

# Beast Fables: A Videographic Study of Cinematic Deer and Transhuman Children

Catherine Grant

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*As long as we have been telling stories, we have been telling them about the desire to escape our human bodies, to become something other than the animals we are.*

-Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine*<sup>1</sup>

*[A]s a not-quite human being, sometimes characterized as an incomplete or growing subject, and as a being allied with animals and nature, the child challenges the exclusively human status of the subject and thus the validity or workability of the concept of personhood itself.*

-Karen Lury, "Children in an Open World"<sup>2</sup>



Video Essay 1: *BEAST FABLES: "I just missed your heart"* (2019, Catherine Grant)<sup>3</sup>



Video Essay 2: *BEAST FABLES: "You should have told me, Mother"* (2019, Catherine Grant)

The three *Beast Fables* videos that integrally comprise the present study (*"I just missed your heart"* and *"You should have told me, Mother,"* embedded above, and their audio-visual coda, *"You're so very cruel,"* below) are part of a longer series of analytical filmmaking experiments I have carried out on the far-from-rare figuration of deer<sup>4</sup> in international fiction films about child and adolescent development. *Bambi* (1942, dir. David Hand) is probably the most famous *bildungsroman* in this cinematic sub-genre: a Disney movie about childhood, addressed in this case primarily to children, in which the child characters are recast as animated animals including, primarily, deer.<sup>5</sup> As Peter Wollen writes of that film—the "source of [his] cinephilia"—"*Bambi* is the Aristotelian tragedy, the film about trauma."<sup>6</sup> It was also my inevitable starting point for this creative critical research project,<sup>7</sup> as a deeply memorable and upsetting film I saw in the cinema during my own early childhood that I had, as yet, managed to avoid re-watching as an adult. So, for my first videographic study, a preliminary sketch carried out as part of a ground-clearing, autoethnographic work of reflection, I found myself compelled to revisit—and to work to *distill*, or intensify—one of the central traumas, for me, in the film<sup>8</sup> by deploying a split-screen method to replay, side-by-side against a black background, the two

scenes in which hunters visit the forest. It is during the second of these that Bambi's mother is killed (Figure 1).

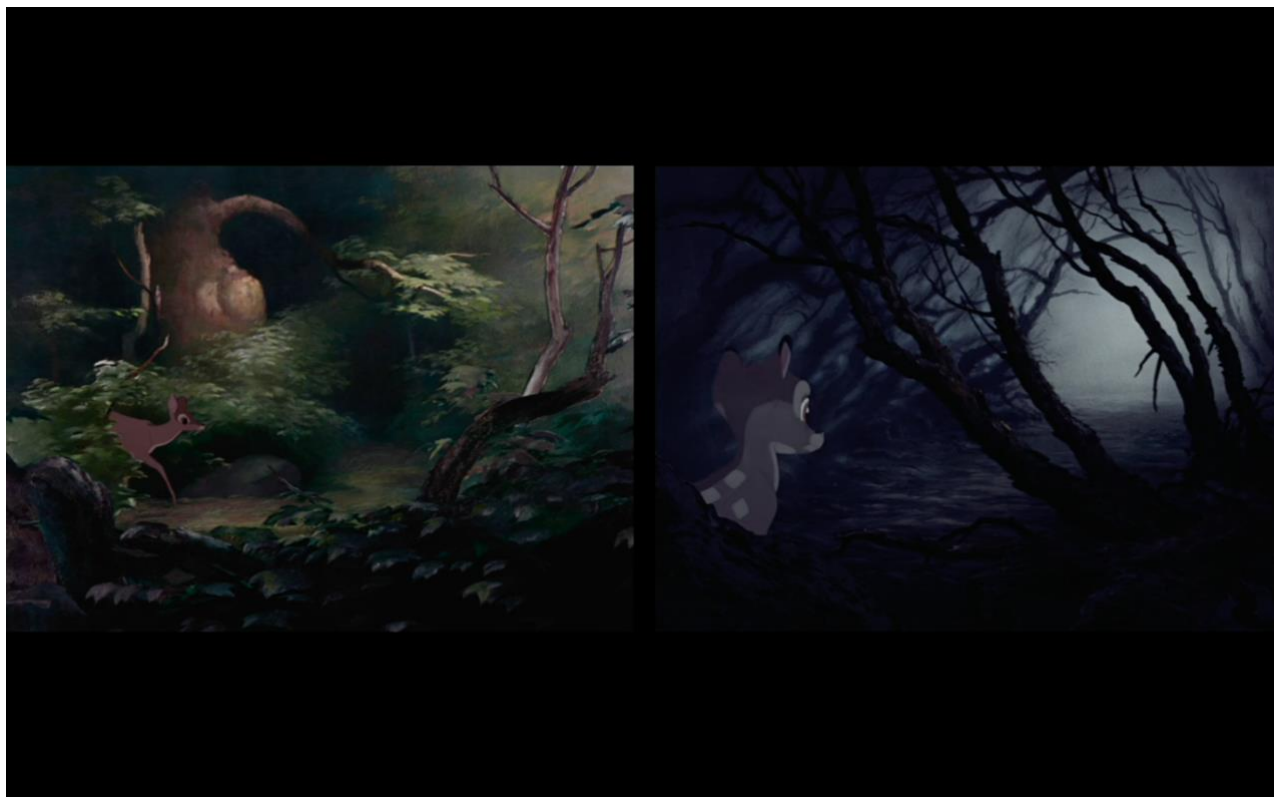


FIGURE 1: Bambi's mother (left) and Bambi (right) emerge from hiding after the hunters have departed the forest in two scenes from *Bambi* (David Hand, 1942). Image from *BEAST FABLES: "Your mother can't be with you anymore"* (2019, Catherine Grant)

After producing a draft of this first video, early in 2017, with its carefully synchronized, performative doubling of a painful cinematic instance of graphic and narrative repetition and variation, an even more specific focus then emerged for the videos in my present study, published here: the curious intersections and motifs produced by the appearance of deer in some *contemporary* films about non-human children—or not completely human children—that also turn on acts of mother-killing (symbolic as well as literal ones). This happened because, around that time, my colleague and frequent

collaborator, Amber Jacobs (author of a ground-breaking book on matricide in Greek myths and psychoanalytic theory, to which I will return below),<sup>9</sup> commissioned a video from me for a symposium she was organising on the depiction of the non-human child in recent cinema and television.<sup>10</sup> Around the time of that invitation, I fortuitously saw, close together, two fiction films about so-called *transhuman* female children (genetically, biomechanically and/or physiologically “enhanced”)<sup>11</sup> on the verge of puberty and adolescence,<sup>12</sup> both of which featured uncannily similar scenes of interaction between those characters and deer (female reindeer in one and roe deer in the other): the British-American science fiction horror film *Morgan* (2016, dir. Luke Scott)—its eponymous heroine (played by Anya Taylor-Joy) “an artificial being with nanotechnology-infused synthetic DNA”;<sup>13</sup> and the action-adventure-thriller *Hanna* (2011, dir. Joe Wright, Germany/U.K./U.S.A.), its titular protagonist (played by Saoirse Ronan) a genetically-enhanced being developed, like Morgan, by scientists attempting to create more efficient (in other words, more deadly and less potentially remorseful) military personnel.<sup>14</sup> In both films, the title characters engage in killing large numbers of people, including their own mother-substitutes (or symbolic mothers), and deer.<sup>15</sup>

Fascinated by these striking and, paradoxically, seemingly *generic* coincidences,<sup>16</sup> I began to explore audio-visually—in my video editing programme—the similarities and differences between both films and their use of deer interactions as a motif. I decided to take up once again the doubling methodology of the distillation *dispositif*<sup>17</sup> that I had begun to forge for my first *Beast Fables* study of *Bambi*. In this regard I was electing to adapt—for videos that would treat one film (*intra-textually*) at a time—a split-screen comparison technique that I more often employ to explore (*inter-textually*) similarities between different films.<sup>18</sup> The result was the two videos embedded above, which function—as I have come to see them—as uncharacteristically multiple-screen, alternate “trailers” (highly spoiler-ridden ones) for *Hanna* and *Morgan*: condensed mini-narratives that performatively

privilege and *précis* the figurations of significant non-human/“transhuman” species interactions that thread their way throughout both films.<sup>19</sup>

As I have argued before,<sup>20</sup> rather than an explicit work of scholarly exposition, verbal explication or argumentation, videographic studies like these are an instance of creative practice as a mode of enquiry and only implicitly, or performatively, a mode of argument – forged through selection and juxtaposition. These concise compilations are made primarily to frame original audio-visual encounters with the pre-existing fabric of the films, turning, in these and other cases, on a technique of defamiliarization (*Ostranenie*) in order to engender new material thinking and feeling. As film historian and theorist Pam Cook has noted, in relation to her own practical exploration of videographic film and television studies, audio-visual forms like this “can produce a ‘writerly’ experience à la Roland Barthes in which viewers / readers / essayists generate their own meanings. The video essay constitutes an event; it transforms existing material to fashion an open-ended process of re-reading and re-writing.”<sup>21</sup>

Both of the above embedded videos use their multiple-screen form in the service of a poetic analysis through synchronous performance, a playing together of cinematic motifs and narrative repetitions or variations that would otherwise only be meaningfully apprehended as such *sequentially* in the audio-visual time-based medium of each source film. The split-screens (placed up and down in the frame in the video about *Hanna*, exploring that film’s frontality and its often vertical, off-screen looking relations, and side-by-side in the study of *Morgan*, with its greater reliance on horizontality) issue an invitation to the “mobile eye” of the viewer to engage in intensified processes of “peripheralized attention,”<sup>22</sup> in an accretional method of meaning-making through “seesaw scanning of the text, compelled by the very duality of the signs.”<sup>23</sup> As art historian Roger Cardinal has argued, such “decentered scanning can constitute a refreshing alternative register of filmic experience.”<sup>24</sup>

Through these acts of reframing and defamiliarization, and the constitutive “in-betweenness” of their split-screen—and split-video—methodology, I offer a de-centering of the films’ originary ideological and narrative thematics. By doubling (duplicating *and* intensifying) them, my work performatively questions, within and, especially, *across* the two videos, the studied *naturalness* of these scenarios and their assumptions. Given that my preferred approach in this audio-visual work is *interstitial* and *relational*, carried out in the spirit of Laura Rascaroli’s notion of essay filmmaking as the art of gaps,<sup>25</sup> I will refrain from offering a detailed verbal summary of my findings in conclusion. But, when all else is stripped away from these films, my selection of material for these video montages clearly points to an underpinning sense of animals as a significant reference point for conceptions of transhumanism. The transhuman characters in these films are drawn to the powerful animals with whom they interact; they are strong, highly agile, and (mostly) more attuned to what is going on around them; like deer, they are easily “startled” creatures, who use their heightened senses to get out of trouble. Unlike deer, of course, these characters also kill, prolifically, to survive, to achieve other goals, and occasionally in anger; both also take the lives of humans and animals in (sometimes ambiguous) acts of mercy. To generate the *trans* in transhumanism (the “across,” “beyond,” and “through” of the prefix), then, audio-visual narratives about this concept seem to require the depiction of humans *and* animals (“civilization” *and* “nature”) in the same frame, and with significant overlap between the two. But these horror/thriller films revel in the opposite of the kinds of anthropomorphism at work in movies like *Bambi*. They play instead with forms of zoomorphism to generate their undoubtedly cautionary tales about the forms of creaturely hybridity, and about the value (and ethics) of possible new lifeforms—inside and outside of the military-industrial complex—as these emerge into our contemporary cultural imaginary.

Aside from the more manifest content of my video studies of these two films, though, what I found especially curious to work through in my audio-visual research is that these cinematic transhumans are what Amber Jacobs might call literal “brain-children,”<sup>26</sup> like Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom and war. According to Oresteian myth, Athena was born directly from the head of Zeus after he disappeared her mother, Metis (the Titaness priestess of crafty thought and wisdom), by swallowing her when she was pregnant with their child, fearing that she would give birth to more powerful offspring than him (Athena actually turns out to be a very dutiful daughter). Biological mothers and their allies are disappeared and dispatched by the patriarchy in *Hanna* and *Morgan*, too (and by its more dutiful daughter-delegates: Marissa [Cate Blanchett] and Lee [Kate Mara], respectively). The super-powered hybrid children of these films are also born of parthenogenetic fantasy, and (metaphorically and literally) incubated by military or commercial scientists, who will then try to dispose of their unruly and rebellious creations when these become teenagers and show distinct signs of turning against their putative creators.

In her book on matricide, Jacobs links the myth of Metis, Zeus and Athena to another Greek myth, that of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon (her name meaning “strong-born,” “born to strength” or “she who causes the birth of strong offspring”).<sup>27</sup> On his way to the Trojan War, Agamemnon offends the goddess Artemis by accidentally killing a deer in a grove sacred to her. She retaliates, preventing the Greek troops from reaching Troy until Agamemnon agrees to sacrifice Iphigenia, which he achieves through deception. As Jacobs writes,

[He] calls for his daughter to be brought to the naval camp on the pretext that she is to be married. Instead of the promised groom, the virgin bride is met by her father on the wedding altar and is penetrated through the throat by his sword. Iphigenia vanishes at the point the sword meets her throat, and the body of a deer mysteriously appears in her place. Her disappearance is interpreted by the chorus and by her father as a great relief: the vanishing is used as evidence that she has been “wafted to the gods,” and thus the replacement of her body with the deer’s allows her murderer to avoid experiencing any guilt associated with his crime.<sup>28</sup>

Stories of powerful or super-human female children and deer have been told for centuries. In these most recent cinematic retellings, the stories are technologically more complex, but they are still equally played out between the worlds of “gods,” humans and animals. Female transhuman characters and magically appearing deer in both films survive to fight (or not) another day, the former doing so through acts of self-reflection on their origins and their capabilities, overcoming the withholdings and deceptions of those around them. We don’t know for sure, at the end of *Hanna* and *Morgan*, whether the surviving daughters will be able to move beyond their cruel legacies, but, as my third video, below—an audio-visual coda—explores through its intertextual compilation, unlike some of the earlier cinematic stories of children and deer, these new mythical protagonists stand at least some chance of so doing.



Video Essay 3: *BEAST FABLES: "You're so very cruel"* (2019, Catherine Grant)



**Catherine Grant** is Professor of Digital Media and Screen Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. A prolific experimental video-essayist, she has authored and edited numerous studies of audio-visual forms of film and moving image research and scholarship, including: *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image* (co-authored with Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2019); *screenstudies.video* (2019), a monographic website collecting and reflecting on her own practice; and another website collection *The Audiovisual Essay* (2014-present). She is also creator of *Film Studies for Free* and a co-founding editor of *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic and Moving Image Studies*.

### Author's acknowledgements

Thanks to the brilliant audiences to whom I have presented my *Beast Fables* videos for their valuable feedback, especially those at “The Non-Human Child in Film and Media” symposium held at Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image, Birkbeck, University of London, UK, May 7, 2017; at the National Endowment for the Humanities funded, Scholarship in Sound & Image Workshop on Videographic Criticism at Middlebury College, U.S.A., June 2017; at the *Interfaces, Bodies, Gazes* screening programme at the 70<sup>th</sup> annual Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland, August 6, 2017 (thanks to Daniela Persico for the invitation); and most recently at the Screen Studies Research and Enterprise group’s open research seminar, University of Brighton, U.K. April 24, 2019. Thanks also to Amber Jacobs and Tracy Cox-Stanton for their helpful and inspiring discussions of this project with me over the last two years.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mark O’Connell, *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (London: Granta Publications, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Lury, “Children in an open world: Mobility as ontology in New Iranian and Turkish cinema,” *Feminist Theory*, 11(3), 2010: 283–294, 284.

<sup>3</sup> The three 2019 *Beast Fables* video essays by Catherine Grant, published here, are archived online as follows: Video Essay 1: *BEAST FABLES: “I just missed your heart,”* <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/filmstudiesff/clips/beast-fables-201ci-just-missed-your-heart201d-a/>; Video Essay 2: *BEAST FABLES: “You should have told me, Mother,”* <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/filmstudiesff/clips/beast-fables-201cyou-should-have-told-me/>; Video Essay 3: *BEAST FABLES: “You’re so very cruel,”* [http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/filmstudiesff/clips/beast-fables-201cyoure-so-very-cruel201d-a-video/video\\_view](http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/filmstudiesff/clips/beast-fables-201cyoure-so-very-cruel201d-a-video/video_view).

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<sup>4</sup> I am not the first person to take a videographic interest in the cinematic depiction of deer. When I embarked on this project, though, I hadn't yet seen the brilliant compilation video *They Shoot Deers, Don't They?* by Roberto Amaba (2014), published as part of the web article "A la domesticación por la imagen: cine-ciervo," *Transit*, 2014. <http://cinentransit.com/a-la-domesticacion-por-la-imagen-el-cine-ciervo-2/>. My videos hopefully work to supplement Amaba's highly moving survey of a wide-range of what he calls (in Spanish) "Cervid Cinema."

<sup>5</sup> I took my project title from Stephanie Mastrostefano's compelling study of what is at stake in the anthropomorphism of *Bambi* and of some other Disney films: "Gender and Ideology in Disney's Beast Fables," *Honors Projects Overview*, 2013. 85. [http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/honors\\_projects/85](http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/honors_projects/85).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Wollen, "An Alphabet of Cinema," *New Left Review* 12, November-December 2001: 115-133, 119, 117.

<sup>7</sup> For more on performative methods in the creative critical research mode of the audiovisual essay, see Catherine Grant, "The audiovisual essay as performative research," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, Autumn 2016. Online at: <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/the-audiovisual-essay-as-performative-research/>; and Catherine Grant, "Screen Memories: A Video Essay on *Smultronstället / Wild Strawberries*," *CINERGIE: Il Cinema e le altre Arti*, 13, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/7914>.

<sup>8</sup> The other central trauma being the great fire represented in the film that so disturbed Wollen as a wartime child.

<sup>9</sup> Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis and the Law of the Mother* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> "The Non-Human Child in Film and Media" symposium held at Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image, Birkbeck, University of London, UK, May 7, 2017. [http://www.bbk.ac.uk/events/remote\\_event\\_view?id=1385](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/events/remote_event_view?id=1385). The poster for the event featured an image of "El" (Millie Bobby Brown) from *Stranger Things*, the U.S. American science fiction horror web television series created, written, and directed by the Duffer Brothers and released on Netflix on 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For two informative and thought-provoking studies of the emergent scientific and philosophical field of transhumanism, see Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine* and Kyle Munkittrick, "When Will We Be Transhuman? Seven Conditions for Attaining Transhumanism," *Science Not Fiction Blog | Discover Magazine*, July 16, 2011. <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/sciencenotfiction/2011/07/16/when-will-we-be-transhuman-seven-conditions-for-attaining-transhumanism/>. For reasons of space I will not attempt here a connection between the cultural depiction of transhumanism and the related field of posthumanism and interspecies animal studies. I would point those interested in these aspects to the foundational work of Donna Haraway and in particular her book *When Species Meet* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press 2008), and to the excellent chapter by Adam Lowenstein ("Buñuel's Bull Meets YouTube's Lion: Surrealist and Postdigital Posthumanisms") in Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon's magisterial edited collection *Animals and the Moving Image* (London: Palgrave Macmillan/British Film Institute, 2017), 77-93.

<sup>12</sup> In relation to the gendering (and gender identity) of the films' early-adolescent protagonists, Morgan seems to be coded as a "tomboy," and certainly as rather more genderfluid or genderqueer (and interestingly, also, increasingly more *animalistic*) than Hanna. Both characters have intensive, possibly sexual, feelings for other female-coded characters, though.

<sup>13</sup> As the film's Wikipedia page puts it, drawing on publicity for and dialog from the film:

<sup>14</sup> *Hanna* has recently been adapted and franchised as an online American television series, based on the 2011 film, for Amazon Video. The series was created and written by David Farr, co-author of the original film script, directed by Sarah Adina Smith, and released as a full eight-episode first season on March 29, 2019. A second season has been commissioned.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan also kills her father-substitutes – the male scientists, assistants and security staff, working in or attached to the unit in which she is raised.

<sup>16</sup> Another recent film I have been working with is *Thelma*, (2017, dir. Joachim Trier), a Norwegian supernatural thriller. Its eponymous protagonist (Eili Harboe) also has an encounter with a deer that bears some similarities to those of Hanna and Morgan. The resulting video study is not published here as, in this film, the explanation for the heroine's very special trajectory, isolation from society, and behaviour isn't given as *transhuman* experimentation. Thanks to Anne Gjelsvik, who suggested I take a look at *Thelma*.

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<sup>17</sup> As Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin have written of my practice:

For Grant, “essay” means “experiment” – as in the laboratory-like assembly of film/media samples, music, and text in various formats (graphic as well as spoken). Her experiments frequently take a very contemporary artistic form: the *dispositif*, a game-structure in which parameters are set and then patiently carried out, with the results to be studied and sometimes tinkered with and taken further, perhaps in a future audiovisual piece. Therefore, for example, Grant will set herself the task of collecting all the cuts or lap-dissolves in a given film, and then juxtaposing that with a musical track and/or a textual commentary. For her, the results of such audiovisual experiments have the proven potential to generate new knowledge in our screen studies field – with the proviso that the real challenge today is less to translate this knowledge back into the conventionally “acceptable” verbal or literary metalanguage of description and theory than to value our discoveries in the very terms of, and on the same level as, the aesthetic and sensory properties of rhythm, colour, texture, affect, and so on.

See “The Audiovisual Essay as Art-Practice,” *NECSUS*, Spring 2015. <https://necsus-cjms.org/the-audiovisual-essay-as-art-practice/>.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, my video project “Interplay: (Re)Finding and (Re)Framing Cinematic Experience, Film Space, and the Child’s World,” [Video and text] *LOLA*, 6, 2015. <http://www.lolajournal.com/6/interplay.html>; and “Déjà-viewing?: videographic experiments in intertextual film studies,” *Mediascape: UCLA’s Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Winter 2013. [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013\\_DejaViewing.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html). For other examples of the “intra-textual” comparison method, see Catherine Grant, “Screen Memories,” and Catherine Grant and Amber Jacobs, ‘Persona Non Grata Sonata’, *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, Issue, 1 (Spring 2018). <http://maifeminism.com/persona-non-grata-sonata/>.

<sup>19</sup> I believe I was inspired to experiment with the paratextual form of the film trailer by Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell’s adoption of the format of the “alternate trailer” (a common and fun genre of viral video) as a practical student exercise in the first Scholarship in Sound & Image Workshop on Videographic Criticism at Middlebury College, U.S.A., June 2015, a brilliant pedagogical experiment that they wrote up in the first edition of *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound & Image* (Montreal: caboose books/kino agora, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> In Catherine Grant, “Screen Memories” and Grant in Grant and Jacobs, “Persona Non Grata Sonata.”

<sup>21</sup> Pam Cook, “Word vs. Image: Making *Mildred’s Kiss* (2013).” *The Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* 2014. <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualexperiments/reflections/intransition-1-3/pam-cook/>.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Cardinal, “Pausing Over Peripheral Detail,” *Framework* 30, 1986: 112-30, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *The Semiotics of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1980), 165-6.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Cardinal, “Pausing Over Peripheral Detail,” 112.

<sup>25</sup> See the numerous mentions of gaps, dialectics, the interval and the interstitial in Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See, for example, the discussion of these concepts in the first chapter of this book, 7-13.

<sup>26</sup> Jacobs writes, “Athena, the literal brainchild of her omnipotent father, Zeus, has a very special relation to matricide. It is her birthright.” Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1859) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2351428&redirect=tr> ue; and Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 188. Both sources are cited in the “Iphigenia” entry in Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iphigenia>.

<sup>28</sup> Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide*, 158.