

(Re)Counting Love: Martin Arnold's *pièce touchée*
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I am writing about a film and a term. More specifically I am writing about a film and its relation to different dynamics of love.

It is called *pièce touchée*. It is by the Austrian filmmaker Martin Arnold. It was made in 1989. The film is an analysis of a pre-existing film. More specifically it is a sixteen-minute frame by frame analysis of an eighteen-second sequence from a 1954 film titled *The Human Jungle*. In Arnold's filmic analysis the sequence is taken apart and put back together in a process of destruction and recomposition. Using an optical printer Arnold duplicates frames from the original and re-organises their order to provide his extended analysis. Using this process Arnold renders a transformative observation; multiplying and re-ordering the film frames to stress and twist the original's narrative, running the film backwards and forwards in short rhythmic bursts. In this process the film length is greatly extended (from eighteen seconds to sixteen minutes) while the gestures are contracted and condensed into spasmodic convulsions.

In this film seemingly simple movement becomes a syncopated series of micro-convulsions.

In this film a woman is pictured sitting in a comfortably decorated room, a living room. Reading. Waiting. This scene is presented for a long period of time with a minimal gesture; for the first minutes of the film only her finger seems to move. It twitches. It fidgets. Gradually, more movements animate the scene. First the door behind the woman opens a crack. Then it closes. This is repeated until finally a man begins to emerge, seeming to struggle with his own trajectory and the door itself. As the woman waits in the domestic interior the man returns, penetrating into the space through this reluctant aperture. Whilst this action happens the woman turns her head to see what is happening behind her (the man turns a knob, flicks a light switch). All the while the film runs back and forth, the scene at times flipping and flopping – left becoming right and vice versa. The door opens and closes. The light turns off and on. Binary divisions are emphasised and emplaced. We encounter in this analysis a number of binaries.

Man. Woman.

On. Off.

Up. Down.

Inside. Outside.

Forwards. Backwards.

Positive. Negative.

Active. Passive.

To continue a description of a scene. A woman waits. A man enters a room. They greet. They kiss. He walks into the room. She rises and follows. This simple scenario is extended, distended, reversed, with actions repeated and narrative progress denied. In conclusion the couple lean together to (almost) repeat a kiss we saw as part of the flurry of (in)action many minutes before. The film cuts to black followed by a title screen before their lips can touch again.

With *pièce touchée* we encounter a cinema re-visioned in the form of a faltering and pulsatile movement-image. What we encounter is a form of reading gone awry. We might more accurately call this film the re-counting of a scene of love.

To witness a pragmatic account of the status of number in this re-count we can look at the process of its construction. Arnold remarks that the structure of frames in *pièce touchée* is processed in a strictly numerical fashion:

I work with a more-or-less continuous forward and backward motion. I start with frame x , go forward to frame $x + 1$ and then from $x + 1$ back again through x to $x - 1$ [...]. If I had chosen a different process, there might have been jumps in the motion.¹

From frames that march forward in order – such as 1, 2, 3 - we arrive with Arnold's re-counting, at something akin to 1, 2, 1, 0. From the implied unity of illusion that the progression 1, 2, 3 gives us, we are presented with a running back and forth, a limping asymmetric progression

that goes by way of regression.

The process of this film transforms a simple action – such as entering into a room, or the delivery of a kiss – into a distended and distorted set of relations. This could be described as torsion, the twisting and stretching of a linear narrative under mechanical stress. The original is not interrupted but rather folded into itself as an immanent form of intervention. Arnold is keen to stress that there is no cut in the narrative, no finite interruption, but rather an interminable progression and regression, a repeated and continual running backwards and forwards where once fluid motion becomes an irregular sexualised vibration. The sound of the film – a micro-loop of the door opening that sounds like a pulverising engine – distorts any clear temporal progression that moves definitively from A to B. It mires the audience in a perpetual present that evokes a ‘now-now-now’ that incessantly moves but does not ever truly change, conjuring a situation Fredric Jameson describes as the postmodern condition of having no connection to the past whilst being without any conceivable future.²

Referring to the *Origins of the Family; Private Property and the State* by Frederick Engels we find a significant historical reading of the oscillating temporality of the couple, the subject under Arnold’s analytic scrutiny. Engels notes:

Monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other [...] Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others.³

A step forwards that is also a step backwards is the historical condition that Engels assigns to monogamous couple. This double-step is found in the temporal image-manifestation that Arnold produces in *pièce touchée*. This logic can be found in Arnold’s own remarks on his work:

We are familiar with stepping forwards and backwards in life: taking ‘two steps forward and one step back’ is associated with insecurity. When a body trembles, we perceive anxiety or nervousness. My filmic interventions infuse the characters’ actions with tic-like twitchings, that once in a while become so dominant as to seemingly create new actions out of themselves.⁴

To situate this film in the date of its completion is also appropriate. 1989 is the date that Francis Fukuyama pronounces as the end of history, a time when the struggles of ideology were replaced by ‘economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands’.⁵ In contrast to Fukuyama we might encounter Alain Badiou’s characterisation of the period post-1976 (perhaps most engrained by the events of 1989) as a time of restoration defined by a prohibition of thinking a new world, with the ‘tomorrow’ of the ‘new man’ [sic] replaced by family values and economics.

Today, it seems that ‘modernisation,’ as our masters like to call it, amounts to being a good little dad, a good little mum, a good little son, to becoming an efficient employee, enriching oneself as much as possible, and playing at the responsible citizen. This is the new motto: ‘Money, Family, Elections.’

The century concludes on the motif of the impossibility of subjective novelty and the comfort of repetition. This motif has a categorical name: obsession. The century ends with the obsession of security, under the dominance of the following, rather abject maxim: It really not that bad being where you are already; it is, and has been, worse elsewhere.⁶

To read Badiou with Fukuyama I propose that we find Arnold’s *pièce touchée* with its auditory perpetual present and obsessive actions. The central motifs of this work are the foundational figures of the family and the ‘state’ form of love (Badiou’s name for the couple-form) alongside a manifest work of calculation, a filmic work of number-crunching in a frame-by-frame

approach. To transpose ‘money, family, elections’ to *pièce touchée* is also to see its consequences: obsession aligned with repetition and (in)security. This obsession is produced in a hypertrophic fashion as Arnold puts himself to the task of exaggerated and extensive calculation.

To talk of Arnold re-counting a love scene in this way it is possible to ask what kind of love do we see at work in this film. What form of love is manifested in relation to this statist representation of love? We can ask these questions as *pièce touchée* does not seem to be of the devotional order. It does not seem to offer devotional love but seems instead to recount a love scene as one of crisis and contradiction by inserting anxious affect into a site of seeming security, this arising by means of stepping backwards and forwards into this scene of a man coming home to a woman.

We might instead tentatively call this film a manifestation of love as fidelity, a fidelity to the event of a frame-by-frame approach found in alternative cinema, and in particular in the approach of Peter Kubelka, an Austrian filmmaker of a previous generation strongly associated with what has become known as structural film. Arnold’s frame-by-frame approach is indicative of Peter Kubelka’s intervallic notion of cinema. Such a notion relocates attention from the relations between shots to the space or interval between frames. Here it is the collision between frames that provides the space of cinema, the collision between things in which articulation happens: ‘One word alone is one word alone, but when you put two words, it’s between the two words... that is your articulation’.⁷ Arnold acknowledges this frame-by-frame approach as a formative interest but one that comes to him without its previous utopian coloration. Arnold poses *pièce touchée* as an intervallic enquiry of what seems stalled (or at a standstill) in the present: ‘In the eighties, people paused and questioned why the paradigms of progress and emancipation had failed so utterly in so many respects. The issue is no longer what should be, but what is and was’.⁸

The model of interval that provides the mechanics of film has inspired much fidelity and passion (as well as bad faith and factional division) in alternative cinema. Sergei Eisenstein’s conception of montage poses the interval as the site of a dialectical collision of images. Following his dictum, montage is not a linkage of one idea to another – not Pudovkin’s brick by brick approach used to demonstrate, or expound, a concept – instead it is ‘[a] view that from the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept [...] So montage is conflict’.⁹ This is in contrast to Dziga Vertov’s model of the interval that proposes cinema as movement, with the interval as the transition from one movement to another. In this model the interval is part of a cinema of rhythm and movement; a foregrounding of a kind of inhuman perception that is a product of machinic assemblage as well as an enunciation of revolutionary consciousness. As Gilles Deleuze reads it: ‘For Vertov, the dialectic is in matter and of matter, and can only reconcile a non-human perception with the overman of the future, material community and formal communism’.¹⁰ This articulation of the interval becoming apprehensible to show the material form of film against the ‘realist’ illusion of cinema becomes, in the history of experimental film, a militant tendency, something to which filmmakers commit themselves. Such is the backdrop to thinking about Arnold’s films, a backdrop of filmic fidelity to the interval often claimed as the radical truth of cinema. The interval might be thought of as a form of militant love.

It is possible to call this militant love a hatred of the ideal of the representational regime that is often named Hollywood. To complicate this we might also say that a relation of love and hate is found in what Laura Mulvey describes as ‘the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience’.¹¹ This drama of jubilant misrecognition of the self in the ideal image is that process which Lacan describes as the ‘flutter of jubilant activity’ of the mirror stage.¹²

The scene of the mirror-stage or phase operates through two conjoined terms: narcissism (as self love) linked to aggressivity (as jealousy, hatred and violence). Lacan would come to name this correlation of love and hate in identification as *hainamoration*, a neologism of hate and *enamored* (enamoured), a confusion of being in hate and of being in love.¹³ To pose *hainamoration* as a term alongside *pièce touchée* is to first evoke the militant tendency of experimental film that just *loves* to hate Hollywood. It is also to pose the problematic condition of identification with the ideal image, a process of embroiled love and hate that is embedded in the very structure of the Hollywood film, a process revealed in *pièce touchée*’s fluttering and flickering movement.

If we are to call this work, this *pièce touchée*, a work of filmic analysis we must also contend

with yet another modality of love. Jane Gallop remarks that when making analytical critiques of art works and objects in the world – or more precisely, when engaging in acts of interpretation – analysts-as-critics should be aware both of the violence that interpretation applies to the mute object and also of the mute transference that draws them to this object in the first place. Her concern is that we remain alert to that moment where ‘we experience not only the object’s force but also our own powerful drive to understand, to possess, that which moves us so intensely’.¹⁴ To continue on the subject of love in analysis, we might recall that Jacques Lacan remarks: ‘People have done nothing but speak of love in analytic discourse’.¹⁵ Such a passionate dynamic complicates models of criticality in which the presupposition is made that analysis occurs in the state of cold neutrality untainted by partiality. Love might be said to surface as the fly in the soup of objectivity. Or, as Slavoj Žižek is keen to remind us, ‘love is a kind of radical imbalance’ and as such an imbalance love can unhinge the world, re-drawing its co-ordinates.¹⁶

As a work of analysis *pièce touchée* is a work of transformative violence that is made in the context of love: on the statist idealised representation of love, in the dynamic of *hainamoration* and perhaps as an act of (militant/analytical) love. As Lacan describes it, the work of analysis is directed towards ‘knots of imaginary servitude that love must always untie anew or sever’.¹⁷ To extend this reading I turn here to the ‘work of love’ that Žižek uses in reference to the revolutionary figures of Che Guevara and St Paul. Addressing Guevara’s dictum that ‘the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love’, Žižek suggests that the aim of revolutionary violence is not to bring about or restore harmony, but it is to be associated with violence *as such* as it is this activity ‘(the violent act of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates. Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance’.¹⁸ In another mode Žižek declares love as ‘the hard and arduous work of repeated ‘uncoupling’ in which, again and again, we have to disengage ourselves from the inertia that constrains us to identify with the particular order we were born into’.¹⁹ Love in this sense is expressed through a struggle that works towards an articulation of division and difference. Love here is a scene or a process of struggle, a scene where unity is displaced by a division, by an uncoupling; a scene where the One of unity becomes the Two of division, or Two as relation thought other than totality or wholeness. To think of love and the Two is to think otherwise than the lover who makes one complete. It is to think of a mode of love that opens one up to the experience of incompleteness and new horizons.

To pose love as the work of arduous uncoupling I will turn in conclusion to Alain Badiou’s theory of love. No other theory of love has so arduously uncoupled love from the couple, the scene where two (people) become one (the family unit, this principle of unity). Opposing this unifying love Badiou proposes a notion of love that is predicated on the impossibility of fusion in the sexual relation as theorised by Lacan. Concentrating on this impossibility or this non-relation Badiou positions love as the scene of the Two that frees itself from the powers of the One.

The One to which Badiou refers is the supra-numeric principle of unity. We find this state of unity in the couple bound together in romantic fusion, as well as in the idealised and whole image.²⁰ Against this unity – this anxious mirage of wholeness – is what Badiou names *the scene of the Two*, a conception of love as a production zone that is not *a state of being*, nor a *state form*. Love here is both a disjunctive chance encounter and the construction of a new duration, the encountering of a new perspective and the commitment – or fidelity – to such a perspective. Love for Badiou is precisely not found in fusion (where two becomes one: ‘Love is not that which from a Two taken as structurally given creates a One of ecstasy’), but is found instead in disjunction where the one (or the mythic One of identity) is rendered incomplete through an experience of the Two (where the imaginary opens up to the possibility of the new in an encounter with the real).²¹ Love here is a struggle against fusion, inertia, identity and points us towards an experience of the world, as Badiou tells us that ‘love is not even an experience of the other, but an experience *of the world*, or of the situation, under the postevental condition that there are Two’.²²

To recount this supra-numerical Two, it might not only stand for two people, or for the space that separates them. For Badiou, in his *Theory of the Subject*, it has stood for the process of dialectics as struggle, posed against the unity of metaphysics. In his *Manifesto for Philosophy* it arrives as infinite or incompletable experience, the encounter of the ‘irremediable excess with respect to the law of

the One'.²³ In his *The Century* we encounter the Two as the unleashing of politics rather than the enforcement of a pre-emptive peace in his discussion of Chinese politics. More specifically, even more cinematically, this Two might be rendered, as Lacan does, as *d'eux*, 'of them' or 'between them'. Two as *deux* reformulated as *d'eux* comes to stand for the 'between', the numerical equivalent of the interval not just of film but also of all social relations. Alenka Zupančič notes that in order to start counting properly, Lacan advises us to start at Two:

Lacan refers to 2 not as though to yet another number (the 'second one'), but as the (numeric) signifier of the Other [...] Lacan endeavours to define the Other by claiming that here, so to speak, we start to count at 2. As far as the Other is concerned, 2 is the first number that we are forced to reckon (with) – that is to say, we start with a split as such, with a non-coincidence of the same.²⁴

The task for love here is how to go beyond oneself (the One-self) and to truly love the Other, that which Lacan describes as the One-missing, the One-too-few, *l'un-en-moins*.²⁵

To pose Arnold's *pièce touchée* with Badiou and the scene of love (as interval, as excess, as disjunction, as duration) might be to re-locate this work on (or of) love as revealing a void, a work of disjunctive encounter that re-counts a One for a Two, that foregoes the count 1, 2, 3... for the re-count of 1, 2, 1, 0. Or as Badiou counts it: 'Such is the numericity of the amorous procedure: One, Two, Infinity'.²⁶ Even more specifically we might think of it as the work of forming a new temporality. Against the perpetual present that advocates a frenzied inertia – a tempo that Arnold reveals in its full horror – we might think of how the work addresses the need for a new sense of temporality, of the possible experience of another duration. Badiou writes: 'Love invents a new way to last in life [...] it's the wish for an unknown duration'.²⁷

To finish I repeat that Arnold's *pièce touchée* re-counts a love scene. I would contend that this re-count of love is directed from the state of the One towards a scene of the Two, from a state of unity to the experience of incompleteness and disjunction. I would further speculate that *pièce touchée* reminds us to ask ourselves what it means to love. Trapped between irony as perpetual displacement and the fear of commitment perhaps our task is to find out what we can do with love. To think of love as the work that uncouples us from inertia and that provokes us to see the world in a different/divided perspective may provide the beginning co-ordinates for this task as well as the tools to sustain its interminable and infinite labour.

NOTES

1. Martin Arnold interviewed in 'Martin Arnold', Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, p. 361.
2. Jameson notes that postmodernism, and postmodern art in particular, seems to him to follow the logic of schizophrenia, a logic where the subject 'is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments in his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon'. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster, Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983, p. 119.
3. Frederick Engels (1884), *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, London: Penguin, 2010, p. 96.
4. Martin Arnold in 'Martin Arnold', p. 361.
5. Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, Summer 1989 <<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm#source>> [accessed 13 April 2010]
6. Alain Badiou (2005), *The Century*, tr. by Alberto Toscano, Cambridge: Polity, 2007, p. 66.
7. Peter Kubelka in Jonas Mekas (1967) 'Interview with Peter Kubelka', *Film Culture Reader*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000 [1970], p. 292.
8. Martin Arnold in 'Martin Arnold', p. 349.
9. Sergei Eisenstein cited in Peter Wollen, 'Eisenstein's Aesthetics', *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, London: BFI Publishing, 1998, p. 30.
10. Gilles Deleuze (1983), *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, tr. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London: The Athlone Press, 1986, p. 83.
11. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 18.
12. Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, tr. by Bruce Fink, London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 76.
13. Lorenzo Chiesa suggests that this dynamic is the struggle of attempting to be in the ideal place where one is not: a struggle which 'attempts to realise an impossible co-occurrence with the ideal-image: given such an impossibility, this relationship ends up in a permanent rivalry of the subject with himself, with the narcissistic image of himself that the lure of the mirror creates'. In such a scenario where the subject encounters itself in an image there is an antagonism, as to eroticise one's own image (or an image in which one sees oneself reflected, a different but related matter) is also to operate in rivalry with that image: a vying for one's place with it 'since it constitutes the ideal perfection which the subject does not have.' Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007, pp. 19-20.
14. Jane Gallop, 'Psychoanalytic Criticism: Some Intimate Questions', *Art in America*, vol. 72, November 1984, p. 11.
15. Jacques Lacan (1975), *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality; The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. by Bruce Fink, London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, p. 77.
16. Slavoj Žižek, interview with Joshua Delpech-Ramey, 'On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love', *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*, 2004, republished online at <<http://lacan.com/Žižekscripture.htm>> [accessed 23 January 10]
17. Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function', p. 80.
18. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London and New York: Verso, 2002, p. xlvii.
19. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, London & New York: Verso, 2000, p. 128. To continue: this process is not an interiorised contemplative stance but rather 'the active work of love which necessarily leads to the creation of an *alternative* community.' To pose love in this way is to think again about *pièce touchée*'s context, the time of 1989 when it was declared that there was no alternative (to the maxim 'money, family, elections'). To think about love establishing difference that turns away from interiorisation I address community here not as the proverbial ties that bind but as that which more radically opens individuals to the outside, to the exterior. Roberto Esposito leads me to this when he states that 'community is not an entity, nor a collective subject, nor a group of subjects [...] It is the 'with', the 'between' [...] the being of community is the gap, the spacing that would relate us to others in a common non-belonging, a loss of what is one's own which never manages to be added up to a common good. Only lack is common, not possession, property and appropriation' ('Community and Nihilism' in *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, ed. by Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, Melbourne: re.press, 2009, p. 41). To think of community and alternative film is to conjure up a whole constellation of international collectives and co-operatives where filmmakers have pooled resources and supported each others practices. In

- relation to Martin Arnold we might think of the sixpackfilm distribution agency that he was involved in co-founding along with Peter Tscherkassky and Brigitta Burger-Utzer (among others) in Vienna to support, promote and disseminate alternative film.
20. This same one, Badiou tells us, is really a state of oneness – a something of the one – or what he calls a void of inconsistent multiples that is formulated into a representation of unity: a count-as-one that is re-counted as a supra-numeric One.
 21. Alain Badiou, ‘What is Love?’ in *Conditions*, ed. by Steve Corcoran, London & New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 181.
 22. Badiou, ‘What is Love?’, pp. 181–182.
 23. Alain Badiou (1989), *Manifesto for Philosophy*, tr. by Norman Madarasz, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1999, p. 83.
 24. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003, pp. 146–147.
 25. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 129.
 26. Badiou, ‘What is Love?’, p. 189.
 27. Alain Badiou, with Nicholas Truong, *Éloge de l’amour*, working tr. by Maryse Summers, Paris: Flammarion, 2009, p. 36.