

Note on the text: given that this will doubtless be a project larger than a class paper, I'll just write the following observations about the kiss as a series of relatively small, serialized micro-analyses. This should help me organize my thoughts more and eventually form a strong thesis or research question, and then allow me to rearrange the material I have now according to the forms the later-stage argumentation takes.

1.

Rene Magritte has painted a series of four images titled *Les Amants*. In the first and most famous image, a man and a woman are shown kissing. However, both wear what appear to be linen sacks over their heads. The labial caress is reduced to a wavering line where a shadowy surface meets a well-lit surface.



The gesture of the kiss is thus clothed and hidden, and the operations of clothing and hiding are brought together in the practice of eroticism. The kiss remains to be rendered nude and revealed.

This impression is complicated by the kiss represented in another painting from the same series. In this image, a man and a woman are shown kissing, their lips making contact in plain view and unveiled, though at a greater distance from the spectator than in the case of the veiled kiss. The body of the man, situated as in the first image to the right of the woman, is missing entirely.



A montage emerges between the two images. In the first, the kiss appears as a gesture lacking nudity or stifled by its own hiddenness. The second image liberates the kiss, but not

without cost. The clothed body of the man vanishes when the kiss is denuded. The nudity of the kiss inverts or contravenes the nudity or concealment of the body. In this image, the disconcealment of the kiss results in the concealment of concealment.

Questioning the kiss thus requires an analytics of eroticism which is not limited to the function of revealing. The eroticism and potential obscenity of the kiss does not belong to the same order of nudity and concealment as the body. It is thus irreducible to the biblical paradigm of the veil Giorgio Agamben understands as a lost and coming nudity.¹ Rather, the kiss contains within itself the border between obscene eroticism and socially innocent affection. The question of the eroticism (and, from a historical point of view, the eroticization) of the kiss may be a guiding figure in the exploration of sexual practice in general.

2.

[This section is a bit strange, I'm not sure if I need it.]

In a passage from *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes describes the enjoyment of reading as the experience of a gap, analogical to the gap between garments in which a fleshly interstice appears. He denies that bodily organs themselves could become objects of desire without this function of veiling and revealing.

Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogenous zones" (a foolish expression, besides); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.² Barthes's commitment to the dignity of the semblance which produces his desire remains admirable; only the simplicity of his distinction between a purely textual perversion and a bodily

¹ agamben, *nudities*, 55-90.

² *pleasure of the text* 9-10, thanks to michel for this reference

eroticism appears utopian. The body of the pervert, of Barthes himself, is concealed in his vision of fleeting disconcealment. Thomas Pynchon tries to capture the full breadth of the eroticism of this dynamic of appearance and disappearance in a dense passage from *Gravity's Rainbow*. Intrinsic to the motion of the veil, for Pynchon, is an abstraction common to garments, language, metabolic functions and technology—namely, the figural capture of a discontinuity.

How the penises of Western men have leapt, for a century, to the sight of this singular point at the top of a lady's stocking, this transition from silk to bare skin and suspender! It's easy for non-fetishists to sneer about Pavlovian conditioning and let it go at that, but any underwear enthusiast worth his unwholesome giggle can tell you there is much more here—there is a cosmology: of nodes and cusps and points of osculation, mathematical kisses... singularities! [...] In each case, the change from point to no-point carries a luminosity and enigma at which something in us must leap and sing, or withdraw in fright. Watching the A4 pointed at the sky—just before the last firing-switch closes—watching that singular point at the very top of the Rocket, where the fuze is. ...Do all these points imply, like the Rocket's, an annihilation? What is that, detonating in the sky above the cathedral? beneath the edge of the razor, under the rose?³

Perverts like Barthes demonstrate the presence of textual kisses. But the underwear enthusiast

Barthes is not entirely worth his unwholesome giggle when he draws a clear distinction

between textual kisses, mathematical kisses and real ones. Aren't certain bodily organs

themselves uniquely responsible for the fabrication of signs from the erotic function of the veil

springs? Language produces erogenous zones; this production is revealed in the kiss.

Barthes identifies the rhetorical form of this variety of pleasure as tmesis. Crucial to the functioning of tmesis is the distinction between the structure of language and its consumption.

The pleasure of language lies in its consumption, not its essence.

Tmesis, source or figure of pleasure, here confronts two prosaic edges with one another; it sets what is useful to a knowledge of the secret against what is useless to such knowledge; tmesis is a seam or flaw resulting from a simple principle of

³ gr, around page 300?

functionality; it does not occur at the level of the structure of languages but only at the moment of their consumption [...] ⁴

This distinction between structure and consumption marks the frame of a fantasy, of which Barthes gleefully admits the perversion. Those who do not (entirely) share this fantasy may note that the kiss both represents the juncture between an erotic function and a semiotic one (e.g., speech), as well as between the structure of language and its consumption. Not all edges are prosaic. “The very delimitation of an ‘erogenous zone’ that the drive isolates from the function’s metabolism [...] is the result of a cut that takes advantage of the anatomical characteristics of the margin or border.” ⁵ The kiss makes the means of production of spoken signs consumable. A purely rhetorical approach to the consumption of signs may overlook the stakes of this corporeality.

3.

In a passage from his Enzyklopädie dealing mostly with the dialectical status of excrement, Hegel introduces a division of labor within the oral cavity. Speech and kissing constitute the higher faculties of the mouth, while spitting, eating and drinking make up its vulgar operations.

Die Organe der Exkretion und die Genitalien, das Höchste und das Niedrigste der tierischen Organisation, hängen bei vielen Tieren aufs innigste zusammen, wie Sprache und Küssen auf der einen Seite, auf der andern Essen, Trinken und Ausspucken im Munde verbunden sind. ⁶

The direct combination of spiritual and vulgar functions in human anatomy recalls the passages on phrenology from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (“Spirit is a bone”) and the adjacent reflections on the phallus, according to which a speculative insight is gained from the

⁴ barthes 11

⁵ Lacan, Jacques. “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, Norton 2002.

⁶ enzyklopädie, section 365

observation that the organ of procreation is also the organ of urination.⁷ Hegel's separation of eating and speaking, while intuitive, also surreptitiously aligns the kiss and thus the erotics of the mouth with language, without reflecting on the consequences of this association.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari identify a similar division of labor in the mouth in Kafka's writings. For them, the functions of speech deterritorialize the primary function (or "territoriality") of the mouth, namely eating. This deterritorialization does not dialectically separate the two kinds of traffic in the mouth but rather brings them into intimate relationships, where signs in language become edible and food becomes semiotic.

Rich or poor, each language always implies a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue and the teeth. The mouth, tongue and teeth find their primitive territoriality in food. In giving themselves over to the articulation of sounds, the mouth, tongue and teeth deterritorialize. Thus, there is a certain disjunction between eating and speaking, and even more, despite all appearances, between eating and writing. Undoubtedly, one can write while eating more easily than one can speak while eating, but writing goes further in transforming words into things capable of competing with food. Disjunction between content and expression. To speak, and above all to write, is to fast.⁸ The metabolic functions of the mouth are suspended in the formation of signs, and vice versa.

In analyzing the over-determination of the oral cavity, we are thus faced with the difficult relationship between Hegelian *Aufhebung* and Deleuzian disjunctive synthesis. The former maintains its threefold function of negating/storing/raising, while the latter forms a network "of distributions and of co-ordinates that serve as points of reference" for a rhizomatic system.⁹ One may pose the question of the "image of thought" implied in the kiss: is it a hierarchical raising up of the metabolic function of the mouth into language, or a horizontal diffusion of disjunctive functions into an erotic field in which neither of the two predominate?

⁷ phänomenologie, schädellehre

⁸ d&g, kafka, 19-20

⁹ anti-oedipus, part 1

The Hegelian alignment of the kiss with language must be considered with its maximum possible gravity. That is, it should be read as a claim (or at least the identification of a clue) regarding the symbolic character of sexual practice. Only the verticality of Hegel's division of labor in the mouth is questionable. This is due to a seemingly unavoidable fact of the kiss (and, for that matter, of speech), namely it also involves *spitting*, which Hegel unquestioningly groups with eating among the lower class of oral functions. Sigmund Freud was keenly aware of this. His attempt to differentiate perverse from normal sexual practices confronts him with a paradoxical disgust proper to the libidinal cathexis of bodily organs.

Die Verwendung des Mundes als Sexualorgan gilt als Perversion, wenn die Lippen (Zunge) der einen Person mit den Genitalien der anderen in Berührung gebracht werden, nicht aber, wenn beider Teile Lippenschleimhäute einander berühren. In letzterer Ausnahme liegt die Anknüpfung ans Normale. Wer die anderen wohl seit den Urzeiten der Menschheit gebräuchlichen Praktiken als Perversionen verabscheut, der gibt dabei einem deutlichen *Ekelgefühl* nach, welches ihn vor der Annahme eines solchen Sexualzieles schützt. Die Grenze dieses Ekels ist aber häufig rein konventionell; wer etwa mit Inbrunst die Lippen eines schönen Mädchens küßt, wird vielleicht das Zahnbürstchen desselben nur mit Ekel gebrauchen können, wenngleich kein Grund zur Annahme vorliegt, daß seine eigene Mundhöhle, vor der ihm nicht ekelt, reinlicher sei als die des Mädchens. Man wird hier auf das Moment des Ekels aufmerksam, welches der libidinösen Überschätzung des Sexualobjekts in den Weg tritt, seinerseits aber durch die Libido überwunden werden kann.¹⁰

Libidinal charging even of a conventionally normal, non-perverse object of the desire both causes the appearance of disgust and overcomes it, so that disgust emerges as a fleeting moment in the normal functioning of sexual desire (and becomes a sticking point for hysterical subjects). Eating, brushing one's teeth, kissing and speaking all involve the crossing of the oral mucus membrane. Disgust and libidinal desire emerge when the distinction between the "higher" or normally libidinally charged functions of the mouth and its "lower" or uncathected functions (i.e., Hegel's distinction) becomes momentarily unrecognizable. The double-sided

¹⁰ drei abhandlungen, "'sexuelle verwendung der lippen—mundschleimhaut"

nature of this non-distinction, i.e., the oscillation between disgust and desire, marks the paradoxical place for the eroticism of orality in the division of labor of the mouth.

The kiss marks a point of non-distinction between language and eating, or a suspension of their mutual suspension. In Hegel's terminology, it is a kind of spitting speech; in the coordinate system of Deleuze and Guattari, it is a kind of signification which does not fast, or a kind of devouring which is not without signification.

4.

[this reads like a thesis statement—unfortunate, since I'm trying to write without one...]

Characterizing more precisely the grey zone in which the kiss takes place requires a new formulation of the passage from orality to literacy than the one Walter J. Ong proposed as a model of media transformation in Greek antiquity.¹¹ Or rather, the implacability of the kiss on one side or the other of the distinction between the symbolic and the metabolic/natural demonstrates that the passage from Homeric orality to textual literacy cannot simply be considered as an historical event, but rather as the opening of a new zone of differentiation between orality and literacy.

A unique sub-tradition of literary history will thus become an archive of the kiss, insofar as it constitutes a series of instances where a literary technique disassembles, however briefly, the distinction between its own textual, literary nature and the oral gestures of speech. These texts dissect and technically reproduce the body and, in particular, the oral cavity. The mouth appears in them both as an assemblage of signs—organs and gestures, which symbolically

¹¹ orality and literacy

represent faculties of speech or emotions—as well as a station for the formation, circulation and manipulation of encoded signs and meanings.

The kiss functions both as a destructive and formative event in the narrative sequences of the texts. Its unpredictable and fungible narrative function directs attention to a modality of events in which minimal acts of signification trigger consequences on a macroscopic level of meaning. This discrepancy between the undecidable signification of the kiss and its narrative consequences—what one might call, following Michel Foucault, the microphysics of the kiss—undermine the semiotic status of the kiss. That is, the kiss never reaches the degree of signifying coherence necessary for a symbol. Instead, a kind of coordinate system emerges, composed of organs (tongue, lips, teeth), affective trajectories (love, hostility, desire) and signifiers (words, gestures) which are occasionally reassembled in an event of uncertain signification. These kisses do not establish a paradigm of representation (of sexuality, intimacy, whatever), rather they serially reconfigure the unbalanced system of orality according to changing historical circumstances. Their poeticity consists in the variability with which the kiss can be reassembled; their historicity in the invariability of trends observable in sequences of kisses over longer periods of time. The kisses of the nineteenth century follow a pattern corresponding more to a shift in semiotic paradigms than a development of a representation of intimacy or sexuality. There is no prestabilized discourse of the kiss; instead, the transformation of the circulation of signs becomes visible in the kiss.

The kiss is emblematic of what Johannes Kleinbeck has recently referred to as “tender trouble,” that is, the ways in which various discourses seek and fail to stabilize social relations on the basis of erotic relations.¹² Insofar as it marks a semiotic function of the body, a corporeal

¹² kleinbeck, geschichte der zärtlichkeit

dimension of language and an erotic potential in speech, the kiss embeds the question of tenderness (and violence) not only in social paradigms, but in the most fundamental transformations of communication. I will wager that the kiss registers many of the deepest possible ruptures in language in the last three centuries (at least in the German-speaking realm)—the transformation of literary language around 1800 after the Enlightenment, and the emergence of telecommunications and technical media around 1900.

5.

Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* contains the most notorious expression of the implacability of the kiss in German literature. After quite literally devouring her beloved, Achilles—sinking her teeth into him—she appeals to the poetic trope of lyrical rhyme to explain her action. “Küsse und Bisse, / das reimt sich.” The flagrant appeal to phonological proximity (which is itself dubious due to the slant rhyme) is undermined by the distinctness between the oral functions of kissing and devouring. In *Penthesilea*, the kiss is only possible in a poetic virtuality that emerges between the poles of eating and speaking. Penthesilea's rhetorical attempt to collapse the kiss into the act of devouring become repulsive or ironic.

Penthesilea.

—So war es ein Versehen. Küsse, Bisse,
Das reimt sich, und wer recht von Herzen liebt,
Kann schon das Eine für das Andre greifen.

[...]

Wie Manche, die am Hals des Freundes hängt,
Sagt wohl das Wort: sie lieb' ihn, o so sehr,
Daß sie vor Liebe gleich ihn essen könnte;
Und hinterher, das Wort beprüft, die Närrinn!
Gesättigt sein zum Eckel ist sie schon.
Nun, du Geliebter, so verfuhr ich nicht.
Sieh her: als ich an deinem Halse hieng,
Hab' ich's wahrhaftig Wort für Wort gethan;
Ich war nicht so verrückt, als es wohl schien.

Language is invoked to render the mouth an unpredictable, uncontrollable weapon.

Penthesilea only kisses Achilles to death—“Küßt' ich ihn todt?”—because she is not the master of her own lips, “[w]eil ich der raschen Lippe Herr nicht bin.”

Mastery of the lips and tongue however constitutes a central theme in the play.

Penthesilea forms a metaphorical system of orality in which all interactions between friends and enemies flow through or are governed by the organs of the mouth. The language of the drama establishes a distinction between the arts of speech, negotiation and persuasion and the irrational attraction between Penthesilea and Achilles. In their first discussion regarding Achilles's deviation from the strategic goals of the Greek attack on Troy, Odysseus opposes Antilochus's language to Achilles's foaming mouth. “Versuch's, o Antiloch, wenn's dir beliebt / Und sieh', was deine rednerische Kunst, / Wenn seine Lippe schäumt, bei ihm vermag.” The Greek soldiers, teichoscopically observing Penthesilea offstage, describe her enraged or lustful pursuit of Achilles as a drinking of the space separating her from him: “Wie sie, bis auf die Mäh'n' herabgebeugt, / Hinweg die Luft trinkt lechzend, die sie hemmt!” (405-407). She herself is twice referred to as “hungerheiß.” The final confrontation between Penthesilea and Achilles, in which he plans to submit to her and return to the land of the Amazons as her lover, is framed as a battle for the tongue of fate, the loser of which must lick the dust at the feet of the victor.

So fordert er zum Kampf, auf Tod und Leben,
 Noch einmal dich ins Feld hinaus, auf daß
 Das Schwerdt, des Schicksaals ehrne Zung' entscheide,
 In der gerechten Götter Angesicht,
 Wer würdig sei, du oder er, von beiden,
 Den Staub nach ihrem heiligen Beschluß,
 Zu seines Gegners Füßen aufzulecken.

The clever mastery of the tongue for which Odysseus is so well known is sidelined for a snarling contact between two parties whose status as enemies or friends (since, according to Odysseus, there is no third alternative¹³) will be decided by the sword, or the tongue of fate.

When Penthesilea has finally drunk all the distance between herself and Achilles (even if Achilles has carefully stage-managed the encounter), the master trope of the play finally takes on dramatic form. Namely, the two extremities meet. This is expressed in the figure of the bow (*Bogen*).¹⁴

Und spannt mit Kraft der Rasenden, sogleich
Den Bogen an, daß sich die Enden küssen,
Und hebt den Bogen auf und zielt und schießt,
Und jagt den Pfeil ihm durch den Hals; er stürzt.

The kiss denotes both the poetic form of the encounter and its retroactive poetic explication; its content, however, is a violent scene of devouring. Already at the beginning of the play, Odysseus describes the mutual fixation of Penthesilea and Achilles as a symmetrical, mutual devouring, almost a kiss with teeth: “Todt sinken die Verbißnen heut noch nieder, / Des einen Zahn im Schlund des anderen.” The suspension of distinctions promised by the kiss of extreme points—friend/enemy, hunter/hunted, speaking/eating, etc.—finally collapses in the end. The word or trope of the kiss is not embodied by a real kiss, but rather glides violently and uncontrollably into devouring.

One outcome of the system of orality is thus the fragile suspension of metabolic functions in erotic but entirely poetic kiss. The tense, precarious trope of the meeting of extremes in the kiss ultimately releases its potential energy in a violent (or poetic) return to one pole of the disjunction between eating and speaking.

¹³ carol jacobson, *The Rhetoric of Feminism*

¹⁴ on the *Bogen* as master signifier in the play, see chaouli, devouring metaphor

[In the longer version of this, I'd likely include a section on Hofmann's Sandmann and Ovid's Pygmalion (Metamorphoses). But I need to read the texts again. The kiss in Ovid's tale is an act of vivification, transforming the statue into a living woman. It also involves a clear demarcation between active and passive (man kisses statue/woman), living and dead, before and after, divine and human. In Hofmann's text, the kiss is more complex. The protagonist Nathaneal, in the process of being seduced by the woman-automaton Olimpia, has a split, doubled experience of the kiss: both a shudder of cold death and a feeling of coming to life. The distinction between organic life and mineral lifelessness and the loving affect necessary to make the latter into the former is reformatted to the distinction between life and its mechanized simulacrum, and the psychological manipulation necessary to bring a man to confuse the latter for the former. The divine gift of life becomes the technical achievement of "woman engineering" (Bernhard Siegert). Likewise, the protagonist is the one being kissed and seduced. This would be a second outcome of the coordinate system of the kiss around 1800: the production of the erotic image of life by the gods or machines. Compare this to the destruction of the symbol of life (Achilles is the sun) in *Penthesilea*...]

6.

After the Enlightenment, the kiss thus marked the construction of stable borders between shifting conceptual zones: life and death, friend and enemy, language and a pre- or exo-linguistic body. In the nineteenth century, the negotiation of these border regions in the oral cavity is expanded spatially. The nearly instantaneous circulation of language through space involved in telecommunication introduces a new dynamic of presence and absence into the

erotics of language. The oral cavity (and the human body in general) is not immune to the transformation of language initiated by the emergence of technical media.

Richard Wagner stages just such a kiss in *Parsifal*, i.e., a kiss in which the physical proximity of the bodies of the man and woman is overcome by the paradoxical absent presence of a distant wound. This wound belongs to Amfortas, the ruler of the Grail cult. It intervenes to prevent the seduction of Parsifal in the Zauberschloss of Klingsor by Kundry, who has taken on the appearance of Parsifal's departed mother. The libretto establishes a contestation of the nature of the kiss. Kundry frames the kiss as seductive gesture, promising Parsifal an incestuous reunion with his mother and the inheritance of his father's life force in sexual bliss.

Die Liebe lerne kennen,
die Gamuret umschloss,
als Herzeleids Entbrennen
ihn sengend überfloss!
Die Leib und Leben
einst dir gegeben,
der Tod und Torheit weichen muss,
sie beut dir heut,
als Muttersegens letzten Gruss,
der Liebe—ersten Kuss.

Parsifal's pure foolishness does not fully submit to Kundry's seduction. Instead, he reacts painfully and addresses Amfortas. He references a sensation of pain (of having the wound himself), of vision (seeing the wound bleed) and of hearing (the "Klage" of Grail). "Amfortas! Die Wunde! Die Wunde! / Sie brennt mir hier zur Seite! [...] Die Wunde sah ich bluten; / nun blutet sie in mir. [...] Es starrt der Blick dumpf auf das Heilsgefäß - das heil'ge Blut erglüht [...] Des Heilands Klage da vernehm ich, / die Klage - ach! Die Klage / um das entweihte Heiligtum." Instead of initiating sexual relations—in both senses of the term, i.e., of the sexual act and of the sexual differentiation of man and woman, mother and father, parents and children—the kiss

triggers an unexpected and inexplicable sensuous experience at a distance. The power of the Grail is to reformat the kiss; it no longer inscribes sexual difference into language, but rather broadcasts the wound in real time at a distance. The oral cavity is put into a disturbing proximity with the wound which cannot be closed and does not speak. The overdetermination of the oral cavity no longer accounts entirely for the effects of the kiss, and the libretto cannot explain the dramatic transformation expressed in the plot and the music.¹⁵ The kiss is no longer entirely in the mouth.

Franz Kafka has expressed this new circulation of the kiss in the context of telecommunication in a contemptuous reflection on the practice of postal communication in a letter to Milena Jesenská from March 1922. The act of writing letters turns both receiver and sender into ghosts, and the writing hand itself is guided by spectral third parties. “Die leichte Möglichkeit des Briefeschreibens muß—bloß theoretisch angesehen—eine schreckliche Zerrüttung der Seelen in die Welt gebracht haben. Es ist ja ein Verkehr mit Gespenstern und zwar nicht nur mit dem Gespenst des Adressaten, sondern auch mit dem eigenen Gespenst, das sich einem unter der Hand in dem Brief, den man schreibt, entwickelt.” Kafka describes the development of transport infrastructure as a countermeasure in the war between humans and spirits, in which telecommunications technologies have allowed the ghostly element to haunt all aspects of daily life. The ghosts live off of a parasitic or vampiric nourishment, namely “written kisses.”

Wie kam man nur auf den Gedanken, dass Menschen durch Briefe miteinander verkehren können! Man kann an einen fernen Menschen denken und man kann einen nahen Menschen fassen, alles andere geht über Menschenkraft. Briefe schreiben aber heißt, sich vor den Gespenstern entblößen, worauf sie gierig warten. *Geschriebene*

¹⁵ friedrich kittler has emphasized the failure of speech and sense to capture the forms of communication and sound which drive the action of Wagner’s operas. see *Weltatem, die wahrheit der technischen welt*

*Küsse kommen nicht an ihren Ort, sondern werden von den Gespenstern auf dem Wege ausgetrunken. Durch diese reichliche Nahrung vermehren sie sich ja so unerhört. Die Menschheit fühlt das und kämpft dagegen, sie hat, um möglichst das Gespenstische zwischen den Menschen auszuschalten, und den natürlichen Verkehr, den Frieden der Seelen zu erreichen, die Eisenbahn, das Auto, den Aeroplan erfunden, aber es hilft nichts mehr, es sind offenbar Erfindungen, die schon im Absturz gemacht werden, die Gegenseite ist soviel ruhiger und stärker, sie hat nach der Post den Telegraphen erfunden, das Telephon, die Funkentelegraphie. Die Geister werden nicht verhungern, aber wir werden zugrundegehn.*¹⁶

Kafka expresses a new variety of eroticism brought about by the proliferation of technical media, namely the possibility of constant communication at a distance. The kiss has lost its place as a marker of the distinction between the metabolic and symbolic functions of the mouth, but has regained a new status as the inscription of physical intimacy into the new media of communication. The silent speaking lips of the kiss are replaced by the vampire's bite of technical media. The kiss is becoming a sign around 1900, one that does not circulate efficiently from sender to receiver but is intercepted along the way by a parasite.¹⁷

For both Kafka and Wagner, this kiss is not entirely metaphorical. It is housed in metaphors—of war with the machines, of religious experience, of good and evil, etc.—but it executes a new operation, namely the reconfiguration of the border (what Lacan calls a cut where the drive takes over) between the metabolic and symbolic functions of bodily organs. The place of the kiss within the dynamic of speech and consumption in the oral cavity is deterritorialized, introduced into the space and time of telecommunications and electronics. Accordingly, it no longer mediates differences (sexual, biological, anthropological, etc.) as it did around 1800. Instead, the kiss mediates the differences between the now traditional eroticism of spoken language and the new erotic tensions introduced by technical media.

¹⁶ xyz, emphasis added

¹⁷ siegert, cacophony or communication

7.

One of the first ever short cinematic films to circulate widely in the US was a kiss, recorded by Thomas Edison in 1896 in his *Black Maria*. It is borrowed from a musical play called *The Widow Jones*. Linda Williams describes the kiss as the dawn both of a unique cinematic symbol and of a mode of proto-pornographic display: “A stage kiss if ever there was one, this kiss demonstrates a divided attention; the actors are compelled simultaneously to face each other and to face front. Something of this divided attention persists in all representations of sex acts, torn as they are between the necessary close contact between bodies and the compulsion to make that contact visible.”¹⁸ The viewer takes the position of Kafka’s parasite, receiving the kiss exchanged by the actors on screen.

¹⁸ Linda Williams “Of Kisses and Ellipses: The Long Adolescence of American Movies,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Winter 2006), pp. 288-340



In 1926, Virginia Woolf goes to see *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and leaves with a new impression of what cinema can be and do. In her essay “The Cinema,” she expresses frustration with the appropriation of the narrative form of the novel by film. The affective force of Tolstoy’s tales is not captured by contemporary attempts to make his characters visible or his prose recognizable. “All the famous novels of the world with their well known characters and their famous scenes only asked to be put on the films. What could be easier, what could be simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results have been disastrous to both.

The alliance is unnatural.”¹⁹ The passions of his characters more than anything disappoint. Their kisses are only clichéd images.

The cinema proceeds, ‘Anna falls in love with Vronsky’—that is to say the lady in black velvet falls into the arms of a gentleman in uniform and they kiss with enormous succulence, great deliberation, and infinite gesticulation on a sofa in an extremely well appointed library. So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world. So we spell them out in words of one syllable written in the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy. A kiss is love. A smashed chair is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse. None of these things has the least connection with the novel that Tolstoy wrote and it is only when we give up trying to connect the pictures with the book that we guess from some scene by the way—a gardener mowing the lawn outside, for example, or a tree shaking its branches in the sunshine—what the cinema might do if it were left to its own devices.

The filmic image of the kiss thus becomes for Woolf the mark of a failed relationship between the narrative and prosaic forms of the novel and the possibilities of cinema.²⁰ The kiss as a dynamic mobilization of the erotics of orality or of the suture of technical media and organic embodiment thus disappear in the cinematic kiss. The kiss which symbolizes love loses its unique eros.

The German cinematic director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, however, has given reason to doubt the monolithic nature of this legacy of the kiss as fossilized cinematic sign. He has filmed experimental versions of two of the theatrical works which are fundamental to the development of the kiss in the 19th century: *Penthesilea* and *Parsifal*. Syberberg’s *Parsifal* is well-known. Notoriously, he does not represent Amfortas’s wound as a lesion on the actor’s body, but rather as a disembodied, independent mass, lying obscenely open on a pillow. We have seen how the wound has affected Parsifal at a distance; Syberberg thus incorporates distance (what

¹⁹ Woolf, the cinema

²⁰ Of the latter she notes: “For what characteristics does thought possess which can be rendered visible to the eye without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has also an inveterate tendency especially in moments of emotion to make images run side by side with itself, to create a likeness of the thing thought about, as if by so doing it took away its sting, or made it beautiful and comprehensible.”

you might call tele-sensation or tele-affectation) into Amfortas's woundedness as well, making action at a distance into the primary characteristic of the wound.

In addition to this incorporation of distance, Syberberg introduces an unexpected formal and narrative dynamic into the kiss: after the kiss with Kundry and the infliction of the wound in Parsifal, the young male actor portraying Parsifal is replaced by a young, chaste, severe female actor. The voice remains the same, as a result of the lip-synch technology utilized throughout the production. Only the body of the actor has now shifted. The resistance of Klingsor's magic, the taming of Kundry, the restitution of the Grail to the Grail cult and the re-establishment of sexual difference—all these functions of Parsifal's pure foolishness are now executed as a product of this pass through sexual difference in the kiss. Because the voice remains unchanged, the cinematic kiss does not constitute a transformation of orality; but the function of the kiss as image is transformed, insofar as the images of the actors are destabilized. The kiss does not retain its status as an image (an image of the mother, an image of seduction, a pornographic image, etc.), but rather emerges as a technique for the transformation of images, a montage or cut experienced in real time.

Syberberg's *Penthesilea* takes this becoming-woman of the actor in a different direction. Instead of a transformation of the actor, the female protagonist takes on all functions of the entire dramatic apparatus—Edith Clever is the only actress and plays all roles. This leads to a univocity of the dramatic exchanges which is emphasized by the function of reading. Clever holds the text in book form for much of the film and reads from it directly, while dramatically acting out certain parts. *Penthesilea* thus becomes a unique mix of *Lesedrama* and film. This mix is out of joint; as she reads, Clever destroys the text. She tears pages from the book and lights them on fire; she wets them and uses them to cover the surface of a marble

bust in an apparent attempt at *papier-mâché*. When she arrives at the climactic *Küsse/Bisse* monologue, she holds a page from the text in each hand. One she kisses, and one she bites. The kiss and its apparently identical twin, the devouring bite, thus come to destroy the lineage of textuality that Woolf considers to be the unhappy heritage of cinema.

