

AN AESTHETICS OF INHABITABILITY

Christine Ross

Steadily, at least since *Smithfield* and *North Circular* (2000), Mark Lewis has been filming urban worlds of larger cities (London, Toronto, Los Angeles, Vienna, Beirut...). Tightly framed, these microspaces systematically raise the question of inhabitability—of how people live in specific places. They include: modernist (but also Victorian and brutalist) architectures filmed in their advanced state of deterioration or about to be (even filmed in the process of being) demolished; modernist buildings or squares which have survived urban sprawl and haphazard development; roads; street corners; parks; posts and trees. These sites are rarely without beings (people, birds). But what makes them unique is that they are often barely populated. Their population is depicted as something strange and unexpected. As Lewis specifies, his films are always preceded by a period of observation, in which he tries to understand how people “live there” or, in the case of his landscape films, how people “might be there.”¹ The films never provide a detailed view of these beings: the viewpoint is not ethnographic or expressionistic. They don’t support identificatory processes. Their beings are generic, devoid of character designation, but culturally diverse and elusive. They are present as extras, “both there and not there”, occurrences and quasi-ghosts, celebrated as such by Lewis in his film *The Pitch* (1998) where he imagines making a film only with extras, those quasi-unnoticeable figures who have become “the silent proletariat of the film set”, and whose “job is to be quiet and be the background

of history.”² One must never lose sight of this fundamental concern for inhabitability, which will be searched and thought out through the relatively short yet durational filmic time of the single take. Lewis’s filmworks address temporally the query raised by philosopher Bruno Latour: “why has [the world] not been conceived as if the question of its habitability was the only question worth asking?”³

Approached from the angle of architecture, urban planning and design, the question of modern and contemporary inhabitability derives from what must be called (at least in European and North American contexts) the failure of modernism—modernism’s inability to respond sustainably to the developments of modernity, despite its search for formal innovation and its utopian engagement with the social.⁴ As summarized by architectural historian Anthony Vidler, modernism favored and has been criticized for favoring abstraction and technological innovation over history and humanism: “its functional promises and technological fetishism were nothing but failed utopias of progress; its ideology was out of touch with the people, if not antihumanistic. Its formal vocabularies were sterile and uncommunicative.”⁵ Lewis’s filmworks contribute to this concern in an inventive way: simply put, they show contemporaneity as made of *failing* yet *wanting* architectures—a story in which buildings are becoming historical, being replaced by new ones or resisting their replacement, in relation to urban development and modernism’s inability to adequately respond to the life needs of its inhabitants. But his films only engage with this failure to deploy takes whose singleness allows the everyday to emerge within the image.

This essay seeks to show the complexity of Lewis’s aesthetics of inhabitability, one that unfolds through the deployment of single takes. These takes are edited to appear single; they are continuous but made of discontinuities and multi-temporalities; and they catch the vitality of the everyday (inhabitability) through a constant collaboration between the technical capacities of film, the director’s filmic decisions and the spectator’s perceptual reception. In a recent interview, Lewis explains how filming for him is a form of abandonment to the materiality of film:

“Whenever I make a film I try to imagine what would the camera do if it had consciousness, if the camera had the ability to make its own decisions. It obviously [. . .] has limited things it can do but given it can do some things, how can it do them [. . .]? Let the camera free here and let it decide how it’s going to move.”⁶ That statement is but a strong reminder of how much Lewis’s aesthetics of inhabitability has relied on what might be called the agency of filmic matter. That materiality is not the sole player in the thinking-through, seeing-through, search and manifestation of contemporary inhabitability: the director’s aesthetic decisions and the spectator’s perceptual activities collaborate in that process. But how that materiality matters in the aesthetic investigation of inhabitability is what this essay aims to unravel.

Potentialization

Let us first provide a general view of what I see as being Lewis’s ambition to potentialize modernism, with the understanding that this ambition (as we will start to see in the next section) is what will be partly taken over by the materiality of film. Vidler’s study of the historical awareness of modernist architects and architectural theoreticians makes the convincing point that, contrary to the postmodernist postulation, modernism never rejected history. It respected it *too much*. By affirming the need to cut with the past, it “in fact understood history as a fundamental force, an engine of the social world” that “might be anticipated, its force applied to new and anticipated ends.”⁷ Modernism was a progress-oriented movement open to the future but that openness mostly articulated itself through an erasure or depreciation of the past. What might be saved from modernism is precisely its understanding of history as “an active and profoundly disturbing force.”⁸ Vidler’s critique of postmodernism and his belief that some aspects of modernism can still be useful sustain Lewis’s production, which attempts to potentialize modernist buildings and urban sites

that are part of the everyday. He does so by exploring the materiality of film—as a renewed modernist quest. In a pivotal text responding to T. J. Clark's book, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (1999), in which the art historian claims that modernism is now drastically past ("already the modernist past is a ruin, the logic of whose architecture we do not remotely grasp. This has not happened, in my view, because we have entered a new age. [...] On the contrary, it is just because the 'modernity' which modernism prophesied has finally arrived that the forms of representation it originally gave rise to are now unreadable. [...] Modernism is our antiquity, in other words; the only one we have"),⁹ Lewis speaks of the necessity to consider modernism not so much in its pastness than in its relation to the future. If one observes any modernist building, it is difficult to know what it really wanted but one must "acknowledge that it might just continue 'wanting.'"¹⁰ The same applies to film. Lewis contests Clark's standpoint according to which modernism—as an aesthetics that critically kept modernity at bay and injected modernization with utopian prospects—has ceased to be operative. His main objective is to "engage with the failure" of modernism "as an unexpected development that in turn might produce new and unexpected forms."¹¹ This means that Lewis wants to potentialize modernism's (be it architecture or film's) critical embrace of modernity's drive for "change, transformation, and possibility."¹² The potentialization of modernism is set about to depict vitality (change, transformation, possibility)—what I have been designating as inhabitability.

This is to say that, even in the restrained microspaces recorded by the films, human bodies are active in the places they live in: they stand, look, play, walk and cycle. In *Lawson Estate* (2003) and *Downtown: Tilt, Zoom and Pan* (2005), for instance, the urban sites spread out through a triad deployment of a foreground, a middle-ground and a background that simply fail to connect; and in *North Circular* (2000) a derelict grid-structure industrial building sits in the middle of an empty parking lot, surrounded by urban roads. Yet, and this is indicative of

Lewis's standpoint on failed modernism, these sites never articulate the absence of life or the inability of the inhabitants to engage with failure and to negotiate a place for living. A young woman with a baby carriage appears unexpectedly in the frame and walks down the middle diagonal lane of *Lawson Estate*, while a man mows grass in the background and the shadows of construction workers move in the left foreground. Young teenagers can be seen hanging out in the *North Circular* building. The concern for inhabitability becomes fully explicit in *Cold Morning* (2009), which films the urban shelter of a homeless man organizing his precarious life space. The same must be said about the *Heygate Estate* works (2002-2003). The Heygate Estate is a large housing development in South-East London completed in 1974, presently in the process of demolition. The two Heygate filmworks concentrate on different sections of the estate, filming the warned down buildings and surrounding environment. But children are shown playing in these environments. *Tenement Yard, Heygate Estate* proposes a static 4 minutes single take of children carrying out a football game in the yard of the housing blocks. The fixity of the view is counterbalanced both by the movement of the children and the activity occurring on the balconies of the buildings (the movement of clothes hanging out to dry and the walk of inhabitants transporting a mattress). *Children's Games, Heygate Estate* proposes an uninterrupted 7:27 minute travelling shot in which a camera mounted on a rickshaw dolly moves along the above-ground walkway crossing the estate. Although the tower blocks take up most of the frame and although the walkway is deserted, human action unfolds at the periphery: children from different cultural backgrounds play a variety of games (cycling, roller skating, playing football and badminton), filling "the marginal spaces of the brutalist architecture with lively activity."¹³

On the one hand, all of these filmworks make manifest the disconnection between the building and their occupants. On the other hand, while this disconnection persists, occupants go about their daily lives. Film captures that vitality. Vitality is shown to unfold within modernist

environments, not despite them. The critique of modernism is thus never simply a rejection of it, potentialized as it systematically is in Lewis's work, when the everyday, what Stephen Johnstone has called "the vast reservoir of normally unnoticed, trivial and repetitive actions comprising the common ground of daily life",¹⁴ becomes manifest.

The aesthetics of the everyday is not new. Social theory and art have brought the "vast reservoir" of unnoticed daily actions to the fore at least since the mid-1940s, following a growing desire to make visible disregarded aspects of lived experience. In the Situationist paradigm, especially, displaying the everyday was a modality by which what Georges Perec designated as "the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual", was made noticeable through practices of *détournement* and estrangement.¹⁵ But the Situationists conceptualized the everyday as an ambiguous space—a site of alienation and creativity, homogeneity and heterogeneity, docile conformity to and disruption of repressive routine, where routine and habits could be radically transformed into the uncanny, the strange, the new. Many observers have exposed how the Situationist call for the infra-ordinary, as a means to subvert the capitalist organization of the city, most often ended up reinstating the divide between the everyday and history, insofar as its "disruption of the everyday" was not enough to disorganize urbanism.¹⁶ In contrast to the disruptive drive of the Situationists and in synchronicity with recent literature which in fact insists on the benefits of routine for psychological development, problem-solving, even inventiveness and effective socio-political action, Lewis's filmworks propose manifestations of inhabitability as part of the everyday and as made possible by the very modernism with which it constantly negotiates.¹⁷ The underlying impulse of Lewis's aesthetics is (let us follow Agamben's definition of potentiality here) "to remain faithful to that which having perpetually been forgotten, must remain unforgettable."¹⁸ The artist films with the understanding that the modernist thrust of film, architecture and urbanism "demands [*esige*] to remain *with us* and be possible *for us*

in some manner."¹⁹ Architecture and film remain because they make inhabitability possible.

The Materiality of Film

Lewis sets into play a variety of aesthetic procedures that allow film to be a 'noticing' machine—a medium that notices the unnoticed inhabitability in the everyday. These procedures take their originality from a desire to make films despite or more properly *because* of what Lewis has called "the end of film." His filmography begins with that declaration, one that asserts the end of the filmic belief system according to which film has the ability "to transform consciousness."²⁰ I understand Lewis's declaration to be an aspiration for realism (more on this typically misdefined notion further down), as well as an aspiration for speculation (instead of assuming that film can transform consciousness, he speculates over the possibility of filmic materiality as having consciousness). One way to do this, as a filmmaker, is to abandon one's ambitions to the materiality of film: to let the camera perceive in place of the director *as much as possible*.

In the last fifteen years, Lewis has developed a whole range of aesthetic procedures to sustain this paradoxical declaration (a declaration whose paradox lies in the fact that it proclaims the necessity of film after the end of film). One of these aesthetic procedures is particularly relevant to this declaration: the "part cinema" approach to film.²¹ Since 2000, Lewis has adopted the Lumière brothers' tradition of *vues* or actualities (vignettes of everyday life lasting the length of a roll of film), producing single takes without sound which are shot in real time and whose length is determined by the length of a single celluloid roll of 35mm film (an average of 4 minutes, in contrast to the Lumière brothers' rolls which lasted 50 seconds). This is mainly a material solution to the question of how one starts and when one ends a film. The director takes that decision out of his hands by adopting the

prefixed length of the 35mm roll. Lewis has kept that average length even in his digital films, with the understanding that it corresponds to the time length a spectator can handle looking at his films in a gallery setting before getting bored.²²

The “part cinema” abandonment of the director’s ambition to the materiality of film is also articulated by the isolation and combination of filmic procedures intrinsic to the technology of film, as well as the isolation of filmic conventions from the narrative. These forms of autonomization of filmic procedures and conventions are manifest in the filmworks when they are preselected yet set free at the moment of filming in ways that don’t follow the plot-and-character logic of narrative cinema. While respecting the Lumière-inspired singleness of the take, the filmworks articulate a significant modification of that singleness: not only are the takes substantially edited but they unfold through technical processes postdating the Lumière films—techniques that complicate yet thicken the continuity of the take. An autonomized procedure or convention may be explored in such a way that it becomes the sole content of the film. But when autonomized techniques are explored consecutively in a same filmwork, they create perceptual discontinuities that are nevertheless glued together by the single take. These autonomized cinema parts include: opening credits sequences (*Two Impossible Films*, 1995); ending sequences (*A Sense of the End*, 1996); extras (*The Pitch*, 1998); the traveling shot (*Smithfield*, 2000; *Isosceles*, 2007); the pan (*Queen-sway: Pan and Zoom*, 2005; *Little Tree*, 2011); the tilt (*Downtown: Tilt, Zoom and Pan*, 2005); the zoom (*Spadina: Reverse Dolly, Zoom, Nude*, 2006); rear projection (*Rear Projection [Molly Parker]*, 2006; *The Fight*, 2008; *Nathan Phillips Square, A Winter’s Night, Skating*, 2009); axis rotation (*Harper Road*, 2003); the turning of the image upside down (*Upside Down Touch of Evil*, 1997; *City Road 04 May 2012*, 2012); the passage of black and white to color (*5262 Washington Boulevard*, 2008); the split-screen (*Prater Hauptallee, Dawn and Dusk*, 2008); and the immobilized camera shot (*Airport*, 2003; *Walworth Road [Rosa Miguel, age 32, August 22, 2009]*, 2011; *Outside the National Gallery*, 2011).

By making these processes exist in their own right, Lewis allows the materiality of film to act according to its own physical and technical features, most of them highly institutionalized but now explored as autonomous operations not particularly dedicated to the making of narratives, to the transmission of the director’s view of the world or to the transformation of the spectator’s consciousness. Of course, the director intervenes: he observes the site beforehand, he selects the site, he refuses to add any sound, he provides autonomy to the materiality of film, he edits the images, and his main motivation is to find vital forms of inhabitability. But once these decisions have been made, film becomes autonomous: it does what it does according to its material possibilities. The belief here is that when film is given a level of autonomy, it will produce unusual images—the very images of inhabitability. Film becomes a seeing materiality that is different from and alien to human seeing. As such, it can produce a different (alien) image.

Let us recall and extend what Lewis says about the consciousness of film and his attempt to make films by abandoning his ambition to that material consciousness:

“Whenever I make a film I try to imagine what would the camera do if it had consciousness, if the camera had the ability to make its own decisions. It obviously [...] has limited things it can do but given it can do some things, how can it do them [...]? Let the camera free here and let it decide how it’s going to move. [...] It stops the image becoming a kind of realization of an ambition or an idea. It suddenly becomes: what happens when it is set free? What can it see? What can it do? [...] In *Beirut* [...] the camera is kind of a predatorial presence: it’s looking around for something to settle on and it finds this most amazing swimmer in the world’s smallest pool and that’s why it settles: it has found something unusual.”²³

Notice how Lewis’s understanding of the action of the camera is speculative: he acknowledges the relative autonomy of the camera, conjectures on how it sees (insofar as it is impossible to know a camera’s seeing experience) and accounts for it as an alien seeing machine that

might capture the vitality hidden in the everyday. That vitality can only manifest itself when the film director accepts to dethrone his position in relation to the action of the camera, as it moves and halts. Only then can images of vital inhabitability come to the fore. Lewis's off-loading of human perception to the materiality of film turns his filmworks into a speculative realist engagement with the world—a unique contribution to a philosophical (but also artistic) approach that attempts to break with the mind/matter dualism by which materiality is erased to privilege the working of the mind. The agency conferred to the materiality of film partakes of speculative realist and object-oriented philosophical and artistic perspectives that denounce the limits of that persisting dualism. Speculative realism is a philosophical approach that maintains the Kantian postulate according to which it is impossible to know things in themselves but that also fundamentally contests Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy's reliance on correlationism—the conformation of things to the human mind—to know the world. It is a form of realism that denounces the antirealist correlationist assumption that humans can never access, know or speak about the world as a realm independent of thought or language.²⁴ In the Kantian correlationist tradition, the world, reality, and the existence of reality are considered as mind-dependent. In disagreement with that tradition, speculative philosophies and artistic practices claim that reality exists independently of the human mind even though it is not directly knowable. They reflect not so much upon *what is* than *what can be*—a realm accessible through speculation. The object-oriented ontology strain of speculative realism (a strain particularly relevant to Lewis's material practice) insists on the equality of existence of human and nonhuman entities, so as to speculate on the reality of objects whose existence is assumed not to be human dependent. Following philosopher Graham Harman who coined the term in the late 1990s, the object-oriented position is one in which “the human/world relation is just a special case of the relation between any two entities whatsoever.”²⁵ It supports a flat ontology in which all entities are considered to have the same ontological status.

More generally speaking, any approach that considers the participation of objects in the making of everyday events is a realist approach that seeks to recover what correlationism devalues in its spirit/matter dualisms: the materiality of things (notably, their objecthood, technology, physicality, institutionality, infrastructure, setting, and so on). As anthropologist Daniël Miller says about the persistent spirit/matter dualism in Western philosophy: “the stance to materiality [...] remains the driving force behind humanity's attempts to transform the world in order to make it accord with beliefs as to how the world should be”; but this humancentric concealment and devaluation of matter behind the alleged superiority of the human's mind make matter even more powerful “precisely because we do not ‘see’” and therefore do not allow humans to understand its capacity to determine our behavior.²⁶ The imperative is thus to *dethrone* humanity, to remove the human subject from its pedestal, to suspend one's ideas as a film director, to let the camera act autonomously, as much as possible.

Although Lewis speaks about letting “the camera free” to allow it to do what it can do (pan, tilt, reverse, zoom in, look, depict and halt), I believe it is more fruitful to speak of how the depiction of inhabitability results from a collaboration between the materiality of film, the director's aesthetic decisions and the spectator's perceptual reception. Sociologist Noortje Marres has devised the term “material participation” to account for the collaborative ways in which materiality *participates* in the making of events. Objects like cameras do not simply have agency in and by themselves. Rather, material participation is a “specific mode of engagement, which can be distinguished by the fact that it deliberately deploys its surroundings” according to “a particular division of roles among the entities involved—things, people, issues, settings, technologies, institutions, and so on.”²⁷ Humans and nonhumans participate, collaborate and negotiate (they are attached to each other as in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory; they play different roles in relation to each other) in the making of events, in the filmic noticing of the world. Objects can facilitate, inform and make realities manifest for those using them. The

camera is the technology Lewis can use to deepen his knowledge of and sensitivity to the sites he films. The camera has a consciousness and does make decisions but does so in coevolution with the filmmaker. As literary critic Katherine Hayles has recently reminded us, “[w]e think . . . through, with, and alongside media.”²⁸

What is specific to Lewis’s approach is that its perspective on materiality is twofold: it admits the otherness of the camera (the camera has its own way of seeing and depicting) and it emphasizes the need to abandon the director’s ambition to that otherness (an abandonment which is similar to a Husserlian *epoché*—the bracketing of commonsensical attitudes or assumptions about what images should represent). But it is also the case that there is still a director orienting it and a spectator receiving its images, as well as a site being filmed. The benefit of that coevolution is that it may result (a result that is never guaranteed) in the production of new images of the world. This is Lewis’s faith in modernism: even though modernist practices are limited and have mostly failed, it is crucial to “engage with the failure” of modernism “as an unexpected development that in turn might produce new and unexpected forms.”²⁹ The camera is an alien presence and elaborates a nonhuman phenomenology of seeing: it moves, stops, moves again and halts on the unfamiliar, the different, the unusual, the unexpected, the unperceived. It doesn’t in and by itself create a new image of vital inhabitability (insofar as the unexpected or the unperceived is something that is part of the filmed space) nor does it in and by itself move (a director is participating in its movement), but when it halts the camera makes information that was unavailable available. It opens unusual viewpoints of everyday life. The camera is a machine, a quasi-alien space probe, a “predator”, that turns us (the artist and the spectator) into quasi-alien as it gathers and perceptually analyzes data as autonomously as possible (according to its own material logic) to intensify our own perception of the depicted environment.³⁰

Let us look briefly at two works to see how this perceptual collaboration proceeds, and how it slowly introduces the spectator’s activity as well.

North Circular, Queensway: Pan and Zoom and *Downtown: Tilt, Zoom and Pan*: in these works, the single take starts with a static view of the scene conveyed by an immobilized camera. *North Circular*, a 4 minute 35mm CinemaScope film, begins with the image of an abandoned industrial building slated for demolition, located in one of London’s suburban no man’s lands. For more than one minute, the immobilized camera frames a panoramic view of the modular structure, conveying it as a frozen photographic scene. A variety of aesthetic decisions are combined to ensure the pictoriality of the image: the site has been selected because of the generalized absence of life surrounding the building and the abandoned state of that building; the distance between the camera and the edifice makes the activity of the latter difficult to perceive; sound is absent from the film; and the frame has been immobilized. But then, the camera is allowed to act filmicly: it is set free, autonomized to see in a unique nonhuman way. Indeed, after one minute or so the camera starts to move. It slowly approaches the building, traveling above the ground like a predator searching for its prey. It catches a few flying birds as well as a small group of teenagers. The camera sees through the windows of the second floor and frames one of the young boys as he puts a spinning-top on a table to then activate it. This singular depiction is enabled by the crane-shot and the camera’s capacity to glide up on its crane, to approach and frame what it sees. The young boy also looks: he looks at the spinning-top, similarly to the young boy in Chardin’s *Portrait of the Son of M. Godefroy, Jeweller, Watching a Top Spin* (1738). The boy leaves it spinning; the spin starts to wobble; the film ends, as the wobbling is about to stop. As viewers, we follow the hold, perceptually negotiating our way into the take.

Likewise, *Queensway: Pan and Zoom*, a 3:07 minute super 35mm film, proposes three static views, each of them about one minute long. A camera that reiteratedly immobilizes itself to frame each scene conveys the views. The camera is a materiality that can see in that specific way, through frame immobilizations followed by movement. The recorded site is made of two adjacent warned down red-brick apartment

blocks, surrounded by roads and electric poles, located on the other side of a patch of lawn full of detritus. The site is filmed on a grey day or at dawn or dusk, when natural light has not yet fully emerged or has nearly abandoned the environment. An initial take provides a more distant view of the site: the camera acts materially by framing a barely legible woman running through her bag, next to one of the buildings. The pan movement of the camera towards the right suddenly interrupts the scene. This movement provides a second outlook: a closer view of the other building where we can see (but again only schematically) a woman sitting outside the entrance. This scene will also be cut short by the sudden activation of the zoom, which gives a close-up view of one of the building's windows, through which we can see curtains and a hanging piece of clothing. Crucial here is how the camera is able to travel, approach, stop and look at things closely (as in *North Circular*); how it ends with a surreal image of inhabitability or, better said, an image of inhabitability as something surreal: a slightly moving piece of clothing that signals inhabitation. Meanwhile the spectator holds on to the image but also struggles to see what is depicted. Key here is the collaborative effort: the director chooses the site and pre-establishes the filmic parameters but then the camera is allowed to see following its own material properties (it frames, it pans, it zooms, it halts) so as to make possible the depiction of an otherwise unseen trace of inhabitability.

Spectatorship and the Phenomenology of Time Consciousness

As indicated above, the spectator is part of that collaborative process by which film offers vital images of inhabitability, insofar as s/he sees according to a contemplative mode set out by the films—a mode s/he may or may not integrate but is invited to integrate. To understand this contemplative state, it is essential to emphasize that, though Lewis delegates some of his filmic decisions to the materiality of film, film

is investigated in its relation to other major image technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: namely, painting, photography and digital media. The pictorial dimension is fundamental to Lewis's practice. His single takes have the motionlessness of the pictorial surface—a motionlessness that resides in the physical fact that a painting “is more or less the same now in its absolute material form as it was five minutes before and will be in five years to come.”³¹ Lewis states: “When you look at a painting, you can really be *struck* by the brute fact of this unchangingness, and that the image holds itself unchanged durationally” and “I am [...] interested in [...] making work that is about opticality and the legibility of duration; how one registers time in a work of art.”³² This infiltration of the pictorial is made to counter Lewis's main disappointment with film, which “began with the realization, that no matter what one did, the images of a film were always profoundly disappearing, escaping into the past.”³³ This escaping of images into the past is what film theorist Mary Ann Doane has designated as “the temporality of the apparatus itself—linear, irreversible, ‘mechanical’.”³⁴ Pictorial durationality is conveyed by the single take. The director's editing of the images so that the take appear unbroken despite its discontinuities also facilitates that durationality, as well as the absence of sound, the slow movement of the camera, and the selection of apparently uneventful sites. Pictorial durationality is the modality by which the spectator's perception of the single take is made more attentive. Let us briefly consider *Outside the National Gallery* (2011) here: as the immobilized camera films one of the concrete walls of the gallery and gives the viewer a glimpse of passersby utterly indifferent to that wall, it shows—reflected on that very wall—the shadow of a tree surrounded by flying and pausing birds. The film's framing of the wall allows the spectator to see what the passersby fail to see: the slightly moving shadows; vitality; unusual yet real inhabitability. The single take and the absence of sound facilitate the spectator's concentration. The spectator is thus perceptually solicited to see what the camera sees. But this is not the whole story, for the spectator also has

to perceptually work his or her way into the image. What is the spectator's *role* in the noticing of vital inhabitability? How does s/he contribute to the potentialization by which a modernist quasi-remnant (a wall) is made to act as a surface of reflection? Without film, but also without the remaining wall and without the spectator's own phenomenology of perception, there is no poetry.

Lewis has recently claimed that the spectator occupies "the subjectivity" of the camera: "you become a camera, you become the machine, where you see the possibility of this different kind of look."³⁵ I want to argue that the spectator's position is more than the camera's subjectivity insofar as the pictorial dimension of Lewis's aesthetics of inhabitability (the absence of sound; the editing of the images so that the shot appears continuous or unbroken; the choice of uneventful subject matters; and the slow rhythm of the camera's movement) establishes a duration—an enduring and unified temporal span—that augments what philosopher David Couzens Hoy calls the "qualitative aspects of the temporal experience."³⁶ That durational quality inserts the spectator into a phenomenology of time consciousness. The unity of a time span is ensured by what philosopher Edmund Husserl, in his study of the phenomenology of time consciousness, describes as the three-layered phenomenon of temporality, in which primal impression, retention, and protention unfold to secure temporal experience not as a succession of discrete, self-contained moments, but as a flow of *connected* moments that reflect previous ones and anticipates later ones.³⁷ The unified experience of that temporal interval is one in which parts of the span will be apprehended as now, just-passed and just-coming, as one experiences primal impression, retention and protention. Although the filmworks solicit that phenomenology, the spectator must engage in that solicitation to notice inhabitability. She has to find a way to adapt to the fluctuations of the moving image; she struggles to keep her attention, falls back into distraction and secures her attention anew; she sees the image bit by bit; she perceives some things in the image but also, like the passersby in the filmworks, fails to see other

things; she stands in front of the screen, moves slightly but keeps standing there to see; she might decide to leave or she might decide to abandon herself to the looped projection and re-view the work. This embodied engagement means that the spectator never simply sees what the camera sees but that s/he participates in the potentialization of film and modernist architecture productive of new images. As art historian Whitney Davis has rightly observed, "[n]othing whatsoever makes us see anything in or anything as anything else."³⁸ A state of contemplativeness is offered to but also individually practiced by each spectator so that s/he may contribute to the seeing of this alien, other, new, unexpected image of inhabitability. The culture and sociality of that spectator condition that contribution.

To Conclude

When unexpected images of inhabitability emerge in Lewis's filmworks, the (modernist) potentiality of film and architecture is actualized. That emergence relies on a triadic collaboration between the director's aesthetic decisions, film's materiality and the spectator's phenomenology of time consciousness. Children hang around inside a deserted building (*North Circular*); children play at the periphery of Heygate Estate's abandoned walkway (*Children's Games*); a woman stands on a decaying balcony (*Spadina: Reverse Dolly, Zoom, Nude*); a piece of clothing mysteriously floats in a brick-building window (*Queensway: Pan and Zoom*); moving human shadows and the shadow of an active bird tree are reflected on modernist walls (*Lawson Estate and Outside the National Gallery*); a young man's face is glued to and flying birds are reflected by the windows of a launderette (*Willesden Launderette; Reverse Dolly, Pan Right, Friday Prayers, 2010*); a man waits in his car in an empty industrial site at the margins of central Toronto (*Downtown: Tilt, Zoom and Pan*); a plane materializes out of nowhere on the other side of an airport lounge window (*Airport*); a window opening

randomly aligns itself with a road sign to let us imagine a bicycle path (*Bricklayers Arms*); black-and-white footage of a cheap motel in Hollywood subtly changes into colour (*5262 Washington Boulevard*); and the photograph of a young woman attached to a lamppost memorial is illuminated (*Walworth Road [Rosa Miguel, age 32, August 22, 2009]*). In all these filmworks, an image unfolds, depicting an alien habitability seen by the camera: previously unnoticed acting beings, thinking/looking beings, intangible presences, elusive machines and imaginary pathways, eerie and odd occurrences. This depiction, this essay has claimed, emerges from a speculative realist (non-correlationist) aesthetics that allows filmic matter to act independently from yet collaboratively with the artist's decision-making processes and the spectator's perceptual processes.

To conclude, let us add another collaborator to this camera/director/spectator triad: the inhabitants themselves. That multi-collaboration is consistent in all of Lewis's filmworks. It is made fully manifest in the last moments of *Willesden Laundrette*; *Reverse Dolly*, *Pan Right*, *Friday Prayers*'s 4:40 minute digital single take. Indeed, this is when the camera reverses, stops, and eventually pans to the right to gradually transform itself into a curved travelling shot of the street. The Lumière's aesthetics of actualities properly re-begins there, as the camera discloses the everyday life of the multicultural district of Willesden: the shops, the passersby, the cars; the Afghan community. The potentiality of a modernist urban development is always partially conditioned by the ways in which inhabitants live in that development and how they have appropriated or not a vanishing architecture (here, a laundrette) to make it theirs. It is significant that the moment in which the camera flows freely to the right, it offers a view of a street full of life: not only is the street crowded with 'extras' walking everywhere in different directions; a transient, new immigrant population occupies it.

- 1 Mark Lewis, Yilmaz Dziewior, "Conversation with Mark Lewis", in Yilmaz Dziewior (ed.), *Mark Lewis*, Hamburg/Ostfildern-Ruit, Kunstverein in Hamburg/Hatje Cantz, 2005, p. 62.
- 2 Mark Lewis, *The Pitch*, 1998, [http://www.marklewisstudio.com/films2/The_Pitch\[1998\].htm](http://www.marklewisstudio.com/films2/The_Pitch[1998].htm).
- 3 Bruno Latour, "Spheres and Networks: Two Ways to Reinterpret Globalization", *Harvard Design Magazine* 30 (Spring/Summer 2009), p. 141.
- 4 Christopher Wilk, "Introduction: What is Modernism?", in Christopher Wilk (ed.), *Modernism: Designing a New World 1914-1930*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006, p. 12.
- 5 Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2008, p. 191.
- 6 Mark Lewis, "Film maker Mark Lewis in conversation with writer David Company", Birkbeck School of Arts, University of London, London, UK, 21 May, 2013, <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2013/05/film-maker-mark-lewis-in-conversation-with-writer-david-company/>.
- 7 Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, *op. cit.*, p. 192. For a postmodernist critique of modernist architecture, see especially Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, Random House, 1961; Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Modern Architecture*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1966; and David Watkin's *Morality and Architecture*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977. Postmodernist criticism has proclaimed modernism's failure by denouncing its three main deficiencies: its rupturing with tradition, a rupture which has consistently widened the gap between past and future architectural forms; its blind embrace of technology as a means to improve the world and resolve social injustice—especially in the postwar context where "poorly designed and built concrete towers [...] were urgently needed to rehouse the population after the Second World War"; and its configuration—through centralized forms of governance—of large scale schemes for built environments.
- 8 Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
- 9 Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 2-3.
- 10 Mark Lewis, "Is Modernity our Antiquity?", *Afterall* 14 (Autumn/Winter 2006), p. 4.
- 11 Mark Lewis, Yilmaz Dziewior, "Conversation with Mark Lewis", *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 12 Mark Lewis, "Afterword", *Afterall* 22 (Autumn/Winter 2009), p. 3.
- 13 Vanessa Muller, "Mark Lewis", <http://marklewis.fvu.co.uk/english/essay.html>.
- 14 Stephen Johnstone, "Introduction: Recent Art and the Everyday", in Stephen Johnstone (ed.), *The Everyday*, Cambridge (MA)/London, MIT Press/Whitechapel, 2008, p. 12.

- ¹⁵ Georges Perec, "L'infra-ordinaire", in John Sturrock (ed. and trans.), *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London, Penguin, 1997, p. 210.
- ¹⁶ Karel Kosík, *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World*, trans. Karel Kovanda with James Schmidt, Dordrecht, the Netherlands, D. Reidel, 1976, p. 44.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Agnes Heller, *Everyday Life*, London, Routledge/Paul Kegan, 1984; Stephen K. White (ed.), *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Post-Modernity*, Notre-Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1989; Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd Edition, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; and Rita Felski, "Introduction", *New Literary History* 33/3 [autumn 2002], p. 607-622.
- ¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 40.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.
- ²⁰ Mark Lewis, "Trying not to make films that are too long: Interview with Mark Lewis by Jérôme Sans", in Steven Bode (ed.), *Mark Lewis Films 1995-2000*, London, Film & Video Umbrella, 2000, p. 45.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ²³ Mark Lewis, "Film maker Mark Lewis in conversation with writer David Company", *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ The philosopher Quentin Meillassoux defines *correlationism* as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, New York, Continuum, 2008, p. 5. On speculative realism, also see Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harmanin, "Towards a Speculative Philosophy", in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harmanin (eds), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne, Australia, re.press, 2011.
- ²⁵ Graham Harman, "Realism without Materialism", *SubStance* 40/2 (2011), p. 52-72.
- ²⁶ Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction", in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 1-50. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic_staff/d_miller/mil-8.
- ²⁷ Noortje Marres, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 2.
- ²⁸ Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 1.
- ²⁹ Mark Lewis, Yilmaz Dziewior, "Conversation with Mark Lewis", *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- ³⁰ On the camera as an alien space probe, see Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What's It's Like to Be a Thing*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 32.
- ³¹ Mark Lewis, Yilmaz Dziewior, "Conversation with Mark Lewis", *op. cit.*, p. 59.

- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 60; and Mark Lewis, "Trying not to make films that are too long: Interview with Mark Lewis by Jérôme Sans", *op. cit.*, p. 53.
- ³³ Mark Lewis, Yilmaz Dziewior, "Conversation with Mark Lewis", *op. cit.*, p. 59.
- ³⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*, Cambridge [MA]/London, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 30.
- ³⁵ Mark Lewis, "Film maker Mark Lewis in conversation with writer David Company", *op. cit.*
- ³⁶ David Couzens Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives*, Cambridge [MA], MIT Press, 2009, p. 50.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ³⁸ Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 58.