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## Notes on the Streaming Metaphor

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Counter to conventional histories of streaming media that have only more often than not culminated in pessimistic narratives of mastery and technocapitalistic exploits, this essay takes Neil Postman's cue, "the medium is the metaphor," to rethink an aesthetics of streaming by way of its tropological configurations. Specifically, approaching our language for media as a primary site of mediation, it pursues a speculative and semantic *longue durée* of the idiomatic "stream" — one that traces our vernacular for content-on-demand not to the media industry but to natural philosophy and early experimental psychology — to probe the ways that the concept's evolutionary trajectories have formed and informed our contemporary technico-sensory experiences. At the same time that it unravels the philosophical aspirations, transdisciplinary concerns, and historico-material imperatives implicit in this capricious term, hence, it surfaces the notions of space, movement, and sense-cognition that have long been collapsed therein. In so doing, it charts an alternative hydrology of consciousness that, while speculative, may be exemplified through Apitchatpong Weerasethakul's purportedly "unstreamable" *Memoria* (2022). After all, posited at the limits and the ontologizing plenum of the metaphor, the film's deployment of its polysemy — particularly by agglomerating streaming media in its diegesis — denaturalizes our relations to our technological sensoria. Conversely, as this essay argues, what it comes to demonstrate is an aesthetic pedagogy that plumbs the depths of our conceptual labor, attuning us anew to the transductive juncture between technics and embodiment, the rational and the real, and structure and phenomenality.

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What makes something “unstreamable,” and what, in turn, constitutes a “stream”? From the psychological concept and narrative technique of the “stream of consciousness” to our current plethora of “streaming platforms,” after all, nothing seems to elude its own designation by this seemingly portable concept. One may even suppose that nothing has ever been indescribable — or will ever be left undescribed — by this suggestive image, from the moment that Heraclitus challenged Parmenides on whether one “cannot merge yourself twice in the same stream.”<sup>1</sup> For, staging the movement of time, reality, and the cosmos in its fluvial scenography, the thought experiment rehearses a perennial conundrum on the composition of the universe: whether it is continuous, as Heraclitus contends, because neither oneself nor the apocryphal stream can remain unchanged from one moment to the next, or discrete, as his interlocutor suggests, given the eternal facticity of both oneself and the “stream” of time. Here, typifying *both* notions of flow and constancy, Heraclitus’ example effectively amalgamates two otherwise contradictory ideas. In the two faces of the conceptual stream thus lies a strange contiguity of the discrete and the continuous, if not, the entire extent of how the Occident has long known and understood the universe.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Apitchatpong Weerasathakul’s *Memoria* (2021) posits itself to be just that: unstreamable. The film’s peculiar distribution strategy, which involves a travelling release that plays only on one screen at a time, asks that it be received as an antithesis to video streaming itself.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps such a painstaking mode of delivery may simply be dismissed as a simple marketing ploy, but its rhetorical inversion of “streamability” betrays something of the film’s speculative audacity.<sup>4</sup> For, if the *stream* today is said to name the *de facto* interface between ourselves and the world — insofar as its practices and technologies concurrently mediate, while supplying the media contents of, our temporal consciousness — *Memoria*’s patent refusal of these boilerplate mechanisms of engagement at once brackets and renegotiates the terms on which such mediation occurs. Indeed, while it entangles its diegesis with Colombia’s riverscapes and moves unendingly from screen to screen, and even goes as far as to metacritically comment on its own composition as a matrix of data *streams*, little about the film itself would seem, at first glance, to oppose any of the above entailments of the figurative stream. But it is precisely by operationalizing the idiom’s unsettled semantic space — specifically, through our experiential encounters with the

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Cratylus, Phaedo, Parmenides and Timaeus*, trans. Thomas Taylor. (London: Benjamin and John White, 1793), 42.

<sup>2</sup> One need only think, for example, of our common aphorisms such as “change is the only constant.”

<sup>3</sup> Amy Taubin, “Sleepless Nights,” *Artforum* 60, no. 5 (January 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The film has, in fact, been made available to stream for educational purposes on *Kanopy*.

stream's multifarious guises — that the film comes to eschew the capture of this metaphor by any one domain. Dwelling instead in the invisible latencies of this polysemic trope — with all the analogies, homologues, and connections that inadvertently it implies — it attunes us to the rhetorical throughline that binds our streams of consciousness to streaming media, platform ecologies to the environment, as well as our own sensuous faculties to the natural and technological infrastructures on which they depend. Accordingly, what the film then affords its audiences is perhaps a tangential access into the edifying force of our imaged and imaginaries of streams — a conceptual device that, precisely because of its semantic ambiguity, has often been invoked for and alongside our inquiries into reality's formation.

To the extent that it situates itself at the limits of what can be demarcated by the so-called “stream,” then, the film also alerts us to the narratives of mastery by which we have come to manipulate, shape, and systematically narrow the ontologizing plenum to which the metaphor opens. Thereupon which, it prompts a reconsideration of our existing approaches to streaming, particularly as it pertains to the concept and interfacial media of experience. Here, and as this paper will demonstrate in due course, Weerasethakul's aesthetic pedagogy cannot be understated, as it is by unravelling at the boundaries of form and language that it comes to bypass — in order to unwork — the discursive instrumentalization of our sensoria. Because irreducible and therefore irreproducible, the flights of our minds, senses, and other modes of subjectivation — or what Shane Denson has elsewhere called a prepersonal and “multistable stratum of ... embodied aesthesis” — can only be specified by their analogy to other such continuous events.<sup>5</sup> Such tentative correspondences between two non-discrete phenomena are, in short, our sole means of stabilizing the murky processes by which existence metabolizes and mediates itself for us. Where the provisional slips into presumptions of objectivity, however, discourses of mediation have also ceded the command and control of our experiential being to the sole purchase of those who wield its semantics. As our encounters with the real becomes codified, what was once born out of practicality is likewise transformed into a normative apparatus.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, guided by *Memoria's* provocations, this work charts an extended — but not exhaustive — hydrology of consciousness that has been subsumed under the banner of streaming, given that terms such as this remain the only ways by which we can inhabit and reorder our lives. While always futile, in this sense, our temporal forms demand not our relinquishment of them, but only our constant commitment to rejuvenate their effects.

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<sup>5</sup> Shane Denson, *Post-cinematic Bodies* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2023), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

Of course, much scholarship in the histories of science and technology have already sought to problematize the inadequacy of the means of representation and communication that we take to our complex realities. Countenancing the ancient, Pre-socratic roots of our hydrological metaphors, for instance, Sarah Pourciau notes that for as long as we have contemplated the make and mediation of our metaphysical existence, forms of fluidity have been endemic to our discourses due to their imputations of ungraspability: whereas the wave, since Anaxagoras, has often been envisioned as the ethereal matter from which all phenomena arose, natural philosophy would take its oscillatory continua as a model for the imperceptible energetics subtending all action.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, in more recent history, one may also observe that after James Clerk Maxwell started to “[treat] electrical lines of force, magnetic lines of force and electric currents each by analogy with the flow of an incomprehensible fluid through a resistive medium,” such notions of a primordial flux would come to command our imaginaries of electronic media.<sup>8</sup> “The language of big data has been oceanic from the beginning,” Pourciau hence goes on to elaborate, for it hangs on a history of thought that has long defined discrete structure in a negative relation to its continuous substrate.<sup>9</sup> Portending unplumbed depths beneath the surface of the Earth, the invisible currents and flows of what Anna Greenspan has called “the ‘oceanic’ ether” might therefore stand not just for a point of communion with “entities other than ourselves,” but at the outermost limits of reason — as the start and end of knowledge.

In its material embodiment of a quintessential indivisibility, liquid formlessness may thus be said to yield its most generic appeal to us — it makes for a convenient *deus ex machina* to which one can consign all varieties of the unknown. Yet, it is also worth remembering that our images of watery becoming are not a monolith; their respective etymologies at once belie and depend on traces of their use, or how we have historically imagined them. This then begs the question of how and why certain metaphors have garnered currency where others have faltered, given that the import that we invest into our metaphors — as much as how we intend to denote their qualities — inadvertently come to define their contours. For, if “the medium is the metaphor,” as Neil Postman contends, that at once registers and reorganizes the conditions of its use, the *metaphor as medium*, or as variable kinds of critical and discursive instruments, would likewise entail context-specific modes of

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Pourciau, “A/logos: An Anomalous Episode in the History of Number,” *MLN* 134 no. 3 (2019), 616-7.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey N. Cantor and Michael Jonathan Sessions Hodge, eds, *Conceptions of Ether: Studies in the History of Ether Theories, 1740–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 244.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Pourciau, “On the Digital Ocean,” *Critical Inquiry* 48 no. 2 (2022), 233.

commensurability and transmission that presage our experience differentially.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, one may be compelled to ask: why has the specific image of the stream so captivated our imagination?<sup>11</sup> And how may this capricious figure be released from its currently apparent, yet perhaps specious appropriation by the contemporary media industry? After all, one need only to consider, the current persistence of our language and technologies of *streaming*, even as the advent of wireless telegraphy at the turn of the century had, for some, already “heralded a radically different vision of electronic presence, one that presented an entirely new metaphor of liquidity in telecommunication by replacing the concept of the individuated ‘stream’ with the vast etheric ‘ocean.’”<sup>12</sup> Rather than the groundedness of an isolated stream, discoveries of invisible signals and wireless transmission had plunged us into a “seeming omnipresence [of information and signals] ... that, like the sea, were ultimately boundless and unknowable.”<sup>13</sup> But the rise of such oceanic infinitudes have clearly not dislodged the grip that the figurative stream holds on our ideations of data flows: it remains a key paradigm of information processing, inasmuch as it points us to a dominant mode of content delivery today. Consider, then, what the latter term might still afford and endow our present approaches to media, given that it has been so widely circulated across such disparate disciplines that its symbolic efficiency has ostensibly been diluted.

What I mean to suggest with these conjectures, in other words, is that more than the semantic properties of our lexicon for media, a nebulous concept in itself, it may instead be our orientations towards such language — as well as what they designate — that determines their felicity conditions. This is because our extant vocabularies for media, its forms, and instantiations have always comprised such attempts to resituate the conditions of our existence in light of new and analogous

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<sup>10</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 3.

<sup>11</sup> I thank my second reader for the helpful note that the wave-particle duality of basic building blocks of matter allows us to sidestep the problem of unity vs. multiplicity, only as and when they sit in a quantum super-position of both sides of the dichotomy: “in this sense, the quantum reading of waves threatens any imposition of a fixed metaphorical apparatus that would exhaustively contain the information flows around us,” wherever it is tethered from “the more problematic notion of ‘particle’, ‘unit’ or even ‘datum’.” In this light, one hypothesis for the discursive purchase of the streaming metaphors that it does, indeed, hold these two oppositional valences in and of itself — without the prop of an antonymic term, as in the case of the “wave” and “particle” — by lending itself so readily to (de)nominalization. A sustained consideration of this line of argument, however, lies outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

phenomena — or, to define the nascent contours of an emerging invention in the known arrangements of what is already familiar.<sup>14</sup> As we now run up against the pressing task of adequately describing, if not, addressing media’s increasingly granular effects on us — and as the interfaces between ourselves and the world only appear to unravel into more and more cascades of metaphors — perhaps it would then do us well to turn not back to the rigid structures of our already concrete technologies, which bid us only to rehash our well-worn critiques, but instead, to closer meditations on “how the bias of a [metaphor] sits heavy, felt but unseen, over [elsewise seemingly fixed schemas of experience].”<sup>15</sup> Otherwise put, as the interpositions of media emerge today as a crucial heuristic of contemporary life, perhaps it may be in the very temporal forms that we have for such intermediaries, their fluctuating currencies, as well as the thick materiality of their rhetorical forces that we might start to re-envision our extant relations to our sociotechnical milieux.

Thus, the question with which this essay began — “can anything be unstreamable?” — for it may well be by ascertaining the limit properties of this otherwise all-encompassing term that we may be better able to attend to the ways in which it has been circumscribed for us. To this end, this project first traces an extended semiotic history of what I call the “streaming metaphor” in order to reground our popular and theoretical discourses of streaming media in their environmental, or “elemental,” priors.<sup>16</sup> Upending norms of humanity’s technocultural mastery of their habitats, it considers the ways that our habits of noesis — which include our everyday concepts of technology and how they have been realized — have been cultivated by their organic and computational climates. Taking the idiom of streaming as a foundational thoroughline that aligns our current platform ecosystems to our processes of sense cognition *as well as* the ebbs and flows of the natural world, it probes and problematizes the compression of our originary intuitions of a preindividual reality — the fluvial phenomena of stream hydrology — within such a vacillatory image-concept. In so doing, it elucidates the self-reflexive doubling of our worlds and ourselves within our metaphorical *streams-of-consciousness*, on the one

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<sup>14</sup> One of the most persuasive instances of this tendency arises in our treatment of software as a “universal imitator/machine,” or a “metaphor for metaphor,” as suggested in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 55-58. For another account of the “conceptual consolidation of media — as a mode of transmission, a metonym for massification, an environment that produces and sustains modern production and consumption,” where it pertains to the institutional formation of media studies, see Anna Shechtman, “Command of Media’s Metaphors,” *Critical Inquiry* 47 no. 4 (2022): 644-674.

<sup>15</sup> Postman, 18.

<sup>16</sup> John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

hand, and our terms for streaming media, on the other, not to mention the normative presumptions and elisions that lie between the two — that is, our nascent reflections on our own self-consciousness and our later ambitions to simulate them. Counter to such a linear narrative of the metaphor’s transdisciplinary movements, which functions nonetheless to naturalize a steady progression towards rationalization and control, it hence proposes a diffractive account of this culturally pervasive abstraction that constellates — and might thereby be more commensurable to — its variegated histories of use. Specifically, in turning to Apitchatpong Weeeasathakul’s film, *Memoria* (2021), and its reinventions of the “streaming metaphor,” it advances a reticular sense of streaming that ultimately enables the concept’s psychic, organic, and technical manifestations to go on to inflect themselves upon each other — and in this way, continually unmake and remake itself.

To be certain, what I am after is not a flat ontology but only a more capacious reconfiguration of the medial topology wherein our intentions, body, and mind coincide with the complex data of the world. For just as difference, or our conventional “oppositions between proper and figurative, ordinary and strange, order and transgression ... proceeds from the metaphorical constitution of semantic fields,” these same distinctions always subtend the structure of metaphor and must therefore be maintained for the latter to hold.<sup>17</sup> Thus, every articulation of the “streaming metaphor” is only a remark upon the dynamics of how we might come to perceive our realities at any given time and space, a meaningful decision on what is — or ought to be — the originary difference that would engender all ensuing differences in our streams of experience. By this view, my project remains at its core one of aesthetics, or how we have been poised to distinguish signal from noise: it asks after the ways by which *streaming* has been constituted as a mobile frame in order for us to grasp — even if only momentarily — the very fact of mediation itself, to loosen ourselves from its preestablished logics.

## **Making Media Stream(s)**

Popularized in the 1980s, against a backdrop of the postwar communications boom, the language of *streaming* has come to define a type of platform technology, a commonplace activity, and a familiar genre of cultural content. Its philological record, according to the English lexicon at least, ascribes the word’s inordinate currency in our contemporaneity to its technical sense — in particular, as that which connotes *both* a “continuous flow of data or instructions” *and* the “channel for such

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 24.

data.”<sup>18</sup> At once evoking the consumption of media artifacts as well as the production of such audio, visual, and informatic entities, it has since been appended to nearly every means, component, and process involved in the circulation of information: one may be said to stream (v) a stream (n), at the same time that the latter’s contents are streaming (adj) *and* streamed (v); streams compose their own sense and structures right as they receive and respond to their own effects. In this sense, precisely as the motif’s unreasonable effectiveness augurs an autopoietic, self-organizing, and thereby self-sustaining system (here, of sensemaking), such a pluripotent gerund might be understood as the apotheosis of cybernetic thought — not unlike Claude Shannon’s model of communication or Gregory Bateson’s ecology of mind, it designates an ensemble of past conditions and potential output modulating each other in perpetuity.

Thus construed, streaming throws us into the thick of mediation. Arrested therein, *in medias res*, one might be compelled to ask: what exactly constitutes the frame of/as a stream? Should *streaming* be such a capricious form and activity in our prevailing discourses of media, from what aspect might we even come to detach ourselves from our object of discussion in the first place in order to accurately fathom and evaluate its effects? What fissure must occur, first and foremost, within the unceasing processuality of streaming for such an extrinsic vantage point to produce and authorise itself? To know and to judge requires that our organs of intellect be unencumbered by our subjective slants, even as such judgement can be neither cleaved from our inner experience nor independent of the contingent contexts of their activation. Just as the Guimbal turbine, as Gilbert Simondon sees it, conditions itself — and notably, the specific procedures by which it makes and sustains the turbulence of oil and water in a hydraulic dam — by way of synergizing its possible modes of existence with these prospective futures’ effects on its given reality, every invocation of streaming can only reach its internal consistency through the same “systematic and pluri-functional convergence.”<sup>19</sup> In short, it is only in every moment of its occasion that a *stream* might come to “call forth the creation of this third [frame],” the cut between perceiver and perceived, or interpretant and object, that affords the word its proper form and sense.<sup>20</sup>

What this entails is the particularity of all practices of streaming to their own milieux — human, technical, and organic — given that the relations between them

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<sup>18</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “stream,” Apr. 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stream\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#20561697](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stream_n?tab=meaning_and_use#20561697).

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 57-58.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



can never be wholly known until they determine themselves. Yet, *pace* Heraclitus, one might still be able to “step in the same river twice,” seeing as the terms by which we gesture to such a continuous variability of experience remain one and the same. For this reason, the multivalent quality of the streaming metaphor has largely given way to its schematization as input-process-output — at least, in our discourses of media — to serve as a logical shorthand for techniques of information access and management, because its histories of use have so often traversed the same paths. Think, for example, of the foremost manifestation of streaming hardware: deployed by Data Electronics Inc to market its magnetic tape drives, the idiom was meant then to indicate a “backup storage without interruption,” or “technologies *for* delivery and playback.”<sup>21</sup> Eliciting not just a basin of water but liquid’s passages into and out of it, it points us to a channel and a stated function by which to control, extract, and disseminate flows of data at will. Consequently, the activity of streaming becomes a means to gather, sort, and move data at one’s leisure, whereas its abstraction comes to stand in for the tape drive company’s guarantee of relative freedom to its users. Affixed to such a mechanism of information storage and retrieval, subsequent uses of the same expression would, accordingly, mobilize its underlying insinuation of individual autonomy as a typifying trait and a point of reference to endow to other contexts the same sense. The telecommunications company, Starlight Networks would soon rebrand its video-on-demand and web conferencing products as modes of “video streaming,” just as media historians would trace these various technologies to “radio, television broadcasting and cinema,” or even more “anachronistically,” the Théâtrophone — an earlier precedent that had transmitted opera and theatre performances to listeners over telephone lines.<sup>22</sup> Given the indubitable attractiveness of such an ideal of a perfect conduit to infinite reserves of potential, it is no wonder that narratives of technological advancement — whether peddled by industrial actors or consumers — would both invest within and draw from this overdetermined concept their aspirations towards immediate communication.

With such a lucrative aim of total recall as its frontispiece, demands for liberty, flexibility, and plenitude in terms of information access has thereby dominated canonical accounts of streaming’s genesis, even becoming its sole purchase. As with David Kusek and Gerd Leonhard’s triumphant pronouncements of “music like water” in their manifesto for the digital music industry, wherein both authors prognosticate the infinite availability of audio content with the advent of commercial streaming platforms, mentions of such fluid bodies in respects to contemporary media appeal

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<sup>21</sup>Jeremy Wade Morris and Devon Powers, “Control, curation and musical experience in streaming music services,” *Creative Industries Journal* 8 no. 2 (2015), 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

frequently to a specific imaginary of their antecedents in nature — as linear, undulating, and indivisible — to explain “unlimited access to content.”<sup>23</sup> Inflected by familiar presumptions of streams’ morphologies, which associate them with impressions of linear direction and perpetuity, such perspectives are so inclined to accentuate their object’s flux, deluge, and unilateral effects. What they elide, however, is the internal variability, dynamics, and depths of that which they reference, not to mention the bounded and recursive patterning of broader hydrological forms. For while a stream might appear without start nor end to us, it is still delimited by the finite elements of the universe. Hence, rather than a vapor-like, “celestial jukebox,” our streaming technologies must remain likewise tethered to the constraints of our lived realities, as more recent infrastructural and materialist turns in media studies are increasingly wont to note.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless, behind such seemingly utopian rhetorics lies the streaming industry’s efforts to “control the evolution of the conceptual metaphor,” particularly as its intimation of mobility and abundance has well served platforms, producers, and distributors to veil their own appropriation and regulation of streamed commodities.<sup>25</sup> On these uneven grounds, critical responses to streaming media have correspondingly coalesced around a dialectical refutation of its duplicitous promises: turning the direction of streaming’s course and process — or the act’s extractivist effects — back onto the purported agents of streams, for instance, discourses of cognitive capitalism recompose our streaming platforms as a means of mining our sense-cognitive faculties. In a similar vein, extending the site of streaming to its underlying infrastructural conditions, environmental media studies have correspondingly troubled the flows of labor and resources through our platform interfaces, often towards corporate entities.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, because they cannot detangle themselves from what they contend is the necessarily deficient conditions of their presents — or what thereby legitimizes their critical interventions — such literature tends to fall back all the same onto well-worn matters of data capture and management, be they the proper allotment of natural resources for the manufacture of new technologies or the suitable ratio of our increasingly rare attention spans to

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew J. Bottomley, *Sound Streams: A Cultural History of Radio-Internet Convergence* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 134.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Bukart and Tom McCourt, “Infrastructure for the Celestial Jukebox,” *Popular Music* 23, no. 3 (2004), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Andreas Lenander Aegidius, “The music streaming metaphor and its underlying tangle of transcodes,” *The International Journal of Media and Culture* 19 no. 1 (2021), .52

<sup>26</sup> For more on the material histories and “durational footprints of media technologies and infrastructural systems,” see *Saturation: An Elemental Politics*, ed. Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

external stimuli. Hence, while critics wrestle with industrial prerogatives to determine how best to reorder the topologies of our media streams — the hierarchical demands and priorities that move our content, information, and material throughout their channels — what remains unaddressed is the caveat that streaming itself, as a form, act, and metaphor, is never quite so given a matter of fact.

Lodged within our disciplinary habits, media scholars can only trope an idiomatic imaginary of the stream — as a unidirectional channel of capture and control — while rehashing conservative beliefs that technology exists only as a static and foreign tool of management. We find ourselves mired by the presumed linearity of both stories of progress and the structures of streams, whenever we make ourselves beholden to past dispensations of the term. Yet, is not the very same semantic ambiguity that has so readily given rise to the metaphor's aforementioned uses and misuses also an invitation for us to alter its courses of realization? Should we follow Simondon's contention that "the development of technical objects [must be] made possible without a tendency toward hypertely and then maladaptation," with hypertely being what "occurs when adaptation is relative to a given that exists prior to the process of adaptation," the consolidation of any concept cannot be so bound by a single condition of its necessity<sup>27</sup> To posit such a narrow evolutionary trajectory of the streaming metaphor is only to capitulate to whatever "definitional power [has previously been exercised] over the stream," whereas the reality of any formal emergence is often far more contingent; it proceeds by way of novel and irregular paths, depending on the unique arrangements of its situation.<sup>28</sup>

After all, as evinced in the multifarious afterlives of this fluvial abstraction — in psychology, physics, and philosophy, to name a few — the polymorphous figure has long lent itself as an analog to other domains and designata. These various conscriptions of the stream are not mutually exclusive; sharing symbolic grounds, their respective schemas and impetuses — both actual and virtual — are intractably shot through each other. Hence, to "invent" the streaming metaphor anew, our task at hand is not merely to work against the grain of our priors, but rather, to restore them to "the ground [of virtuality], which is the system of all forms or rather the common reservoir of the forms' tendencies, well before they exist separately and constitute themselves as an explicit system."<sup>29</sup> For it is in such a relation between form and ground that the "influence of the future" — and not just of the past — can be "[diffused] onto the present," it is also in this productive friction between a word's divergent disambiguations, at the furthestmost limits of language, that we can even

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<sup>27</sup> Simondon, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Aegidius, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Simondon, 61.

begin to reactivate the potency of our symbolic orders.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is to other less well-trodden genealogies of the streaming concept that we must now turn to revitalise its capaciousness.

## Split Streams

Decades prior to the advent of streaming media as we know it today, another metaphorical stream had already taken root within popular discourses of mediation. While more often discussed as a literary mode that punctuates narration with “prespeech levels of consciousness,” the idiomatic stream of consciousness had initially been coined and trafficked by early psychologists, from Alexander Bain to William James, to describe the psycho-physiological strata of sense-experience.<sup>31</sup> Displacing the site of streams upon the mind, such a neurophysiological reinterpretation to the streaming interface — or vice versa, for that matter — may well hark to more recent conceits behind our so-called artificial neural networks and their attendant platform technologies. Yet, contrary to the latter’s ambitions to engineer both the form and content of streams, there exists a fundamental alienness to most citations of the stream-of-consciousness that is seemingly indelible to its subject matter — the non-coincidence of consciousness to itself — and which might therefore grant us room to reassess the implications of streaming, so long as our psyches remain a contested terrain in these debates and as long as our systems of mediation continue to be cast after the mind.

Interrogating the psychological bases of our awareness and understanding, or what is more famously known as our “streams-of-consciousness,” James writes that “[m]y experience is what I agree to attend to” — ergo, agreement anchors the attentive faculty that contours the shades and effects of one’s consciousness.<sup>32</sup> Insofar as the language of agreement here has been more commonly parsed as the willful effort of attentiveness, it belies another connotation of concordance nonetheless. Indeed, given the psychologist’s onto-epistemological concerns — or how the base elements of our cerebral functions and, in particular, the “fact ... of selective attention,” come to shape our minds — such an apparent sense of volition is certainly not unwarranted.<sup>33</sup> Understood as well in light of the centrality of free will to his broader metaphysical schemas, whereby subjective intention mediates between chance and choice,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 4.

<sup>32</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), 402.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

“agreement” might seem an unambiguous synonym for voluntary decision. It should therefore come as no surprise to us that while James’ psychology is ramified into subsequent scientific paradigms — from early psychobiology and cognitive neuroscience to the neural networks of computer science — the import of such decisive agency to his postulations has also been imbibed by other fields. *Qua* neurobiology, for example, his vital figure of attention has been similarly replicated in the plastic systems by which we assimilate sensory inputs — or the selective filters that predicate our conscious cognition — whereas in the field of artificial intelligence, this same model has been further transmogrified into the “attention mechanisms” that focus operations of information analysis.<sup>34</sup> Evidently, where one register of “agreement” has come to accent how the Jamesian “stream of consciousness” has been received, the other has been customarily overlooked as a corollary of his diction, even as his doctrines of pragmatism are no less founded on the correspondences between thought and experience.

For James, such an intra- and inter-personal mutuality implied by the alternative implication of agreement is integral as what coheres figure to ground. As he suggests elsewhere in *The Principles of Psychology*, “Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date.”<sup>35</sup> Simply put, just as “our brain changes [whilst we think], and, like the aurora borealis, its whole internal equilibrium shifts with every pulse of change,” so, too, are the ways by which we come to take in and are affected by stimuli.<sup>36</sup> Oscillating between the subject of “my experience” as well as the singular, first-person “I,” a reciprocal consociation between our logical senses and our sensibilities — or attention’s integrative force — impels the unravelling of our conscious awareness. For it is therein that the will and the world can be reconciled, it is also within this framework of interactivity that the streaming continua of our sensuous realities obtain. In this sense, one might observe that there remains a radical openness to James’ pragmatism that is, more often than not, unheeded in vernacular deployments of his work: for one cannot exist apart from the indeterministic universe wherein one dwells, intention alone can never suffice to render our lives cognizable to us. Instead, our subjective impressions are dependent on the happening of external events to us, insofar as their appearances are also guided by our habits and proclivities. Emerging at the nexus of these two halves of our realities — those which are “me’ and ‘not me,’ respectively” — the novelty of our lives is composed of these hemispheres’

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<sup>34</sup> Ashish Vaswani et al., “Attention Is All You Need,” *Proceedings of the 31st International Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems* (2017): 1–15.

<sup>35</sup> James, 234.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

ratification *and* countervailing of the other.<sup>37</sup> Within these psychic streams of “of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc, that constantly pass and repass, and that constitute our inner life,” synthesis and analysis, like prolepsis and analepsis, are not simply isolated mechanisms that proceed by way of their own sequential steps.<sup>38</sup> Rather, they are intercalating processes that run throughout and alongside each other to rupture our customary forms of thought.

Given the simultaneity of these transversal domains of experience, what, then, would such a reticular re-structuration of James’ stream of consciousness entail for its later derivations — should we recall, in particular, that the themes of his early experimental psychology and philosophy have taken on quite another life as they traverse and circulate beyond disciplinary bounds? To my mind, save for its aesthetic renderings, few adaptations of such an ineffable feeling of thought have successfully reckoned with the trenchant stakes of James’ concept. No commercial blueprint for media streaming — or data streaming, for that matter — has been so profoundly given over to their extrinsic transformations, nor have their critics been able to supersede this very same barrier of self-interest and concern. Caught within the bottleneck of a post-Enlightenment consecration of self-determination by way of self-knowledge, our prevailing formulae for learning — and the interfaces of its production, mediation, and becoming — have largely been prepossessed and attenuated by our urge to steer them. Regardless, in the absence of any satisfactory exemplar of his conceptual metaphor, James manages to furnish his readers with an incipient illustration of its potential anyway. In a section on “habit,” in which he delivers his proof of what we understand today as neuroplasticity, he cites this telling passage from the physiologist G. H. Schneider:

To recur to a simile, at least partially apt, imagine the nervous system to represent a drainage-system, inclining, on the whole, toward certain muscles, but with the escape thither somewhat clogged. Then streams of water will, on the whole, tend most to fill the drains that go towards these muscles and to wash out the escape. In case of a sudden flushing, however, the whole system of channels will fill itself, and the water overflow everywhere before it escapes. But a moderate quantity of water invading the system will flow through the proper escape alone.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>38</sup> William James, *Talks To Teachers: On Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), 15. .

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in James, 113.

In this comparison between our hydrological cycles and neurophysiological makeup, James, via Schneider, reaches not just to a removed abstraction of liquid flux, but the precise characters of its flow — the densities, velocities, and resistance that streams of water enact in the moment that they meet the material composition of their channels — to educe the spatio-temporal contingencies that come to inform our sense-cognitive “tend[encies]” and “inclin[at]ions.” To lean thus on an “imag[ination of] ... a drainage-system” to prove the plasticity of brain-matter, James’ line of argument may certainly adumbrate a commitment to a certain scientific systematicity, but the implicit claim remains that one cannot possibly preordain such a plane of order. For “the impulse [must be] determined to the motion of the [stimuli that instigate it],” the speeds, forms, and effects that characterize water bodies cannot be discerned apart from the scenes of their configuration.<sup>40</sup> The semiotic cachet that the streaming concept thereby affords the psychologist’s project is one of a structural homology — that is, a holistic sketch of our phenomenal experience’s event of construction that, while sidestepping conventions of linear causality, also transforms the time of our theoretical inquiry.

In this manner of splashing up against the terrains of our imagination the elsewhere inaccessible processes of our sense-cognition, the diagrammatic comparison maps for us a schema of relations — in this case, a generic tendency towards equilibrium — between “channels” and “streams,” or “muscles,” “nerves” and sensation. Moreover, by deriving from the matter-of-factness of Schneider’s vocabulary — specifically, his simple perfect tense — a touch of facility, it imputes to these relations a note of ease. The extended metaphor hence culminates in a vivid reanimation of the centrifugal force borne by the amorphousness of water, the gravitational pull of a stream to its bed; it exhibits to us the very sense of an unbridled spontaneity that floods pure chance occurrences with the weight of significance. Still, for such an elaborate homology to hold, one must not forget that a comprehensive awareness of the natural environment must be presumed. Because the logic of analogy, in order to become fully operative, depends on an extraneous frame wherein two distinct states of affairs can be made alike, the subjective intervention of such a mediating ground — one that possesses its own prior relations to these disparate entities — can neither be understated nor made entirely transparent. Accordingly, what Schneider’s “simile” ultimately activates is this latent yet always already operative third component: our respective stocks of experience — such as the physiologist’s own background in marine zoology, which, one might easily surmise, has drawn him so deeply into the undulating streams of which he writes — that must be concurrently referenced and considered in new light in order to render so salient to us the likeness between our interior and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 112.

exterior landscapes. Such is a canniness about one's object that loops one's positionality back within the pragmatics of discourse; such is also a rigorous practice of logical inquiry — in line with James' own tradition of pragmatic empiricism — that situates all possibilities of our understanding in a perpetual entelechy between past and present experience.

That Schneider “recurs” to the streaming metaphor despite its “partial apt[ness]” — and only in the moment that he is called to locate the source of our inexplicable habits and “impulse[s]” within our embodied systems — is thereby striking, for not only does the rhetorical device supplement him with another way to articulate a systematic making of our consciousness, particularly where denotative language falters; it becomes his sole means of acknowledging such an insufficiency of forms. Holding together two structurally congruous systems — one of the sensuous body and another of the sensoria it inhabits — while conceding that neither is reducible to the other, his contentions deploy both his immense familiarity with the two *as well as* the proviso that such an intimate knowledge must always defy delineation. After all, inserted in the midst of an example of how a pianist's aesthetic, mental, bodily dispositions are honed through each other over time, Schneider's adoption of the idiomatic stream might have been meant to serve, for his project, to clarify the organic apparatus that administers such a process, whereas for James', it poses for us an even more abstract principle: that any novelty in life, or “growth of structural modification in living matter,” must emerge from the “accidental changes, *blocks ... [and] unwonted*” relations that proliferate throughout such systems.<sup>41</sup> Yet, neither of these theories of consciousness can be proven in themselves, despite being so swiftly intuited by us. For we can never wholly cognize the workings of our consciousness in the time of its occurrence, our flights of mind can only ever be obliquely glossed, “partial[ly]” considered, and communicated by analogy. Thus promulgated at the interstices between such apodictic yet unenumerable qualia, the image of streaming comes not only to index the fact of our experience of experience itself; it becomes a conduit to this known unknown. Here, perhaps one might only be able to conjecture that there exists a slipperiness to the metaphor that lends it so well to expressions of the ineffable. But perhaps there *is*, in fact, something to literal streams — their simultaneous systematicity and dynamism, their spatial expanses *and* temporal scopes, and that they unravel at the inter-exchanges between known terrestrial grounds and the amorphous matter that pass through them — that enables their symbolic representations to speak so readily to the ways in which we have hitherto undergone reality.

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<sup>41</sup> James, 119.



Figuring a continuous recalibration between parts and wholes, and of which we can only grasp but an element, there resides a substantive aspect to how we have conceived of our environments thus far that renders our commonsensical impressions of stream systems comparable to the holistic structuration of our consciousness — a process of subjectivation that cannot be fully disclosed to us except by its remedial effects, the movements and modulations that it works upon our faculties. Put thus, the “recur[rence]” of the idiomatic stream wherever the passage and mediation of our noumenal realities cannot be otherwise explained might just mark the interfaces between ourselves and others — or the precise junctures between scales of action and relation, wherein phenomena are made and remade interminably — but only if it should come to impel and engage our acquaintance with the world. What this entails is a closer attunement to the precise ways in which we are implicated in the stream of life, beyond the merely descriptive and the technical; what it necessitates, no less, is for a critical primacy to be restored to our very constitutive entanglements with the world.

### **Towards An Aesthetic Education of Streaming**

Should we accept that the streaming metaphor conveys something of the processuality of our being as it washes over us, one might also be led to ask: how exactly does it configure such a primordial *energeia* of existence without ever coming to stultify the latter’s potency? Of course, such a the question is not new: the problematic of experience has long troubled discourses of representation for as long as the former has been built on a direct correlation between our sensuous faculties and sense contents — a complete and unfettered presence to oneself — that is altogether antithetical to the procedural drag of mediation. Hence, where Plato proffered a theory of eidetic forms and the German philosophers the sublime, it would appear that media theory has reached instead to a vocabulary of streams for its answer and point of inquiry into an incommunicable — for immanent, presubjective, and undifferentiated — process of subjectivation. Cautioning against the supplantation of our senses by a “general digitization of *channels* and information,” for example, Friedrich Kittler would draw on the likewise evocative image of “eyewash” to construe their effects.<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, Marshall McLuhan would write more explicitly that “the stream of consciousness is really managed by the transfer of film technique to the printed page,” because such media, like infinitesimal calculus, “pretend to deal with motion and change by minute fragmentation, ... while pretending to deal with the

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<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

whole mind in action.”<sup>43</sup> On such a stage of movement, activity, and time, the ongoing production of life by technology may thereby be rehearsed, although the precise veracity of this simulacra remains dubious — at least, by McLuhan’s and Kittler’s accounts.

From this standpoint alone, the figure of streaming may be seen to stand at merely the tail end of our efforts to theorize ontological flux, as our most recent iteration of an ur-substance that resists formal description — not even by our gestures towards the infinite and infinitesimal. So long as our references to the shapeless continuum of thought, time, and natural processes remain at the level of the symbolic, they can never reach the real. Put otherwise, as “sufficient *explanation* mandates a heterogeneity between *explanans* and *explanandum*,” we would always lack such a “structural isomorphy” to substantiate our terms, if we should only concern ourselves with a rubric of the delineable.<sup>44</sup> Emerging at the coincidence between symbolic domains, however, the streaming concept already necessitates that it dwells within the gap of such an inadequacy. As earlier implied, inherent to any analogy’s felicity conditions is an indispensable rift between its desiderata that cannot so easily be resolved into differences and identities: object and representament must always be held apart in order for one to allude to the other. Crossing its plural genealogies, the idiomatic stream comes to press the intensities of its past pronouncements against our present regimes of the sensible, revealing an intertextual thoroughline that connects aesthesis to its modes of mediation.

By this vein of argument, in order to offer a renewed account of our *conceptualizations* of streaming, we must now turn to matters of the aesthetic — or what Jacques Rancière defines as the “conditions [that] make it possible for shapes, movements, rhythms, to be felt and thought” — for it is therein that our analogies can operate.<sup>45</sup> It is also here, within the interfacing of our sensations with their constitutive processes, that our extant apparatuses of streaming are said to increasingly insinuate themselves to redefine the forms of subjective being available to us.<sup>46</sup> Apropos of such technical — and political — interceptions into the sensory fabric of our realities, it is imperative that we formulate an alternative grammar by which to articulate their operations. To this end, Apitchatpong Weerasethakul’s most

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<sup>43</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 322.

<sup>44</sup> Ray Brassier, “What can non-philosophy do?” *Angelaki*, 8 no. 2 (2003), 170.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London: Verso, 2013), x.

<sup>46</sup> For more on this extended cognitive assemblage that integrates higher consciousness with forms of technical and biological nonconscious cognition, see N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

recent work of slow cinema, *Memoria*, affords us an exemplary tutor text to rethink streaming *qua* process and phenomenology, given its express aim to be, in our current vernacular, “unstreamable.”

Set to “play in theaters ‘forever,’ screening in one city at a time for one week at a time,” the film, according to its distributors, had never been intended to be released on streaming services, for few would “do it justice, and those who do could be charged with disturbing the peace.”<sup>47</sup> Poised thus, and as earlier mentioned, at the margins of what can be made streamable, what Weerasethakul’s project professes to negate is the cannibalization of cinematic experience by streaming media. Yet, in doing so, what it must first enumerate for us are the defining parameters of that which it opposes. It is therefore not an accident that the film comes to take for its premise the ontological task of inventing a form that befits the unrepresentable: the stream of experience itself. Beginning with a loud thud that awakens an orchidologist one night — and which goes on to haunt her insomniac ambles through her ensuing days — the fantastical drama follows its protagonist, Jessica, in her attempts to place the source of this sound. Dramatizing such an endosonic occurrence, an “emergent perception” that can be neither “expressed as an actual element” nor otherwise registered by within normative range of capture, the film finds itself confronting the impossibilities of envisioning the imperceptible.<sup>48</sup> For while the cinematic dispositif relies on the principle of *synchresis* — or the presumption of a constant “*synchronism* and *synthesis*” between audio and video — to maintain the coherence of its diegetic domain, the unknown aetiology of *Memoria*’s conceit, being so hallucinatory, severs this dyad of sight and sound.<sup>49</sup> Hence, in order for audiences to identify themselves with Jessica, her embodied symptom must be corroborated to an imagined body; whatever forms by which it is mediated cinematically must, in this sense, materialize the line between sense and sensibility.

Challenging the presumptions of cinema’s audiovisual contract, or the medium’s conventional mimicry of our sense faculties, what the film then orchestrates is a model of the minimal conditions that render the experiential mechanically reproducible — or not. The result is a fiction of a hallucination that suspends our encounters with its object, a discombobulating *yet actual* “percept [that] arises in the absence of an external reality,” within the negative spaces of its depictions.<sup>50</sup> “So your sound is *not* a song?” inquires an audio engineer in one of the film’s earliest scenes, for

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<sup>47</sup> Amy Taubin, “Sleepless Nights,” *Artforum* 60, no. 5 (January 2022).

<sup>48</sup> Mark Grimshaw and Tom Garner, *Sonic Virtuality: Sound as Emergent Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), xviii.

<sup>50</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), ix.

instance, establishing the sound's alienness to any heuristic that might be taken to it.<sup>51</sup> Set in a professional recording studio, the episode introduces Jessica's effort to electronically reproduce her enigma with the audio engineer's assistance. Their undertaking soon fails, however, and the scene quickly devolves into an array of paltry approximates: a brow furrowed when Jessica likens her sound to "a big ball of concrete"; the widening of eyes in incredulity; the flailing of hands as the audio engineer puts the question of "how big [is the ball]?" to his interlocutor.<sup>52</sup> Their situation grows increasingly desperate and laughable by the minute, for it is not, in fact, in want of any sensory data to saturate it: as audiences watch the pair mix and manipulate sound samples with the methodological care of a forensics team, we are greeted by a cacophony of language, gestures, and spectrograms. At one point, "a library of movie sound effects" is even referenced.<sup>53</sup> Yet, neither onomatopoeia nor any of these recordings can ever suffice for our protagonist, for such prefabricated mechanisms of communication, like those of our streaming platforms, bear little to no relation to what she hears. Simply put, the body wherein her sound begins and ends is not that which "hits duvet hits wood bat" — as one of the aforementioned audio files is so labelled (another is named "stomach hit wearing hoodie") — because it can never be materially substituted for any of these other indexes of the already heard.<sup>54</sup> Far from the sonographs, intonations, and estranged scripts that respectively metonymize the latter, Jessica's psychosomatic affliction — of which only she, and we, can be fully cognizant — exceeds the capacities of our mnemotechnics. Thus, without a commensurable vessel into which it can be externalized, Jessica's "sound" can only loom inchoately, as the unrecognizable force that animates the scene.

Here, then, is perhaps Weerasethakul's meditation on experience, cinematic or otherwise: that it is more than a sum of its parts. Irreducible to any of its narrative or semantic coordinates, film's engagement with its audiences must always transcend the merely technical adherence of moving pictures to sound. It may be exactly for this reason that the director insists that *Memoria*'s "theatrical experience," which demands its audiences' immersion throughout its two-hour and sixteen-minute span, "is crucial or maybe the only way."<sup>55</sup> For while it is certainly a pre-recorded "movie sound effect" that so startles us from the film's opening scenes, with its "intermittent, unpredictable

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<sup>51</sup> *Memoria*, directed by Apitchatpong Weerasethakul (2021), 21:33.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 21:54-22:50.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 22:38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 25:11.

<sup>55</sup> Ryan Lattanzio, "Memoria: Neon Sets Never-Ending Theatrical Tour For Weerasethakul's Latest, One Screen At A Time," *IndieWire*, 5 Oct, 2021, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/memoria-apichatpong-weerasethakul-neon-nationwide-tour-release-1234669107/>

detonation on our tympanic membrane,” its mystery consists instead in our anticipation of its recurrence, our attention to its acoustics, and the irresolvable questions that it invites us to raise on just how we listen to each other, or do not.<sup>56</sup> Holding us in thrall to its protagonist’s hallucinations, the film calls into doubt our concepts of aurality, while systematically detangling its percepts from how we have thus far reckoned with them — scientifically, sociologically, or even metaphysically. Insofar as our contemporary streaming technologies are said to peddle an illusion of total self-possession — by offering us the “material control, containment, and objective possession of [our own] time and experience” — the film can hence conversely be said to be “unstreamable,” given its thorough resistance to being so foreshortened or summoned at will.<sup>57</sup> Still, should *Memoria* aim to advance such a negative definition of our streams of experience, against the apparatuses of streaming media that have sought to wrangle it into intelligible forms, it can only do so under the auspices of that which it dialectically affirms. Specifically, in order to refuse the technical instrumentalization of our sensoria, it must first harbor the necessary conditions to verify the quiddity of our senses. Thus, the film concludes with a “confounding evanescence of time and space” — the *a priori* of all perceptions — in an astonishing third act that takes its audience through an hour of still or slow-moving footage, as if in a dreamlike trance.<sup>58</sup>

Notably, the sequence opens on a shot of a rural stream, where Jessica meets a man who claims to “remember everything” that he has ever seen and heard.<sup>59</sup> Here, echoes of the streaming metaphor, as it has been previously thought, are rendered apparent. Comparing himself to a “hard disk” and his guest to “an antenna” that has happened upon his signals, the crossing of their paths initiates a spontaneous act of transmission that unravels across every possible frequency — and perhaps the spool of time itself.<sup>60</sup> Rumbblings of personal histories and deep time are thereafter stirred from their penumbral obscurity, when Jessica makes embodied contact with this boundless repository of memory. Just as he feels the “vibrations” of the entire cosmos “embedded” in the materiality of the world, she is said to “read” the lives of animals, inert entities, and this strange man, animals alike. There is hence a certain literalism to this scene of analog communication, as a profusion of sights, sounds, and feelings seem to issue

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<sup>56</sup> Nathan Lee, “Best Films of 2021: Memoria,” *Film Comment*, 16 Dec, 2021, <https://www.filmcomment.com/best-films-of-2021-list-top-twenty-movies/>

<sup>57</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic ‘Presence’,” *Postcinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film*, eds. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016), 96.

<sup>58</sup> Lee, “Best Films.”

<sup>59</sup> *Memoria*, 1:20:43.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:20:43.

forth from this serendipitous encounter by the stream — it is *as if*, through its fluctuating waves, we can come to access all possible sense realities. Yet, insofar as the film materializes the fact of our experience within and *as* a stream, it also denies that we can ever chart the course of its flow. As its lush or even otherworldly sound design suggests, sensoriality exceeds our conscious intentions. Melding the trickle of water into radio static, quotidian clatter into futuristic beeps, the expansive soundscape of this last sequence folds into its diegetic sphere ostensibly incompatible realities, sweeping over us — and its characters — an astounding litany of subjectless stimuli.

Consequently, when Jessica finds herself being moved to tears by hints of the man's past traumas, he tells her that "they are not your memories," because our sensations do not lend themselves to being so understood or prepossessed.<sup>61</sup> As audiences would soon also discover, "this sound [that Jessica] keeps hearing" is similarly ambiguous — albeit not rootless — in its origins. While it has been described as "her sound" for most of the film, it is "also yours," as she tells the man — and equally ours. A seismic signal from "before our time," it resonates with the intensity of every existing entity, entwining all who come across within in its immeasurable orbits.<sup>62</sup> As the film's closing scenes "unleash the violent flurry" of memories and insights that have been wrapped up in this archaic sound — that is, as variations of Jessica's subterranean rumble are laid over slices of frozen time, a series of elegiac shots, and other semblances of sylvan idyll — they animate the unforeseen realities that reside, no less, in the film's deceptively tranquil frames. Throughout, we find ourselves subjected to unfathomable — because extradiscursive — circumstances that bewilder our conventions of interpellation, given that we can never discern our subjective relations to these alien zones and times. Just as we can neither see the disagreement between the "howler monkeys," which the man "translates" for us, nor behold the persecution of the man's family in his youth, we cannot ever grasp or adjudicate just how much we have complicit in the extractive industries that sustain the film's production — a discomfiting fact with which Weerasethakul confronts his audiences, with interspersed scenes of tunnelling and goldmining serving as grave reminders of the unavoidably material basis of our media infrastructures.<sup>63</sup> Thus, thrown into our experience of the film *in medias res*, we are made to not only bear witness to, but also embody, the lived realities of others; inhabiting the space of mediation itself, we find ourselves adrift in the capricious tides of time that *Memoria* impresses upon us.

Clearly, then, there exists a fearsome unreasonableness to such a diffraction and streaming sensoria, for it implicates us in the architectures of our own lifeworlds

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1:50:03

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1:50:25

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1:25:24.

in such inexplicable ways. But we cannot forget that it is also from this necessary contingency — or, as James sees it, the “law of accidental prepotency” indispensable to the “capricious play of association in the ... mind” — that any vacillation in time can occur.<sup>64</sup> Working its carefully-calibrated images of rainfall, skies, and riverbanks against its equally redolent soundtrack, itself a *stream* of acousmatic sounds that flows from interwoven channels, the film’s final montage obliges us to imagine — that is, to rouse the fundamental “conditions of attention” in order to contemplate — the possible affiliations between the two, to acknowledge the lives to which they may bear testament, and in so doing, admit these potentials into domain of the thinkable.<sup>65</sup> Through this process, the friction of sight and sound’s seemingly discrepant and unintentional co-occurrence becomes resolved in an almost unconscionable sublimity of information, as an inexhaustible agglomeration of nearly every imaginable past, present, and future. Thus, it is as Jessica cedes herself to her baffling yet ever veritable connection to the stranger, who becomes her conduit to pure potential — and contingency — that her predicament eases; she is finally left to inhabit the full extents of her wakefulness. Accordingly, one may observe that the reconfiguration of experience as a *stream* at the end of *Memoria* arises as a threefold operation: as spatial, the literal river towards which Jessica’s journey culminates; as temporal, the real time of the sequence; as deictic, our embodied implication in the cinematic event itself that moves us to agglutinate figure to ground. In other words, the film instructs us in a method of sense and experience that rests entirely on our one-time, single encounters with reality — in the same way that the precise movement of any flow can only be defined by how its irregular currents takes to its variable banks — for it is therein that the near and ancient pasts, the material conditions of our experience, have been long deposited, just as it is therein that they effect themselves on us and may well be realized again.

It is with such an affirmation of ambiguity, semantic or otherwise, that the film finally closes on a stunning moment of anagnorisis: a startling portrait of the cosmos that affords its audiences a *sense* but never exhaustive knowledge of the whole — one that crucially enmeshes the extraterrestrial with the sublunary, the speculative with the material, the violences of history with even more esoteric pasts. In these overlapping but incommensurate circuits of historical, metabolic, or even hydraulic exchange, no existing relation can be consigned to oblivion; they permeate its setting’s fluvial landscapes — not to reproach — but only to implore us to attend more mindfully to them. For this reason, as well as the director’s longstanding interest in the moving image’s amplitude as a socio-historical channel, *Memoria* has also

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<sup>64</sup> James, 593.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 503.

frequently been received as an allegory of the colonial experience: whereas some align its motif of excavation to the wounds of past wars, others read in the very same the socio-political and economic ramifications of such narratives — all of which now extend to the polycrises of the Anthropocene. Indeed, Weerasethakul’s careful depictions of Colombia can reasonably be said to point us to the “burial of [indigenous] histories” throughout the country, the decades-long “conflicts between paramilitaries, guerillas, and armed forces” therein, the devastating extractivism that such politics has catalyzed, not to mention the myriad frames of being that have still to be recovered or lived.<sup>66</sup> Yet, what predicates all such reckonings, and what I would like to stress by way of this essay’s conclusion, is the very constitutive openness required for us to exist at all — in time, in any conceivable relation, or in the world.

No isolated interpretation of *Memoria*, in this sense, can ever fully suffice to plumb the depths of what it presents to us; it only asks that we dive into its curious hydrological metaphors, propelling ourselves through its recursive and fractal patterns, in such a tentative state of being that can be defined only in the last instance. What the film thus enacts upon its audiences — and what this project ultimately posits — is an aesthetic streaming of time and reality that does not, for it cannot, disclose its own grounds prior to its own experience. Such is a structure of mediation qua *process* that wrests us from all attempts at ontologizing its reality, should ontology have only, thus far, entailed an abstraction that results in the instrumental capture of time and space. Such is hence also the only approach to streaming that can reach and restore the promise of its metaphor: for it stages its own mutability, negotiates its own meaning, and, in this way, comes to unmake and remake itself for every age, era, and context that it permeates.

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<sup>66</sup> Leonardo Goi, “Cannes Dispatch,” *Mubi Notebook*, 17 July, 2021, <https://mubi.com/fr/notebook/posts/cannes-dispatch-apichatpong-s-memoria-kovalenko-s-unclenching-the-fists-baker-s-red-rocket>



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