The idea of arousal plays a vexed role in the history of Western thought. On the one hand, the arousal of real consciousness would seem to embody the unifying goal of this tradition as it runs from Ancient Greece to modern Europe. On the other, however, the arousal of sensation threatens to pervert and even foreclose this goal at every turn, and precisely by achieving it all too literally, which is to say, as a literal “embodiment” of consciousness rather than as a conceptual figuration of pure thought or enlightenment. Like the rousing of the prisoners once left to slumber in Plato’s cave, the arousal of the Cartesian *ego sum* and the moral subject of transcendental Idealism consists of nothing more or less than a demystification of “mere” sensual arousal—one that either grudgingly admits the latter’s necessary but subordinate place in the process of intellectual arousal or expurgates it altogether. Thus, despite the fact that the term “arouse” does not itself appear in Western usage until the late 15th century, by another measure we could say that it has always already been there at the ground-breaking of every metaphysic, there for the pouring of every foundation in the architecture of modern thought and its institutions.

It is no coincidence that arousal plays the same ambivalent role in the history of Western poetics, and more specifically, in the discourse of aesthetic politics that weaves in and out of this history indefinitely. What is the concept of *katharsis* but an attempt to control the nature of the relation between the simultaneously sensual and intellectual registers of arousal, and to do so precisely by formalizing their distinctiveness? Aristotle’s comments on the relation between *katharsis* and *opsis*, or spectacle, prove telling here:

> Now, what is fearful and pitiable can result from spectacle [*opsis*], but also from the actual structure of events, which is the higher priority and the aim of a superior poet. For the plot should be so structured that, even without seeing it performed, the person who hears the events that occur experiences horror and pity at what comes about (as one would feel when hearing the plot of *Oedipus*). To create this effect through spectacle [*opsis*] has little to do with the poet’s art, and requires material resources. Those who use spectacle [*opsis*] to create an effect not of the fearful but only of the sensational have nothing at all in common with tragedy, as it is not every pleasure one should seek from tragedy, but the appropriate kind.¹

Aristotle discourages the use of *opsis* in the same way that he does here throughout the *Poetics*, and for reasons identical to the ones driving Plato’s more wholesale rejection of sensory “reality”. In both accounts, *opsis* is contaminated with the “material resources” that make it “sensational” to the eyes instead of “fearful” for the soul. The purely externalized shudders it stands to produce are shudders alone, not the secondarily emotional expression of an internal *katharsis* taking place on the auspices of form, whereby the proper “structure of events” moves the spectator to actively construct the plot of tragedy inside his own mind, and thus, to recuperate its insights there too, in the rightful pedagogical domain of abstract thought. This formal approach to a pedagogy of the senses does not allow Aristotle to disentangle the arousal of thought from the arousal of sensation, or to jettison the physically
transformative affect of a shudder that seems to define the experience of arousal either way. On the contrary, Andrew Ford has shown how Aristotle’s own refusal to disambiguate the concept of *katharsis* as either a strictly spiritual or a strictly physical pedagogical process has effectively animated theoretical debates about the politics of aesthetics ever since. Nevertheless, this approach does allow Aristotle a Pyrrhic victory that has stood for just as long as the foundation for these same debates: it allows him to redirect the undeniable physical energies of this sensual and emotional *affect* into an intellectually and politically productive *effect*. By sacrificing the appeal of spectacle and nothing more, he founds at least the possibility of a political future for arousal—and with it, a possible political future for representation, as well.

To consider the history of Western thought from this perspective does not necessarily teach us anything we didn’t already learn from its inheritors in the 20th century. Heidegger, Derrida, and many others have alerted us to the dualisms and blind spots of metaphysics, and we have long since begun to work through the binarized anxieties to which they gave birth: sensation versus Idea, the body versus the intellect, and representation versus reality. By virtue of this very same fact, though, the history of Western thought stands to tell us a great deal about the paradoxical idea of arousal that emerged from the marked and remarked tensions and affinities of these dualistic discourses over time. To begin with, even if we attend only superficially to the role that problems of arousal play in various discourses of poetics and metaphysics, we must recognize a certain ontological significance for the idea, and do so despite the fact that the latter is often treated as a strictly epistemological problem. Insofar as arousal describes a transformational relationship between two different states or ways of knowing the world—whether from sleep to wakefulness, from unstimulated to stimulated, or from sensation to thought—the relationship it most minimally describes either brings things and states into being or preserves their remaining at rest. In other words, it conditions the nature of our existence even if it simply deludes us into accepting a mere simulation of this existence.

With this ontological dimension of arousal in mind, the blind parallelism between the discourse of arousal as a relation of mere sensation, on the one hand, and the discourse of arousal as a relation of conscious awakening, on the other, makes sense. The unexplained repetition of this term across an opposition that it can and cannot cross at once would mark the confounded entwine ment of these discourses in thought, language, and being heretofore, tracing the increasingly apparent reverberations between the two most manifestly in the discourse of aesthetic politics. Arousal by spectacle or arousal to reality; arousal of affect or arousal into reason; arousal with another or arousal at another: these are the controversies of aesthetic politics that we return to again and again, and always in terms of this same parallel structure, this same readjustment of prepositional relations between whatever states and complicities the arousing representation stands to mediate. Seen this way, the term “arousal” could not really be said to function as a supplement in the Derridean sense. Even though it resonates strongly with the notion of something excessive to and yet constitutive of its opposed term, it is expressly unkempt by the very same oppositional binaries of body and mind, sensation and Idea that it has helped to preserve over time. The parallel yet opposed discourses of sensual and intellectual arousal would thus require that we think of arousal as a supplement to itself. We would perhaps do better, then, to think of arousal as the iterative hinge of supplementary ontology as such, a term that always already marks the work of deconstruction wherever it appears; it is the anonymous graffiti tag of constitutive excess
that disseminates across all of the competing and contrary discourses whose order it has maintained in this very same fashion.

Of course, when seen this way, the inability of arousal to reveal the history of philosophy anew may endow it with other sorts of powers and potentials. More specifically, it might help us trace the discursive fault-lines of an impasse that has formed around the very sets of terms that have developed under parallel conceptions of arousal in the discourse of aesthetic politics. As I have already mentioned in reference to Andrew Ford’s work on *katharsis*, for instance, the debates about the politics of aesthetics that we know from the 20th century revolve around more or less the same sets of terms and problems that led Aristotle to launch this now truly ancient debate in the first place. What formal qualities distinguish politically productive art from art that simply entertains? How can the sensual appeals of spectacle be harnessed to the project of political transformation and social enlightenment? What formal procedures can be used to demystify the simulations of spectacular aesthetics? Most simply put, what procedures allow the artist to rouse the mind and consciousness of the spectator instead of just rousing the body and senses?

At this point it is perhaps unnecessary to rehearse just how little the pedagogical solutions proposed to these questions—let alone the terms that organize them—have changed since the days of Aristotle: maximize formal logics and minimize spectacular pleasure; force the mind to actively complete the work instead of passively observing it; instill pity and fear rather than pleasure and awe; in short, diminish *opsis* as much as possible so that it weakens into a form of sensation that can be commandeered by reason. Such is the repertoire of aesthetic radicalism as we know it, doing business since 335 B.C. This repertoire is convincing, to be sure—as convincing as it is familiar. As our brief foray into the idea of arousal already suggests, though, the problem of aesthetics that the idea of arousal straddles is always already an ontological one, and the imponderable endurance of this repertoire rests on the same metaphysical treatments of the division between body and mind, sense and Idea that we rejected in theory so long ago. In other words, the history of the philosophical problem that we call “the politics of aesthetics” has sustained itself in large part by deferring any direct consideration of the nature of arousal itself. So how might an as-yet unwritten ontology of arousal allow us to rethink this repertoire and its terms? How might a reconstruction of the ontological problem that arousal deconstructs for aesthetic theory change the way we understand the ontological status of spectacle and the relationships it brokers between the body and thought, activity and passivity, sensation and reason? In what follows, I want to trace at least the beginnings of an answer to such questions by exploring two ontological departures for thinking the politics of arousal as it concerns more contemporary forms of media culture. The first re-traces the ontological premise on which pedagogies of aesthetic politics took shape in one of the most indicative and influential modern discourses of the relation between spectacle and arousal, 20th century film theory; the second might allow us to rethink this premise altogether through the spectacular and decidedly multi-media work of the artist Ken Jacobs.

**A-Rousal**

If we rarely bother to ask where a film begins and ends, it is probably because the reel-to-reel logic implicit in the most obvious material object of film, the celluloid strip, seems to answer this question so objectively, which is to say, in its very capacity as an object. A film begins where the film begins, with the appropriately named and numbered “leader”. It also ends
where the film ends, with a slap of the strip as it falls out of touch with the origin of the reel. Seen this way, the filmic object exists most fundamentally as a condensation of two contravening temporalities, the teleological and the tautological: it is what it is insofar as the filmstrip presents a series of static frames in a material relation between start and finish. And while the moving image itself arises from the material rationale for this condensation, it does so only in the form of an ephemeral sensation—like the feeling of humidity that any physical exchange of countervailing energies and temperatures precipitates. For the appearance of presence and continuity that defines it as such depends entirely on that sensual mechanism of self-deception known to us as persistence of vision—a seemingly physiognomic confirmation of the human body’s innate languor, its preference for passive sensation rather than active thought, continuity rather than change, persistence rather than rupture, pleasure rather than conflict. The moving image that arises from film can thus be thought of as an apparitional elision of transformation with facticity from frame to frame in time, a subjective cathexis onto the material logic that the filmstrip makes possible for cinema in (and as) the first place. Even more simply, though, the spectacular phenomenon of the moving image can be defined in sensual contradistinction to the material logic of the object film as essentially illusory and irrational. It is not only not rational; it is not.

From this ontological foundation, the history of political film theory and the story of arousal that it tells would seem to unspool just as inexorably and self-evidently as the filmstrip itself. When Sergei Eisenstein develops his theory of dialectical montage, for example, it is only in order to rouse the spectator from the essentially conservative torpor of this illusion, to “reveal the contradictions of being” that vanish in the sensation of continuous cinematic movement. Like Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and the whole Western world have it wrong, he tells us: the phenomenon of the moving image does not arise from the actual “blending” of still pictures in succession on film, nor does montage build meaning from a developing succession of shots. Like Japanese ideograms, the moving image is a production of the spectator’s senses and ideas rather than a fact of the material object. Moreover, this production actually rests on the material conflict between individual frames that defines the film strip as such—not the mere apparition of continuity that arises from this conflict in “conventional film,” which simply “directs and develops the emotions” in an evolutionary reproduction of the political status quo. Restoring film to its properly material (and thereby materialist) basis, Eisenstein thus proposes that we think of cinema as a materialization of dialectical thought itself, where “the projection of the dialectical system of objects into the brain—into abstract creation—into thought—produces dialectical modes of thought—dialectical materialism—PHILOSOPHY.” To this same end, he insists on “the maximum laconicism” for the image itself. In other words, montage can only arouse an “intellectual resultant” in the spectator when it downplays the arousing qualities of the image per se. Instead, the disproportion between images must confront the spectator’s senses with the same phenomenon of “conflict” and “collision” between images that in fact defines the material foundations of the dialectic and the filmstrip in common.

To use montage in this way is still to arouse the senses of the spectator at first, but only just enough to alert them to the comparatively material relations of production by which the cinema produces the imaginary and thus immaterial relations of continuity that otherwise stupefy them. It is to arouse the senses of the spectator abruptly with and to the material effect of difference that defines cinema, so that a strictly emotional register of sensual arousal by the image cannot congeal in peace. Put otherwise, it is to forcibly relocate the
arousing movement of the image from the ephemeral terrain of mere sensation to the abstract realm of dialectical thought—a realm whose definitional transcendence from the material to the intellectual provides precisely the conditions necessary for any critical engagement with “real” materiality. In short, by demystifying the technological object underlying the filmic illusion, Eisenstein does more than simply outline the aesthetic power of montage to lay bare “contradictory” social and political relations; he transforms the technology of the moving image into an essentially radical one—a machine of demystification rather than just a mystification of the senses, and a mode of production rather than just reproduction. But the ontological truth of this transformation depends on the maintenance of one contradiction above all: the ontological contradiction between a merely sensual affect of arousal aligned with the image, on the one hand, and a radically intellectual effect of arousal, on the other. For as Eisenstein puts it, only a dialectical conception of montage “derive[s] the whole essence, the stylistic principle and the character of film from its technical (-optical) foundations.”

In many respects, this account defines the core of political film theory as such. This is not to say that “political film theory” is in fact a homogeneous and complete discourse, nor is it to devalue the many insights and nuances of the works we associate with it. It is simply to say that virtually all of the major attempts to formulate a political theory of the moving image following in the wake of Eisenstein’s begin from the same materialist ontology of cinematic technology, and thus end, rather unsurprisingly, with the same prescription for a politics of style that the latter’s teleological movement always promised. Once the materiality of the filmstrip can be recognized as the objective correlative and thus the basis for a materialist political consciousness, then the illusory affect of the image itself can be identified with the fundamental logic of capitalist reproduction, which Adorno once described as “the magical repetition of the industrial procedure in which the selfsame is reproduced in time”—terms that could easily be used to describe the logic of the moving image too. By extension, once the illusory affect of the moving image can be attributed to the indolence of undisciplined senses—to a recidivistic complicity between the emotional eye of the subject and the immaterial image projected before it onscreen—the rational intellect of the spectator can be called in to put the latter to more meaningful and productive forms of work—a praxis of labor more befitting the worker’s revolution of Marxism. While Eisenstein prescribed the abrupt confrontations of dialectical montage, Brecht developed his famous repertoire of alienation techniques, and many more theorists and practitioners have developed their own regimens in the years since. As we know perhaps too well, though, virtually all of these regimens seek to demystify the illusions of the moving image by rousing the spectator to act rationally rather than just respond emotionally; to produce an idea rather than just bask in the wonder of the screen’s sensual appeal; to confront material relations rather than submit to the false consciousness of a simulacrum; or even more simply, to think rather than just feel. Only in this fashion can the image onscreen do justice to the essential discontinuity embedded in the material logic of the filmstrip that founds it.

As this account should already make clear, the materialist ontology that underpins Eisenstein’s radicalization of montage is also a poetics of arousal. In a diametric reversal of the ancient scenario, we find the arousal of abstract thought aligned with arousal to the material world; we find an attempt to arouse the spectator to political action on the auspices of this intellectual arousal; we find the transformative arousal of body and mind set against the merely pacifying and immaterial arousal of sensation, emotion, and awe; we find effect
triumphing over affect. In short, we find a poetics of arousal designed for the purposes of political production rather than simply ideological reproduction. Even more striking than the reversal itself, then, is the fact that the pedagogy of arousal constructed in the process—and developed forthwith by a long tradition of theorist-practitioners—shares so much with the family of shock therapies that Plato first devised for his prisoners. Eisenstein is, to be sure, no Platonist; he does not recommend that spectators enlighten themselves so literally as to stare into the blinding sun of the Good; he is guided by a faith in the determining essence of revolution rather than permanence. Nevertheless, Plato’s insistence on the necessary relation between discomfort and learning remains key to Eisenstein’s theory of montage. Eisenstein’s faith in the same dialectical structure that animates Plato’s thought also preserves the hierarchical relation between the mystified bodily senses and the radical purity of the Idea that emerges from this structure, and does so only insofar as the latter can ultimately be defined in opposition to what the former perceive at first. Simply put, the stringent suppression of opsis, the necessity of chastening the senses to make way for the Idea, and the profound distrust in sensual phenomena that forms the basis for these criteria more generally, remain fundamentally intact in the materialist poetics of arousal that emerges from Eisenstein’s ground-breaking cinematic ontology; he simply adapts them to the genre of formal pedagogy that Aristotle refined into art.

Few things attest to the entrenchment of this paradigm as well as the fact that it not only survives the political film theory of the seventies, but actually flourishes in the latter’s care. After all, the defining interventions of both apparatus theory and suture theory consisted of a two-pronged attack: on the one hand, against the persistence of Idealist conceptions of vision and reason, and on the other, against the presumed objectivity of the film technology that Andre Bazin had declared the perfection of such conceptions. In a valiant attempt to complicate easy distinctions between the objectivity of the camera and the subjectivity of the spectator—and presumably the distinction between rationalism and desire that undergirds all of the poetic regimes outlined above—proponents of both projects argued that the elements of cinematic representation in fact produced the same ideological affect that Althusser called the founding conceit of ideology as such: the coherent subject of Western rationalism. And yet, despite the best of intentions, both of these projects ultimately wound up promoting regimens of style and critical activity that not only conformed to the poetics of arousal glossed above, but even restored this poetics to explicitly Platonic terms.

Apparatus theory offers the best illustration of this reversion. For in his famous writings on “the apparatus” Jean-Louis Baudry directly appropriates Plato’s allegory of the cave in order to demystify the Idealist ontology that it founds. Describing the “technological arrangement” of the cinematic image onscreen as “an ideological machine” analogous to Plato’s shadow-play, he argues that the mechanically constructed objectivity of the camera lens conspires with both the mechanical process of projection and the libidinal economy of human vision to delude the spectator into identifying himself as the transcendental subject of the image—in all its apparent continuity. In fact, the only element of filmic technology that does not play a fatal role in this veritable mechanism of political stupor is, fittingly enough, the “material base” of the filmstrip, which Baudry commends for betraying at least the “marking of difference” that the camera and projector conceal on either side of it. As a result, the identification that the apparatus of cinema spectatorship secures—like all Lacanian identifications—represents nothing more than a misidentification based on illusion. Immobilized in the comfort and repose of the darkened theater, the spectator—now a
functioning part of the apparatus that positions its eyes as objective—has simply regressed to the mirror stage to find yet another hallucination of the subjective continuity, plenitude, the Real.

From here, Baudry attributes the timeless appeal of cinematic spectacle that Plato’s allegory would seem to indicate to a transcendental problem of arousal: “What desire was aroused,” he asks, “more than two thousand years before the actual invention of cinema, what urge in need of fulfillment would be satisfied by a montage, rationalized into an idealist perspective precisely in order to show that it rests primarily on an impression of reality?” For Baudry, the answer to this riddle lies in the self-deluding faculties universal to all desiring subjects as such. In other words, arousal itself is to blame; the promise of intellectual arousal was always really just a mystifying shadow-play carried out by the deluded arousal of emotional and sensual investments. There is as such only one safe way to awaken the consciousness of the spectator from the slumber of ideology that conditions his role in this material apparatus: just as the refugee from Plato’s cave must undergo the blinding pain of looking back into the sun of an immaterial Good, Baudry’s cine-subject must relinquish the “specular tranquility” of his sensory faculties by confronting the material “mechanism” whose “work” it conceals as the real material reality. Or as Baudry puts it, “if he looked at [the projector] directly he would see nothing except the moving beams from an already veiled light source.” In short order, then, Baudry’s ideological demystification of Idealism reverts to a strikingly Platonic prescription for the arousal of true consciousness: to see nothing, and in so doing, to feel the discomfort of real Truth. The only difference is that Baudry’s truth is a truth of the materiality that work and machines have made rational, not the direct truth of the Good.

Given the ontological foundation from which this scenario begins, it may come as no surprise that tracing the residue of arousal through the materialist poetics of film theory should lead us back to the originary scene of Idealism with which we began—despite the fact that the former explicitly took up this foundation in order to demystify its ontological primacy. For as many others have noted, the very notion of demystification requires that an essentially true ground for existence can be revealed intact once an essentially illusory perception that occludes and exceeds it has dissolved. And as the inverse equation between Baudry’s psychological theater and Plato’s material cave only confirms, it doesn’t matter much whether one designates this essential reality as material or abstract; one way or another, the arousal of sensation perverts our ability to regard it, and still more, our capacity to act critically on the comparatively stable foundation that it provides for the types of thoughts and actions that we might like to call “conscious”. In this much alone, it would seem that the reel-to-reel logic of the filmstrip may serve best of all as a metaphor for the metaphysical economy that connects these inverted but identical attempts to demystify the truth behind spectacle at either end of it. And yet, the deconstructive movement of arousal at work here alerts us to more than just the supplementary role that sensation plays in binding the metaphysic of orthodox materialism together with its opposite. In the twists and turns of a discursive logic that its parallel incarnations hold together, the ontological problem of arousal manifests as a kind of erotic point of contact between a whole series of related oppositions from the history of Western poetics: between body and mind and sensation and thought, to be sure, but also between the activity of political production and the passivity of political reproduction, and perhaps most strikingly of all, between the mystifications of the image-as-spectacle and the revelatory appearance of material truth that it conceals. To recognize the marks of these twists and turns is to recognize that the poetics of arousal
which defines virtually every understanding of aesthetic politics heretofore has effectively enforced what we might call a politics of a-rousal. Here the preposition a- that precedes every -rousal in question is always already set against itself in a relation of antithesis or abstention, always already geared toward its own dialectical undoing through a process of self-transcendence that moves from the material realm of arousal to the abstract arousal of consciousness. Arousal here is always already self-negating and neutered, exhausted in advance by its own promise of erotic deference to reason—a quality that the self-negating terms of this tradition, such as Laura Mulvey’s call for a spectatorial position of “passionate detachment” and the various treatises on “non-bourgeois camera style” and “counter-cinema” make perfectly manifest.17

With this poetics of a-rousall in mind, it is easy to understand why the pedagogical regime that defines 20th century political film theory seems to have ended as soon as it began, remaining virtually unchanged despite the many intense philosophical disagreements that have animated it over time. Until film theory genuinely re-opens the question of media ontology outside the techno-determinist economy that has defined it heretofore, these disagreements will simply describe the same material again and again.18 Like the frames of a filmstrip that might tell the story of this discourse to a presumably entranced Hollywood audience, they will point to differences both small enough and large enough to register movement, and thus small and large enough to constitute the coherence and historical continuity that effectively constitutes this discourse as a discourse, stretching from its beginning in Eisenstein’s theory of montage to the recent revivals of Guy Debord’s concept of spectacle.19 For as long as the materiality of the filmstrip is consistently taken for granted as an ontological ground for the truth of cinema—the secret of discontinuity whose political truth must be revealed behind the insubstantial spectacle of the image—the prohibition on opsis will be reiterated indefinitely as truth, and the full scope of the ontological problem that arousal presents will remain out of view. It is thus worth asking: what might another ontological approach to media spectacle bring into view? And how might another notion of arousal change the way we think about the ontological affects that constitute it?

Arousals

Ken Jacobs’ 1990 film Opening the Nineteenth Century: 1896 provides an intriguing occasion for approaching these sorts of questions. For it does not properly begin when a projector rolls the first frame of the film before the light cast onscreen. In fact, one could say that it does not begin properly at all. Or if it does, it begins with a kind of primer, a short set of instructions explaining how—of all things—to see it. These instructions come printed on a small slip of paper accompanied by an envelope full of rectangular black light filters. Both of these accessories bear the handling of the numerous other audiences for the film that preceded whatever audience is presently assembled—and still just preparing—to watch it. It reads:

Including 50 filters; plus $5 for each additional packet of 50 filters. 3-D utilizing Pulfrich Effect (filters supplied; standard projection). Film is symmetrical and can be shown from either end. Cinematographers: Eugene Promio, Felix Mesgusch, Francis Doublier. Places originals, perhaps exposures from cameras in motion, to 1896. Shafting the screen: the projector beam maintains its angle as it meets the screen and keeps on going, introducing volume as well as light, just as the Paris, Cairo, and Venice of a century ago happen to pass. 3-D Instructions To Viewer: Passing
through the tunnel mid-film, a red flash will signal you to switch your single Pulfrich filter from before your right eye to before your left (keep both eyes open). Center-seating is best: depth deepens viewing further from the screen. Handle filter by edges to preserve clarity – Either side of filter may face screen. Filter can be held at any angle, there’s no ‘up’ or ‘down’ side. Also, two filters before an eye does not work better than one, and a filter in front of each only negates the effect. Suggestion To Film Curators: pass scotch-tape dispensers through audience—an inch of tape will hold a filter to an eyebrow.  

These remarks technically prepare the spectator—literally and figuratively—to begin the screening itself. They provide the name of the optical effect that the film enacts; the number of filters included so that viewers can experience it; the historical origins of the footage used to demonstrate it; and instructions for how, when, and where to use the technological accessories provided to their optimal effect. At a level perhaps best described as sensual or phenomenal, though, they confound the operative temporality of preparation at every turn, consistently undercutting the implicit beginning that preparations would in general seem to occasion.

The tone of the instructions—as wry and poetic as it is exacting—is perhaps the most striking instance of this effect. It is ironic in the most radical sense of the term. In this much it already bears unmistakable traces of the voice and sensibility that have grown so familiar from Ken Jacobs’ writings and performances over the years—a voice whose living intensity provides the only constant in an endless bleed between the acuity of the thoughts and ideals it sets out and the flashes of deadpan humor that reopen and enliven the aporias of these thoughts and ideals at every turn. Consider the theoretical lucidity of the pun about “shifting the screen,” the fleeting reflections on volume and light, and perhaps most of all, the undecidably parodic delight in experiential details drawn from prior and perhaps imagined screenings—ranging from where to sit to how much Scotch tape should suffice for eyebrow-to-filter security. To a certain extent, all of these specifications exploit the functional rationalism of the instructional genre associated with commercialized “optimal viewing conditions,” simply turning them on end to delineate the peculiar set of perceptual conditions that the film at hand requires in order to be seen at all. But in the process, these same qualities remind the audience of a sensual and communal dimension of its experience that is exactly as “rational” and “optimal” as sitting in a room full of people with black rectangular filters Scotch-taped to their faces—no matter how efficient the portions. The tactile and unavoidably social process of actually executing the instructions along with a whole auditorium of people makes it difficult not to appreciate the absurdity of their rigor as much as the rigor itself, and the social dimension of the tension between these affects.

We could say at this point that Jacobs has actually mobilized the instruction-form in order to render the spectatorial conditions of the film as a kind of performance. And yet, for this performance the artist need not be present to present it. The emotional dimension of the conditions themselves overflow the solemn temporality of pure communal presence so often fetishized in more traditional modes of performance art. During a screening of the film that Brian Price and I staged at Oklahoma State University in Fall 2010, for example, the process of passing around both the old spool of tape and the envelope full of filters, worn to softness by its exchange both within and between prior audiences, roused everyone to an almost euphoric state of giddiness and anticipation for the impending event of the film. It
constituted a palpable bond between all of us there, but also between all of us there and the un-present audiences that came before us in zig-zagging waves of previous and future times and places; between us and the disparate, asynchronous, and discontinuous community of audiences that gladly submit themselves to the protocols of avant-garde media spectatorship all the time. Put otherwise, by the time an audience has “prepared” itself to begin the piece of work known as Opening the Nineteenth Century: 1896, the show—like the century that its title promises to open with images from 1896—has ostensibly already begun. It has done so many times.

Then again, it has not and cannot begin. For as the spectator learns very close to the outset of its “preparations,” the film for which it is preparing “is symmetrical and can be shown from either end.” In other words, Opening the Nineteenth Century opens and closes as a palindrome, making the distinction between beginning and end on which the meaning of either term rests—like the terms “open” and “close” themselves—both contingent and arbitrary. In fact, if we as spectators can distinguish such terms at all, it is only because of the singular importance with which Jacobs’ instructions distinguish the mediate point in the film—a point that literally binds them together, puts them at odds, and thus renders their relation undecidable in one staggering turn. Concentrating all of the viewer’s attention on a promised event of appearance “mid-film”—when the anxiously anticipated “signal” will provide a cue to the viewer to switch the filter from the right eye to the left—Jacobs maintains the possibility of a distinction between beginning and end precisely by marking its impossibility. The film’s only conceivable climax hereby evacuates itself, occurring instead as
a transitory moment during a train ride to the region identified vaguely as “mid-film”—a place that most viewers probably don’t see anyhow since by now they are wrapped up in their own conscientiousness as spectators, which is to say, in the sensory-motor-based labors of seeing and handling that actually allow them to comply the film’s cumbersome pedagogical regime. Thus, even if Opening the Nineteenth Century cannot help but begin and end somewhere, its audiences almost inevitably and even more literally stand to miss the sole point on which its rigorous spatiotemporal logic insists. For the instructions that occasion the film’s beginning—and moreover, create the possibility of perceiving the optical effect that occasions its existence as such—confound its defining ends along with their own. And we still haven’t even gotten to the film.

Of course, if Jacobs’ instructions teach us anything, it is surely that the film itself is not what we are after here. For the deconstruction of temporal order that unfolds in the course of Opening the Nineteenth Century: 1896 is also—and significantly—a deconstruction of the ontological primacy so often assigned to the material base of the film strip in both media theory and in media-based practices of aesthetic politics. It is not simply that the palindromic structure of the film denies any necessary precedence to the film strip’s beginning at either end; it is that such a structure effectively renders the entire materialist conception of the film strip incidental to any organizing logic or basis for a revelation of what truly exists “outside” or “beyond” the image. Jacobs’ almost off-handed observation that the film “can be played from either end” thereby presents “the film itself” as a kind of ontological sight gag, a supplement to rather than a material basis for, or a conceptual purification of, the existence of the image. In other words, if there is a revelation to be had in the light of Jacobs’ staging of a cinematic origin-story, it does not derive from the truth of the filmic object behind the hallucinatory image, nor does it derive from some hulking apparatus that fuels a techno-economic simulacrum of subjectivation with nothing but mechanical reels and penis envy. In fact, it would seem to derive instead from an exacerbation of the very same sensuous experience of the moving image that both apparatus and suture theory hoped to demystify in favor of concrete material relations: the indecipherability of any clear border between the subjectivity of the spectator and the spectacle that looms before her as a seemingly tangible reality. As this scenario already suggests, then, Jacobs’ abandonment of the ontological “ground” of the film strip also entails an abandonment of the metaphysical economy that binds the materialist pedagogy of aesthetic politics to the purism of its Idealist opposite. And while Jacobs’ work as a whole is both casually and almost invariably treated as a straightforward enactment of apparatus theory, it does not take long to see the extent to which the ontological departure announced by Opening the Nineteenth Century’s cinematic origin-story breaks open the metaphysical terrain on which the pedagogical aesthetic order of both modern film theory in general and apparatus theory in particular have, like their ancient dialectical counterpart, run aground.21

Perhaps most notably, Jacobs’ departure from the revelatory discourse of demystification—and the attending truth of either the materialist filmic object per se or its promise as an index—presents us with a radically different conception of both the image and its arousals. After all, “the show” that Opening the Nineteenth Century presents is not geared in any necessary sense toward the proper indexical revelation of the truth behind the Pulfrich effect, or of the material places that pass onscreen. To be sure, these places do or did exist somewhere at some time; they also appear on the here of the screen in the present time of the screening, reminding us of cinema’s abstracting ability to conjure movement and mobility. Without
them we would see something else, just as we would see something else without the Pulfrich effect that the images avail. But to see only these two-dimensional, indexical images as such affects a distinct sense of disappointment or loss on the part of the spectator. The thing for which we are looking in and at the materialization of his film—if we should still like to call it that—is neither the actual place scarcely summoned onscreen, nor the image that appears there in its place, nor even the promise of an image untainted by visual manipulation. Rather than an indexical image per se, it is the experience of an image that exists strictly in and as our wholly affected experience of 3-D vision. And this experience does not necessarily depend on or take place on this particular strip of film—let alone in the marks of discontinuity it may betray as an “object” when it is not powering this “subjective” experience so extravagantly, eliding every break and impediment without countenance as it moves at once across and away from the surface of the screen.

Instead, to see Opening the Nineteenth Century we must look for an image whose movement takes place precisely as a spectacle of the undecidable relation between the objectivity of the camera, the subjectivity of the viewer, and the palpable material depth of the image that vibrates, intermittently and unstably, in some mediate place amidst all of these visual terrains—“mid”—way, as Jacobs might call it. Or rather, we must look among rather than at the flat image printed on the celluloid and the two-dimensional image appearing on the screen; we must look into the depth of the three-dimensional image that constitutes itself only variously and indirectly, in the fluctuating space-time established only in the reverberations between all of these surfaces and an entire auditorium filled with eyes that are in reality just as dispersed as they are captive. Indeed, the image for which we are looking is not on anything, in any mind, for any one viewer, or even before the eyes of the audience as a whole. It exists, but only as a most precarious relation of proximity—one conjured in the mediate region tentatively shared by a distant place marked there on film, its apparent presence here on the screen, and its spatio-temporal unfolding as a materialization of visions that cannot be shared or sustained, and precisely because they are unkempt by any order symbolic or Real, any logic binary or binocular, and any division of labor between the physical and the mental to which we may have become acculturated, or by which we may have become commodified en masse. Simply put, the image that constitutes the literal and figurative object of Opening the Nineteenth Century takes on the very role that its unmooring from the location of either the film strip, the psyche of the spectator-subject, or the simple projection of one onto the other leaves vacant: it constitutes the ontological “ground” for our phenomenal experience of the work’s materiality.

Needless to say, it would be difficult to reconcile this ontological conception of the image to the metaphysical one posited by Plato and Baudry alike—let alone the politics of a-rousal by which they hope to contain its encroachments on the Real. In Jacobs’ hands, the image can teach us about the nature of its relation to real existence only when its sensual powers are gloriously mystified, and we are awe-struck by them; demystification is not in the offering. The image is not reduced to an immaterial simulation, a technological simulation of objectivity, or even a subjective investment of desire in the lack of das Ding. It disrupts precisely the dialectical polarities of the subject-object relation from which the notion of the gaze derives its explanatory power; the image does not lie on a distinguishable surface at which we gaze in an assumption of subjective mastery and coherence. On the contrary, these are the very assumptions we see dissolve as the phenomenon of stereoscopic vision unfolds in a material space that might otherwise assure us of our strictly conceptual relation to the existence of
the image. Instead of such an assurance, or the lesson it might teach us, we get a conceptually paradoxical and yet vividly concrete experience of the image as an openly mediate plenitude. We sense the generative presence of a palpably material relation opened up between body and world by the phenomenon of the image, and precisely insofar as it simultaneously arouses us and is aroused from the screen in turn.

And yet, to speak of arousal in these terms already gestures toward the extent to which Jacobs’ ontological staging of the image turns on a reconfiguration of the notion of arousal whose bifurcation both founds and sustains the Idealist-materialist discourse of aesthetic politics. Although many of Jacobs’ films evoke the discomfiting aesthetic regime associated with this tradition of thought, to be sure, Jacobs does not treat the experience of sensual arousal as a regrettable but necessary “base” or launching point for a higher goal of intellectual arousal achieved separately—a preliminary accommodation that must be minimized, expurgated, and filtered out before the latter can truly occur. Unlike Plato, Aristotle, Baudry, or even Beller, Jacobs does not attempt to manage our arousal before the spectacle with which he presents us by imposing either a physical or conceptually abstract distance from it. If anything, he complicates our experience of arousal precisely by staging the constitutive and palpably indissoluble relation it opens up between sensation and thought, body and Idea, image and material, spectacle and reality. For instance, the overtly pedagogical preface of Opening the Nineteenth Century produces what we might call the greatest intellectual effects of the piece—reflections on the temporality of film, on the social performance of spectatorship, and on the notion of “ideal” viewing conditions—through a disorienting jumble of manual tasks and bodily affects. And as I have already indicated, while the piece certainly “rouses” the viewer to the material conditions of spectatorship—just as Plato, Baudry, and so many others would prescribe—it would seem to do so to humble us before the ontological complexity and material depth of the image rather than to explain them away. That is, if any sort of truth about spectacle is revealed to or awakened in the mind of the spectator, it is not the truth of some objective, Ideal, or material condition behind or beyond the image. It is an awakening to the stupefying force and singular complexity of our own ontological entwinement with the latter’s deep existence, and it occurs precisely as an experience of sensual novelty and wonder—as a spectacle. The film’s deconstruction of chronological order comes over us in much the same fashion: as an incalculable feeling of eagerness for the promise of a spectacle that comes both in spite of and because of our diligence as pupils; as the anticipation of a transformative vision that impresses itself upon our senses too late, and yet appropriately enough, as a moment of delight in the otherwise austere darkness of an underground tunnel.

In other words, each and every attempt that Opening the Nineteenth Century makes to “arouse” the spectator manifestly reconstructs the relation between the hierarchical opposition of mind over matter, or telling over showing, learning over gawking that the bifurcated language of arousal has maintained throughout the history of Western poetics. It is not too much to say that the subject of the film—like its object—is the sensual enactment of this reconstruction in the very bodies of its captivated spectators. This interpretation of the film does not simply await a deconstructive reading to be carried out by myself or someone else at a subsequent time in a secondary text. As Patricia Mellencamp has observed, Jacobs’ films themselves exist as the material of thought. Outside the metaphysical economy of demystification that has organized the entire history of Western poetics around an effort to manage the distinction between registers of arousal good and bad, Jacobs is free to stage the inseparability of these
registers as an unabashed novelty trick—as the avowed production of a real spectacle. The spectator is free as well—not to blind herself in the name of an abstraction either material or Ideal, but to luxuriate in the image that materializes in and as her sights, and to revel in the wonder of an arousal that thinks through the body as such. In short, the ontological understanding of the image that Jacobs stages in Opening the Nineteenth Century enfolds an ontological understanding of arousal, too. If we experience the image’s power to constitute a material “ground” for ideas and things at once, we only do so through an experience of arousal as the necessary and even indistinguishable sensual relation that opens us up to this power; the mutually generative relation between the two cannot be parsed out any more than can the relation between our minds, our eyes, our sight, our environment, and the image that penetrates the dimensional realm they all share rather than restricting itself to a flat screen.

I would hardly like to circumscribe the scope and variety of Jacobs’ practice, but with this sense of Opening the Nineteenth Century in mind, it is tempting to think of his entire oeuvre as a prodigious, ongoing, and recursively unsettling attempt to make sense of this ontological relation. It is not simply that Jacobs often characterizes his work in ways that resonate with this reading, declaring, “Eisenstein said the power of film was to be found between shots. Peter Kubelka seeks it between film frames. I want to get between the eyes, contest the separate halves of the brain. A whole new play of appearances is possible here.” It is the raw, persistent vigor with which the work itself demands our experience of arousal as a relation with it, but also as the relation that defines it as such. After all, Opening the Nineteenth is hardly Jacobs’ only film to explore this sensation and its implications for re-thinking the origins or essence of cinema. In fact, it is not even his only symmetrical film; the 1971 Globe comes with its own elaborate instructions about the ambidexterity of the film strip, and in case that were not enough, they boast of an “X-ratable soundtrack” that performs no less a task than ensuring the film’s “perfect” enfolding of “divine and profane.” Furthermore, despite the array of different technological apparatuses that Jacobs has constructed over the decades in which he has worked—and the array of different issues and sensibilities they have worked through in their turns—in one way or another they all ceaselessly “re-open” the ontological problem of arousal that Opening the Nineteenth Century cannot and will not close up in the box for a celluloid reel.

Indeed, while Jacobs’ nervous system performances and the digital eternalisms that follow read almost effortlessly as enactments of apparatus theory—and more precisely, as part of the uncomfortable pedagogy of demystification for which they call—these works move to “arouse” the image itself in ways that are hard to square with this project. To begin with, the promiscuity with which Jacobs has moved across and between different media technologies in the process of creating these apparatuses immediately problematizes the medium-specific ontology of film on which apparatus theory rests. To be sure, the halting repetitions of pieces like XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXS (1980), Ontic Antics (2005), What Happened on Twenty-Third Street (2009), and Nymph (2007) entreat us to think about both the materiality of spectatorship and the experience of discontinuity so familiar from the frame of post-Eisensteinian film theory. But they also confront us with overtly physical bodies again and again—whether Oliver Hardy’s or a comely ingénue’s. And in doing so they further entreat us to recognize the vibratory pleasure and corporeal wonder of the visual arousal that animates this discontinuity—in a perpetually unstable and thus absolutely ontological sense—in the form of an image that both constitutes and is constituted by it. They entreat us, in other words, to recognize arousal as the ontological force that defines the notion of
“relation” as such. Furthermore, as many of the pieces included in this issue of *World Picture* suggest, Jacobs’ more recent work with “free-view” 3-D only makes this entreaty more explicit, in part by minimizing the spectator’s experience of discontinuity and foregrounding the tenuous material plenitude of the image through which we enjoy our arousal as its. And while Jacobs’ nervous magic lantern performances surely draw our attention to Jacobs’ manipulation of “the apparatus” as part of the performance underway, they do so only just enough to make us wonder with delight at the existential phenomenon of the image we perceive, which bursts forth from the screen as a sensual materialization of movement, depth, and space to reach the very thing that Baudry and Plato abhorred equally: a room full of different but utterly captivated eyes.

In this sense, we might say that the incomplete and distinctly multi-media whole of Jacobs’ ongoing practice presents and re-presents us with the same philosophical provocation that we found in *Opening the Nineteenth Century*. Namely, it provokes us to abandon our metaphysical reflections on the materialist ontology of film that precedes us, and instead, to entertain an ontological understanding of the image that manifests itself as such in the mutually constitutive reverberation of the relation arousal-spectacle. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy offers some interesting first steps for fleshing out such a provocation. For Nancy not only argues that we must understand the image as the ontological ground of a sensuous relation with the world it presents rather than as a mere metaphysical re-presentation of the world outside or beyond it; in the process of elaborating this argument, he ends up describing this relation in ways that could easily serve to describe the experience of the image that *Opening the Nineteenth Century*—like so many other of Jacobs’ pieces—stages. Insisting that the image “has no object . . . or ‘subject,’ as one speaks of the subject of a painting,” he characterizes it instead as a “mark” that both seals off and opens up our sensuous relation to “a world that we enter while remaining before it, and that thus offers itself fully for what it is, a world, which is to say: an indefinite totality of meaning (and not merely an environment).”

Much like Jacobs’ three-dimensional image, the image that Nancy describes here distinguishes itself from the tangible world that it promises to show, but also disputes the latter’s presence by enveloping us with the same material relation of sensual “intimacy” and phenomenal contact through which we know it as such. That is, in presenting us with a world, the image presents us with the fundamentally aesthetic phenomenon by which we encounter the ontological phenomenon of presence itself. It opens up a hole in our assumption of the material world’s self-sufficient presence by reminding us that whenever we cease taking the presence of something for granted, it too necessarily relies on the aesthetic relation of presentation, and indeed, on the sensual relation that the latter must open up in order for what is present to appear manifestly so. In the case of *Opening the Nineteenth Century*, for example, our very inability to safely objectify or subjectivize the image prompts us to recognize not its insubstantiality—a quality that features heavily in most attempts to theorize the ontological status of cinema in the digital aftermath of its medium-specific form—but rather, to recognize its radical material force as the vibratory sensual relation by which substantiation itself comes into being. It presents us with the ability of the image to constitute our experience of the world precisely as it constitutes a moment of relational instability between our phenomenal experience of the latter and of others, and our sensual immersion in it. It is for this reason above all, Nancy reminds us, that “penetrating the image, just as with amorous flesh, means being penetrated by it. The gaze is impregnated
with color, the ear with sonority. There is nothing in the spirit that is not in the senses: nothing in the idea that is not the image.”

A great deal more could of course be said about the affinities between Nancy’s ontological conception of the image-arousal relation and Jacobs’ enactment of it—not to mention the implications this relation might hold for 21st century media theory. And yet, in my estimation, Jacobs’ expressly sensual and thus spectacular approach to this idea opens up slightly different insights than Nancy’s philosophical approach, however sympathetic, and even evocative, the latter is. For indeed, in Nancy’s account the image exerts its ontological “pressure” primarily because the image is defined in essence as a bounded, two-dimensional “surface” that distinguishes itself manifestly from “the world of things considered as a world of availability.” The “grounding” force of the relation it sets up derives precisely from the “pressure” that the flatness of the image, as a surface grounded in its own self-coincident “underside,” exerts. For Nancy, this pressure is the ontological relation that confirms, “this is this.”32 Accordingly, the experience of radical ontological instability that he summons, however intellectually vertiginous it feels, is at bottom a conceptual or abstract one rooted in a presentational form that is distinguishable from content; it is separate from the image itself, which simply puts this dynamic conceptual relation in play.

This is not the case in Jacobs’ expressly sensual enactments of this scenario. Here the image manifestly refuses to be itself. It overflows the two-dimensional frame of flatness of the screen that for Nancy defines it essentially, merging the scene of its arousal from this surface with our disarticulated arousals by it, and indeed, with that of the world that arises so palpably from it all around us. It is not that the image so roused ceases to be distinct from “reality,” collapsing into mere simulacrum, but rather, that it becomes a spectacle of the unsettling and uneven ontological relation it arouses in spectators—a relation that Nancy must situate outside the phenomenal content of the image itself. Put otherwise, the image displays the constitutive nature of the relation that variously animates it and is animated by it. For example, in Opening the Nineteenth Century and Jacobs’ other experiments in stereoscopic vision, the image coincides with the relation it organizes, and shows itself to us as such. The spectacle of the three-dimensional image thus serves as both the cause and the effect of our arousal; if we see it, it is only because we attend to it so eagerly. And yet, if we attend it eagerly, it is only in order to see it. What is illustrated most vividly of all, then, is the ontologically undecidable relation between the physically affective experience of relation that we generally know as arousal, on the one hand, and an image that can be defined as a spectacle precisely because it either provokes the all-consuming and undeniable attention of every mind’s eye, or because it is the apparent thing produced from the complex relation enacted by such attention. As this scenario suggests, this sensual enactment of the ontological dimension of the image that Nancy conceptualizes immediately confronts us with a more particular kind of image—a spectacle—and a more particular problem of arousal—its ontological force in relation to spectacle. Indeed, the image becomes spectacular expressly because it engages us in this relation of arousal. The relation of arousal likewise finds its existential guarantor in the phenomenon of a spectacle so defined. The two necessarily sustain one another for as long as the force of this relation between them is sustained as relation, and collapse as such when they do not. When the crowd stops looking for the 3-D phenomenon of Jacobs’ images or they ceases to provide us with the material conditions for seeing it, then there is neither spectacle nor arousal; it is only when the image disappears that the techno-perceptual event of Opening the Nineteenth Century closes, and even then it promises to re-open again.
indefinitely. For the relation spectacle-arousal, insofar as it exists as the ontological force of both the image and its mediate relation to us, must remain just that—mediate, reverberating.

With this scenario, Jacobs’ piece presents a very different way of understanding spectacle than the one familiar to discourses of aesthetic politics heretofore. Rather than just a techno-economic totalization of the world that fundamentally obliterates social relations, it shows us spectacle as an aesthetic relation that necessarily depends on the ontological force of arousal for its power; it shows us spectacle as an opening that cannot be determinately closed, for it always opens a relation of arousal between the material and the conceptual, image and world, sensation and Idea, that transforms these terms in the unsettling and unsustainable act of relating them. In this scenario, the danger of spectacle consists not of its enclosure of the world, in either a total simulation or a total economic order in which relation ceases to exist; the danger of spectacle consists of the radical undecidability and tenuousness of the relation it opens up between these otherwise neatly partitioned terrains. The concept of spectacle elaborated by Debord defines this danger specifically, rather than the aesthetic relation of spectacle itself, which consists most fundamentally of the image-arousal relation, and thus also constitutes a necessary ontological ground for the opening of social relations as such.

More broadly speaking, though, to see the relation between spectacle and arousal in this way is also to contemplate a radically different understanding of their political implications than the one with which this essay began. It is to recognize the indissoluble enfoldment of these terms not as the reciprocal guarantee or dialectical enclosure of total simulation and delusion, but rather, as the necessarily spectacular ground of the essentially open, incomplete, and mutually generative relation that defines them both in one another’s image. It is also to recognize that such a relation—as relation—can only threaten to enclose the world in a simulacral totality, whether Idealist or materialist, when it is conceptualized from within the enclosure of a metaphysical economy, which is to say, when the mutual material torsion that defines the entanglement of “relation” itself is reduced to a mere opposition between two separate things. And in this sense, the political problems condensed under the headings “spectacle” and “arousal” in Western thought should be understood as the material effects of the very same discourse designed to solve them. For it is only when we forget, refuse, or deny the fact that any arousal worthy of the name constitutes a multi-directional relation between body and mind, materiality and idea, sensation and thought that—insofar as it is defined as relation—cannot overcome its entanglement with any one of these domains in a dialectical process of conceptual transcendence. Consider, for example, the ethical discourse that typically surrounds the notion of “merely sensual” arousal: it consists of nothing more or less than the threat of a subject treating someone or something as a material object, which is to say, as the discrete polarity of a sensation that is both disengaged and unidirectional, and can be acted upon without implications. The ethical discourse surrounding the techno-economic concept of spectacle reproduces this scenario almost exactly: it is the threat of a subject treating an image as if it were either an object or an objective terrain, to be commodified for material exchange or else acted upon as objective ground. In other words, arousal and spectacle becomes dangerous precisely when we forget, refuse, or deny their essential impropriety as relations. Violence, rape, and oppression represent nothing more or less than the willful purification of this impropriety—the realm of absolute subjects and absolute objects.
As I suggested at the outset, the discursive traces of such forgetting run throughout the history of Western philosophy—and throughout the path of conquest it cuts across the bodies, maps, and texts that mark out that history. And yet, the telescopic discourses of arousal and spectacle that we have traced across this history also mark out a series of reminders against this forgetting. The unsettled prepositional intensity that defines the name arousal itself offers one such reminder. It is surely no coincidence that the mongrel prefix a- can refer to virtually any sort of relation at all, signifying the without or not of atheism, the towards of attest, the proximity of aside, the of of anew, the in-process of aglow, and the increase of aggravate, to name a few. In this way the a- of arousal would seem to manifest the very prepositional excess, undecidability, and incompleteness that has attended the description of arousal as relation throughout my entire description of Jacobs’ images. Aristotle’s use of the term opsis as a precursor to the term spectacle performs a similar function. For this term not only reminds us that the concept of spectacle developed in modern film and cultural theory ultimately boils down to the more precise problem that opsis translates—the action (sis) of appearance (op)—but also that it refers to nothing more or less than the ontological force of a sensuous relation, which is to say, the relation I have called image-arousal. After all, Aristotle’s concern about opsis in the Politics is not the latter’s illusory or immaterial status, but quite the contrary, its dependence on “material resources.” In other words, opsis effectively encroaches on the political by refusing to restrict itself to the immaterial realm of Ideas, and instead, penetrating the aroused spectator and the aroused environment of society in all their materiality. Like the ontological relation of arousal that provides its force, opsis is never completely located, never completely ephemeral or concrete; it is always about us. And in this sense, it is perhaps an even better term for addressing the distinctly aesthetic and ontological understanding of spectacle outlined above than the irrevocably conceptualized term spectacle; it signifies a departure from the self-effaced terrain of conceptualization itself.

As this scenario already suggests, then, regarding the image as an ontological relation of arousal rather than as something at which we might simply gaze, or as a thing we might simply exchange, holds distinct implications for theory and philosophy. Most simply put, it presents us with an opportunity to rethink the problem of aesthetic politics—and the nature of the role that spectacle and arousal might play in social existence—outside of the metaphysical economy that has circumscribed Western poetics since Plato. But regarding the image and its capacity for arousal in this way also holds more practical implications, too. Namely, it entails a particular sort of relation to the materiality of images, too, and the social and political implications of this relation only come into focus when we understand what it would actually mean to regard the image as a constantly unsettled medium of sensuous relation to the world, not an object or subject for the gaze and its valuations. And once again, it is a piece by Ken Jacobs that may demonstrate the meaning of such a regard best of all. I am thinking in particular of the 2008 piece World Enhancer. The piece consists of a somewhat flimsy 8 1/2 by 11 box with a clear plastic top. Through the plastic, one sees a sheet of paper—yet another set of instructions—that reads:

Ken Jacobs’ WORLD ENHANCER
Look through closely, with both eyes. Take your time; shift from place.
Keep looking.
This will have to do until capitalism is only a bad dream.
2008
Inside the box, one finds an ornate gilded picture frame dotted with faux pearls, but the frame does not contain a picture. It contains an opaque sheet of glass so finely ground that it filters and refracts whatever one sees through it in a lovely haze. One can follow the directions indefinitely, openly, and with the consolation of the open-ended and openly beautiful rapport with the world that Jacobs has quietly promised. In closing, then—and in the spirit of a vision we might share with Jacobs—another opening:

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Notes

4 Eisenstein, 29.
5 Ibid., 41-42.
6 Ibid., 25.
7 Ibid., 17.
8 Ibid., 28-29.
12 Baudry, 349.
14 Baudry, 354.
15 Ibid., 352. Italics mine.
18 For a remarkably succinct commentary of the problems of cinema studies’ discourse of ontology, see: Brian Price, “Nine Theses on the Failures and False Start of Filmic Ontology,” The Velvet Light Trap 64 (Fall 2009): 100-101.
20 This text is reprinted (with some electronic code errors) on the website of Film-makers Cooperative, which distributes the film in the fashion described above: http://www.film-makerscoop.com/search/search.php?page=3.
21 This claim is often made so casually that it is left implicit but clear. See, for example, Patricia Mellencamp, “Theoretical Objects,” in Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 92-107; Laura Marks, “Here’s Gazing at You,” in Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 57-72; “Motion Study / Motion Painting: Bi-Temporal Vision: The Sea. Accessed February 2010 at http://academichack.net/jacobs.htm.
David I. Tafler makes virtually the same observation in an essay about the interactive dimension of Jacobs’ work, noting, “The event [of the film] exists somewhere out there, a projection forged somewhere in the cerebral cortex.” As this characterization already begins to suggest, though, Tafler places the event of the image entirely within mental space—partly because he is interested in memory above all. He thus goes on to inadvertently resort to the same doubled terms that Baudry and others have used to characterize the subject/object, mind/body relations of cinematic spectatorship. Accordingly, the “event” of the image remains trapped in the familiar image/materiality problematic without introducing the third term of materiality, or the ontological question of the image that attends it. And so, while Tafler’s discussion is both helpful and highly sympathetic to my own, in what follows I draw out a slightly different tri-partite dynamic that directly manifests these ontological issues. David I. Tafler, “When Analog Cinema Becomes Digital Memory…,” Wide Angle 21, no. 1 (January 1999): 185.

Michael Sicinski offers a similar and very instructive reading of Jacobs’ work as it moves between the painterly and the cinematic in “Motion Study / Motion Painting: Bi-Temporal Vision: The Sea.” Accessed February 2010 at http://academichack.net/jacobs.htm.

See Mellencamp, “Theoretical Objects,” 92-107. I would be remiss if I did not make it clear that Mellencamp’s argument differs slightly from mine. She is interested in exploring Jacobs’ work as an instance of Lyotard’s notion of a postmodern acinema, and thus ultimately characterizes this work as an expression rather than a complication of Baudry’s cinematic apparatus. As a result she does not focus on the insistent role that the body plays in this thinking, or the challenges that this insistence might present to the materialist ontology of film theory.

Laura Marks also discusses the possibility of experiencing the arousal of pleasure before one of Jacobs’ films in her essay “Here’s Gazing at You.” While Marks’ reading is sympathetic to this one in some ways, she implicitly frames this discussion around the same basic theoretical terms problematized here—terms which ultimately result in a fundamentally different reading of the film, especially with respect to the claim I am making here. See Marks, “Here’s Gazing at You.”

This claim has been re-printed so often without a source that I could not find its origin. For one instance accessed in March 2010, see: http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2009janfeb/jacobs.html.


The text of these printed instructions can be found under the listing for Globe in the online catalogue of the Film-Makers Co-Op. See http://www.film-makerscoop.com/search/search.php?author=Ken+Jacobs.


Nancy, 10.

Ibid., 2.
Here is Nancy at greater length: The image is separated [from the “ground” of the world] in two ways simultaneously. It is detached from a ground [fond] and it is cut out within a ground. It is pulled away and clipped or cut out. The pulling away raises it and brings it forward: makes it a ‘fore,’ a separate frontal surface, whereas the ground itself had no face or surface . . . . In this double operation, the ground disappears. It disappears in its essence as ground, which consists in its not appearing. One can thus say that it appears as what it is by disappearing. Disappearing as ground, it passes entirely into the image. Ibid., 7.

I would like to thank Brian Price, with all my love, for making me one of the lucky people who gets to look through a *World Enhancer* regularly. For a beautiful reading of Ken Jacobs’ 2002 video *Circling Zero: We See Absence* (2002)—one that I think offers a sympathetic demonstration of what such a regard might entail—see: Dana Anderson, “I Miss You Already: A Phenomenological Understanding of Ken Jacobs’ *Circling Zero: We See Absence,*” *Afterimage* 36, no. 2 (Sept./Oct. 2008): 18-21.