these spaces are somehow responsive to the emotional states of those inhabiting it – and my body is in tune to these spaces. Although the affective space of Jay's flat is an inextricable part of my emotional engagement with the sex scenes in *Intimacy*, insofar as they set a somber and somewhat melancholy mood that sets into my emotional flesh, these scenes are made particularly intriguing through the body language and facial expressions of Jay and Claire. Their second sexual encounter is particularly loaded in that Claire appears hesitant and troubled – and I was very engaged by this the first time I saw it. It is still quite an impressive and engaging scene, from the perspective of Kerry Fox's amazingly authentic performance. As soon as Jay opens the door to Claire in this scene, she quickly brushes past him and goes to the bathroom. Jay waits for her to emerge, and when she does, she can barely look at him. She pauses in the doorway of the room they normally have sex in. Jay approaches her and kisses her. They lower themselves to the floor, where they continue to

kiss and pull at each other's clothes. Suddenly, however, Claire gently turns her head away from Jay and raises her forearm to her mouth, appearing troubled again. Jay backs off of her, and Claire sits up, looking down. It's as if something has come over her, causing her to feel unsure and even upset in the midst of kissing Jay. Something is definitely wrong. And there is also a great sense of secrecy here, as she doesn't even utter a single word to Jay about her hesitation (at this point in the film, nothing is known about her). Jay takes the lead by slowly undressing himself. Claire hesitantly does the same. And once she has completely undressed herself, she sits and looks over at Jay, planted in place. It is as if she is at a loss, unable to make the next move: she looks to Jay to make it for her. Her hesitation and overall upset state somehow affect the mood of the room that she and Jay are in – as if it senses her burden and grows gloomier. In terms of what Claire silently conveys through the subtlety of her facial expressions and gestures, the work of Béla Balázs in *Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art)* comes to mind – specifically the chapter entitled “The Face of Man.” His observations are focused on the performances of actors in the late years of silent film. At one point, he refers to the “mute dialogue” of performers: “We saw conversations between the facial expressions of two human beings who understood the movements of each others' faces better than each others' words and could perceive shades of meaning too subtle to be conveyed in words.”¹⁷⁰ This is precisely what takes place between Claire and Jay, in which so much of Claire's troubled and guilt-ridden state is conveyed in the total absence of words. And this, of course, reflects the tremendous skill of Kerry Fox as a performer. And the *subtlety* with which Claire's troubled state is conveyed, for Balázs, is a marker of skill that is

¹⁷⁰ Béla Balázs, “The Face of Man,” in *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Bristol Typesetting Company, 1952), 73.

required on the part of the performer in order to render facial expressions convincing in the eyes of the viewer.¹⁷¹ And the apprehension of Claire’s emotional state reflects, once again, the appeal of films to viewers’ emotional intelligence – to our ability to emotionally sense and grasp others (in the case of film, those “others” would be characters and even onscreen spaces). Certainly, I am able to grasp Claire’s upset state through the unpleasant sensation in the pit of my stomach – it is almost like the counter-intuitive pang that I experience when something feels wrong. In this moment, I feel like I am able to emotionally apprehend Claire – without necessarily relating to her situation (a married woman who is having an affair) – through these unpleasant sensations. Cataldi elaborates on the phenomenological structure of an emotionally moving experience through her emotional application of the reversibility thesis. As before, the reversibility thesis is predicated on the concept of doubled perception, whereby – when applied to one’s filmic experience – the viewer both touches and is touched by the screen, simultaneously experiencing him/herself as “here” (offscreen) and “there” (onscreen). The same concept applies to Cataldi’s emotional application of the reversibility thesis, insofar as an emotional depth is simultaneously felt here and there. As Cataldi puts it: “...any application of the reversibility thesis in the emotional realm must... show how there are at least two “sides” to every affective experience, that neither of these “sides” is intelligible apart from the other... it must show that these sides are in distanced contact with each other or in a relation of proximity through distance.”¹⁷² She continues by explaining that in the midst of “these reversibilities of emotional depth, “I” experience my “self” dispersively – as alternating “back and forth” – caught up somewhere between

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁷² Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, 111.

the heres and theres. “I” am in no one particular “place” and on neither “side” exactly, but somehow on both at once.”¹⁷³ According to this logic, I am touching Claire in the act of perceiving her – and in so doing, I am touched back. The same applies to Jay. I feel like I am “there,” in the scene with them, feeling them both as I watch them attentively. I feel the hesitation in Claire’s gestures and movement, and I feel that counter-intuitive pang when she appears troubled, unable to look at Jay. I feel Jay’s desire for her when he first tries to kiss her, and I feel that desire (or eagerness) dull when I notice the troubled expression on Claire’s face. I feel both of them *and* myself at once. As I perceive them “there,” emotionally interacting onscreen, I feel them “here.” What they project on the outside, I feel on the inside – and so goes the reversibility of their visible emotional exterior and my felt (“tactually informed”) emotional interior. According to the logic of Cataldi’s emotional application of the reversibility thesis, this would be the structure of my emotional experience of this particular scene. I will now move on to the final segment of this account, which details another big instance of my emotional engagement with *Last Tango, 9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*.

What I find particularly fascinating about these three films is the theme of obsession. In each of the three narratives, one or both characters reaches a point where s/he develops a keen fascination, or obsession with the other – which entails a compulsion to return to that other party (to continue to meet with them and carry on their sexual liaison, for as long as it lasts) and even follow them between rendezvous. For me, this truly captures the allure of these illicit relationships: the all-consuming desire for one particular person that is quite beyond one’s control. The concept of someone’s life

¹⁷³ Ibid., 117.

revolving around another's for a brief but intense period is fascinating in that it is like being under a spell. That, at least, is my own analogy for this briefly-lived, all-consuming fascination with / craving for someone else. This has happened to me twice. And as long as I was held by this spell, my every thought wandered to that person (for obvious reasons, I will not refer to their names). I looked forward to seeing them – or even hearing from them – to the point that everything else seemed like a drag; everything else took a backseat to that person. I became very mindful of the time, anxiously counting down the hours to a time I could expect to see them. In the case of one of those two relationships, I lived for the nighttime – as I could usually expect to run into that person at the end of a work shift, or after school. He was very spontaneous and would intersect me on some nights, on my way home from work or school – and I consequently began to hope he would appear on the way home on most nights. Whenever he appeared, I was hit with a wave of euphoria. And on nights when he was nowhere in sight, I would go out of my way to look for him: I would make these huge and unnecessary detours on the way home, just in the off chance that I'd see him. And when I didn't see him, I was supremely disappointed. I have referred to this all-consuming, euphoric trip in a somewhat unflattering manner through the word "obsession" – which bears a negative connotation. Perhaps an obsession is depicted in all three films, but that should not suggest that it is altogether negative. In fact, it is a thrilling and wonderful thing to experience on account of feeling so *alive*. The notion of "living for" a rush that one particular person can provide for a brief but intense period is beautifully captured in *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* (in particular, the latter two titles). In *Last Tango*, after their first sexual encounter, Jeanne returns to the flat regularly – both in spite *and* because of Paul. Paul

and Jeanne do not arrange to meet at the flat; they simply show up. Although they share some lusty, sweet, and humorous moments in their first few encounters, Paul usually ends things on an exasperating or upsetting note for Jeanne. And yet, she returns to him each time, no matter how they left off with each other. Jeanne is shown, several times, cutting her time short with her fiancé just to be with Paul at the flat. In *9 ½ Weeks*, Elizabeth daydreams about John at work, looking as if she's waiting the day out until she can see him. John even gives Elizabeth a gold watch and asks that she think about him each day at noon. One day, while she is flipping through slides at work, she begins to masturbate to the thought of him. She becomes increasingly forgetful at work, losing her focus and forgetting the names of people she deals with on a regular basis. One day, she follows John back to his office during his lunch hour (presumably neglecting the second half of *her* work day), just to see how he spends his days without her. Once their relationship has progressed past the halfway point, Elizabeth spends all of her free time waiting for John to call – to bring her to life, as she now lives for their sexual adventures. In *Intimacy*, Jay is driven by his intense curiosity about Claire to follow her on three separate occasions. His second attempt to follow her results in an adrenaline-fuelled journey across London via double-decker bus and tube, in which he learns a bit about her. He learns that she is an aspiring actress who is married with a child. Jay seems taken aback when he discovers that Claire has a family. But this propels his interest in her, if anything. He becomes completely consumed by thoughts of Claire and their affair. Later in the film, Jay is shown bolting to his flat to avoid missing a visit from Claire. He orders his houseguest out of the flat (a friend who is temporarily staying over) and begins to hurriedly clean the room that he and Claire normally have sex in. Jay has now come to count on and look

forward to these carnal visits. But on this particular day, Claire does not show up. Jay is compelled to wait around his apartment, just in case she *does* show up. He is shown staring out the basement window, expectantly. He is then shown curling up on the floor of the basement, appearing dispirited. Clearly, Jay is affected by Claire's absence for reasons exceeding delayed sexual gratification. He ends up waiting until nightfall before he gives up on her.

In each of the moments just described from these three films, I recognized myself.¹⁷⁴ They evoked emotional memories of those exquisite and haunting days and nights in which I was under someone else's spell; consumed by them. They were with me, wherever I went and whatever I did.¹⁷⁵ A surge of energy would flow through me as I neared them – or a place that I thought they were likely to be. My heart raced if ever the phone rang, in the chance that it was them. On days and nights spent without seeing or hearing from them, my body actually ached. Time seemed to pass so slowly without them. I longed for them and lived for the blissful hours spent with them. And I was quite willing to accommodate this very special time by cutting into other things (downtime from work, time spent with family – sometimes, even on homework). But then, of course, everything that goes up must come down. As these (my) two particular relationships began to steadily degenerate, these compulsive tendencies – the urge to see them, be with them, hear from them, think of them – lost their euphoric edge and became a hardship. And as each of the three relationships show (Jeanne and Paul's, and Elizabeth and John's,

¹⁷⁴ But, then, on page 139 of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty points out the following: "...since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision."

¹⁷⁵ Any mention of "them" or "they" within the context of my account of this all-consuming fascination or passion refers to the two individuals with whom I actually had these experiences.

in particular), there comes a point where this compulsion becomes self-destructive.

Eventually, the illicit relationships begin to spiral downward, and that euphoric spell wears off – but the compulsion to think of and return to that person *remains*. There is a scene in *Last Tango* in which Jeanne manages to catch Paul as he is ascending in the elevator to their flat. (Jeanne has just left her fiancé in the rain, without any explanation.)

This scene is interesting because it reveals Jeanne's compulsion to return to the flat – to Paul, essentially. She can't help herself. In spite of the sexual humiliation and moments that Paul has infuriated her (by keeping her at an emotional distance and mocking her value system), she feels the need to return to the flat. She even says that she tried to leave him, but couldn't. This is reminiscent of Elizabeth and her compulsion to return to John, in spite of the moments of high tension and humiliation that she suffered. Within minutes of Jeanne's return (after she catches Paul in the elevator), she is put off by the discovery of a dead rat in their bed and is further horrified by Paul, who taunts her with it. Jeanne, by this point, is in tears and disenchanted. She expresses the desire to leave and declares "this is the end." But, of course, it isn't. Jeanne attempts to spite him with news of her engagement, and Paul responds by pointing out that her marriage will not guarantee her any real security or comfort – and that the best sex she could ever hope to have is with him, in the flat. And after all that's been said and done, Jeanne finds herself at the flat, once again – only, this time, Paul isn't there. Jeanne, however, has reached a point of total disillusionment about the relationship and Paul. There is no longer any euphoric payoff to her visits to the flat – and she must have known this beforehand. And still, she returned. This is less indicative of a desire to return to Paul than a compulsion, over which she has little control and from which she derives no real pleasure. The very same

thing happens in *9 ½ Weeks* when Elizabeth continues to meet John and comply with his increasingly humiliating sexual games. She is compelled to return – she is, in fact, “on call” to John – in spite of the fact that the relationship has already begun to emotionally exhaust her. Elizabeth isn’t able to help herself until John pushes her to the brink of an emotional breakdown. On the night of their final sexual misadventure, Elizabeth attends a show at the gallery she works for. She does not hold up very well. She wanders around the gallery, disoriented and completely detached from the buzz of activity around her. She takes refuge behind a wall, away from the crowd, and begins to cry. Shortly afterward, she rushes to a bathroom in the gallery and vomits. As tormented as she is by John in this moment, she phones him and heads over to his apartment – albeit for the last time.

I find that *Last Tango* and *9 ½ Weeks* very skillfully depict the damaging flipside of this intense “fascination.” They evoke memories of one particular relationship (the guy with whom I had an on-again-off-again relationship) in which I would continue to call and show up at his apartment long after it had ceased to be appropriate – long after we’d expired; and long after I stopped feeling at ease about it. My sudden whims to call or show up at his apartment (without an invitation, and without even knowing whether or not he was home) were accompanied by a counter-intuitive pang in the pit of my stomach. I would dial his number, knowing full well that I shouldn’t. Whenever I showed up at his apartment and buzzed him, I’d feel silly and upset with myself. Every impulse I had to get a hold of him on the phone or try to see him felt wrong. As wrong as it felt, however, the impulse was strong and would get the better of me, each time. It was self-

destructive in that it hindered my ego, making me feel weak and pathetic. I was painfully aware of how I must have seemed to him: burdensome, needy – and perhaps a tad intense. This compulsion became increasingly strenuous, both physically and emotionally. I became evermore anxious whenever I felt it come over me. Things felt unfinished between us, and I didn't quite know how to go about it. I needed closure, but wasn't going to get it by returning to him. Somehow, on a gut level, I knew this. And it is for this reason that I would get these counter-intuitive pangs whenever I surrendered to the impulse to seek him out. This heavy, counter-intuitive ache is felt with Elizabeth and Jeanne, as their illicit relationships begin to degenerate and cause them grief. (Although both Jay and Claire succumb to their curiosity and desire for one another, they do not appear, at any point, to have totally relinquished control of these impulses after their affair has turned sour.) But it is precisely this obsession – this drive, this briefly-lived, intense fascination and overwhelming desire for someone else, and the highs and lows that come with it – that I found most engaging about these films. These films spoke to me – to my own experiences of those two ill-fated, adrenaline-fuelled relationships – through the sexual and emotional journeys that Jeanne, Elizabeth, and Claire/Jay embark upon, respectively. It was in this way that I meaningfully engaged with these films. The moments just described from each film, in which the euphoric highs and heavy lows of the illicit relationships are depicted, bore the “internal equivalent” of the experiences I just described from my personal life.¹⁷⁶ They aroused in me that thrilling sensation that I felt in the first months of those relationships, as well as the emotional exhaustion and

¹⁷⁶ To recap, things (scenes in a film) that bear the “internal equivalent” of something from the subject's/viewer's past arouse a “carnal formula of their presence” in him/her, at which point “there appears a “visible” of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first... It is more accurate to say that [s/he sees] according to it, or with it, than [s/he] *see[s]* it.”

anxiety that I felt when things began to spiral downward and that compulsion took over. By bringing my past experiences into play through the evocation of emotional memories and sensations of moments that continue to haunt and fascinate me, these films strike up a dialogue with me.

Of course, as I've acknowledged throughout this thesis, my relationship with these films is subject to change over time. As my perception changes and my experiences accumulate (resulting in an expansion of my repository of sensory and emotional memories), my investment in these three films may indeed intensify *or* dull. As Cataldi points out: "...we are also, as persons, in process – in the process of becoming; and we cannot talk about 'depths' of our identities without implicating the depths of lived temporality."¹⁷⁷ Who is to say, if put to the task of writing this account several years from now, whether *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and/or *Intimacy* would be focused on? Who is to say how and if these films will continue to stir and fascinate me in the ways described throughout this account? It is unlikely that I will sustain the same dialogue with these films years from now. If anything, this dialogue will gain in complexity and these three films will begin to "speak" to me in new and different ways (in ways I cannot presently account for). This account is indeed a unique instance in my ever-changing bodily and emotional relationship with these three films.

¹⁷⁷ Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, 154.

CONCLUSION

The “dialogue” that was mentioned at the end of the last chapter is important, as it is indicative of the meaningful relationship I have had (and still have) with these three films. To be sure – and as has already been established – this dialogue exists on the level of the sensory and emotional memories that these films elicited insofar as they brought my past experiences into play: they spoke (and continue to speak) to me through the scenes described throughout this account and the skillful way that these scenes vividly recalled bittersweet experiences.¹⁷⁸ What is more is the fact that these three films gave expression to personal thoughts and feelings on the fate of relationships through their common philosophy: namely, that human relationships predicated on sex and/or romantic love are ultimately doomed (this is a philosophy that is consistent across the erotic melodramas I have seen and named in this thesis). It is interesting to look back on my relationship with these three films – and in particular, *Last Tango*. When I first saw this film (at 11 or 12 years old), I was upset by how bleak it was. The film struck me as this nightmarish portrayal of a mismatched couple that was *intended* to upset and shock me. The underlying pessimism of the film – though only partially grasped at the time (and perhaps not fully grasped *now*) – weighed on me and resonated with me until I saw it again, years later. Although the film is still weighty, it now makes far more sense to me. I no longer view the film as nightmarish, but insightful. I feel that there is an underlying wisdom in *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* through their respective portrayals of

¹⁷⁸ These experiences are of the briefly-lived relationships described in the account, which were of particular interest to me because they were lived so intensely: they were physically and emotionally consuming. Consequently, *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* were of particular interest because they vividly recalled these intense relationships and their emotional highs and lows.

love and sex in “illicit” relationships. I feel that they ring true through their depiction of the complexities of desire (which can propel an intense and exhilarating relationship – like those depicted in the three films – and later become a self-destructive force) as well as through their underlying philosophy that relationships are “condemned to change” (and oftentimes, not for the better). I feel that these films, in large part, made sense to me because of the personal experiences described in this account.¹⁷⁹ And if this account has demonstrated anything, it is that my personal experiences have greatly informed my emotional and physical engagement with *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy*. The same could probably be said about every other viewer – to whatever extent – in relation to any number of films. How can our life experiences *not* play a role in our filmic engagement? How are we not sensually and emotionally informed by these experiences? This points to something important: our personal experiences and the ways in which we *actually* (as opposed to *hypothetically*) engage with films should not be ignored in a consideration of film spectatorship.

A singular account of filmic experience could offer some real insight into how and why viewers *meaningfully* engage with films. It doesn’t make very much sense to distance an account – or model – of film spectatorship from viewers, who are (or should be) at its core. An account of film spectatorship that is predicated on the filmic

¹⁷⁹ This is true insofar as they equipped me with sensory and emotional memories that greatly sensitized me to the emotionally- and sexually-charged scenes described in this account. As well, I felt I was in tune with the films’ philosophy on the fate of relationships through personal observations of/reflections on the evolution of my own romantic and/or sexual (mis)adventures. And, of course, all that I feel I am currently “in tune” with in these three films (in terms of the relationships they depict) is sure to develop into an even deeper, richer and evermore complex understanding over time (as my experiences accumulate and I have even more to draw upon). It is in this way that this meaningful dialogue will continue.

experience of an actual flesh-and-blood viewer may prove far more compelling and informative than a hypothetical model of gendered film spectatorship – i.e. the Freudian model of female film spectatorship that is briefly outlined in the introductory chapter (in which female spectatorial pleasure is masochistic, or, in Mary Ann Doane’s words, “indissociable with pain”). It seems to me that our filmic experiences cannot be neatly explained away through cold models of film spectatorship that are not at all in touch with us. Such an approach to film spectatorship is also limiting insofar as it dictates an essentially female and/or feminine way of engaging with films, which ignores the inherent complexity of viewers. To repeat a point that was made in the introductory chapter, we are far too complex, excessive and ambiguous in nature for our life and/or cinematic experiences to be categorically understood as merely or wholly male or female, masculine or feminine. The account of filmic experience that is provided in this thesis may very well speak to male as well as female readers, whether or not they have seen all three films and even liked them. And if, indeed, this account *does* speak to and resonate with female *and* male readers, singular accounts of filmic experience developed by *other* viewers may effectively dissolve this gender binary. In this particular account, a phenomenological description was employed to articulate the ways in which *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* were deeply felt on an emotional and physical level – to uncover why they were meaningful and how they moved me. Although it is acknowledged that I am a female viewer, this account attempts to delineate the ways in which my filmic experiences potentially extend to other viewers – male and female *alike*. Again, this thesis was not intended to serve as an account of *female* film spectatorship. And to conceive of a strictly male/masculine and female/feminine way of meaningfully engaging

with films seems rather simplistic. In this respect, a phenomenological approach to film may be better suited to the task of addressing our complex, ambiguous and excessive nature, blurring the distinction between male and female film spectatorship.

Faithfully recounting our filmic experiences and uncovering the origins of these experiences through reflection is a useful exercise as it stands to provide a better understanding of our personal relationship with films. These first-hand accounts could provide insight into how and why viewers *actually* engage with films in a meaningful way – by delving into the ways in which certain films are particularly powerful. It seems equally important to consider the personal dimension of a filmic experience, and stands to be a very engaging and potentially informative account of film spectatorship. Not to mention the potential diversity and wealth of filmic experiences that can emerge from such an effort – by viewers from various cultures and walks of life, across a range of films (various genres or subgenres from current and/or preceding decades). Thus, the process of developing singular accounts of filmic experience into more expansive accounts of film spectatorship seems like a worthwhile scholarly endeavor, as there is, potentially, a great deal more to discover about our filmic experiences. Sobchack, Marks and Cataldi are examples of theorists who have utilized some of their own personal experiences – both real-world and filmic – as the basis for gaining a deeper understanding of how and why they meaningfully engage with films/video. This approach spoke to me and my filmic experiences, thus making sense. Given my profound experiences of *Last Tango*, *9 ½ Weeks* and *Intimacy* and my desire to articulate and understand them, this phenomenological account seemed like the most interesting and logical way to go about

it. And given the day and age in which we now live – in which a privatized viewing experience is greatly facilitated (and even encouraged) by our current technological situation (the mass consumption of domestic entertainment and mobile technology)¹⁸⁰ – now appears to be the prime-time for the development of these singular accounts.

¹⁸⁰ Cable and satellite TV, rental outlets, desktop computers – as well as ever-present iPods and laptop computers.

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