Cinematic chronotopes: affective encounters in space-time
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now
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Navigating Cinematic Time

Fig. 2.1-2.6: Opening sequence Zusje (Robert Jan Westdijk, 1995)

Daantje: Switch it off.
Martijn: Impossible.
Daantje: Why?
Martijn: I want to record the way you react to me.
Daantje: Well... This is it. You can switch it off now.
Martijn: (laughing) [...]
Daantje: You're frightening me.
Martijn: Why? ...Or did you start believing in your own lies?

Thus begins Robert Jan Westdijk’s film Zusje (NL, Little Sister, 1995 – see fig. 2.1-2.6). The film is seemingly shot from the perspective of Martijn’s home-video camera, with which he travels from London to Amsterdam to make a film about his little
sister. Though we hardly ever see Martijn, we hear him commenting on most of what he films. His obsessive attempt to capture his sister's everyday life triggers an almost tangible tension that pushes their shared traumatic childhood experience to the surface. This process is strengthened by the incorporation of 8mm home movies that function as flashbacks of their childhood, threatening some ominous disclosure.

Although not branded as belonging to a particular movement, like the Danish Dogme 95 films, Zusje can be considered an example of that international trend of mainly European low-budget films that use mobile (digital) video technology to comment on the ambiguous status of the photochemical index. This trend emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s, more or less simultaneously with the advent of digital image technologies, and subsided quickly thereafter. Titles include the Danish Dogme films Festen (The Celebration, Vinterberg, 1998) and Idioterne (The Idiots, Von Trier, 1998), other European arthouse films such as Kutzooi (Bloody Mess – NL, Crijns, 1995), C’est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous (Man Bites Dog – BE, Belvaux et al., 1992), Rosetta (BE, Dardenne Br., 1998) and Planet Alex (DE, Schüppel, 2001), as well as American independents like Time Code (Figgis, 2000), Elephant (Van Sant, 2003) and The Blair Witch Project (Myrick & Sanchez, 1999). What these films obviously share, despite their many generic and even technological differences, is first and foremost their mode of filming: the use of an often unsteady handheld film or video camera which closely follows the characters and action.

In this chapter I propose the term “handheld aesthetic” for such films’ particular aesthetic vision. When I speak of a handheld camera I am not referring primarily to the presence of a hand holding the camera as such. After all, a camera mounted on a dolly or tripod is also often manually operated, but not handheld. Rather, I seek to explore the construction of a notion of handheld-ness, connoting authenticity, authorial presence, and corporeal engagement. Often, the two senses of “handheld” coincide, so that what is generally perceived as a handheld-camera shot is in fact shot with a handheld camera device that requires the presence and corporeal engagement of someone holding it. I speak of a new aesthetics when referring to the ostensible use of handheld equipment from the 1990s onwards in particular, because in my view these films put forward a distinct spatial and temporal configuration that feeds on the viewer’s spatio-temporal disorientation within the film’s diegesis, as well on his or her impulse to anticipate what is yet to come. This effect is enhanced by or sustains the films’ pursuit of a new mode of authenticity, or rather their faux-realism and the performed immediacy that...
is characteristic for this aesthetic. As such, this aesthetic helps me articulate the second juncture of my project, i.e., the “now.”

With regard to the cinematic venture of the Warhol exhibition, I have argued that the visitor-viewer is both embedded in and situated by a space-time continuum that encompasses images and world. This situation, I suggest here, is not unique to a multimedia exhibition, but is more generally in keeping with our contemporary world of omnipresent storage media. Rather than claim that the specific museal multi-media installation of the Warhol exhibition, with its moving images on multiple screens and its mobile spectators, must be defined in opposition to traditional so-called theatrical cinema with its single-screen moving images and static viewers, I maintain that the feature films considered here as examples of handheld aesthetics situate and affect the viewer in significantly similar ways. Whereas the focus of the previous chapter concerned the intensified “here” of our encounter with the cinematic, the emphasis in this chapter stresses the sense of a thick “now” that is negotiated by means of this particular aesthetics. In the course of my discussion I will take up the wish expressed in the previous chapter to further develop an understanding of cinema that accounts for its renegotiation of its spatio-temporal markers, as well as the ways it resituates the embodied subject.

As this chapter’s title indicates, I propose to pair the conception of cinematic time with the spatial metaphor of navigation. Navigation here is not so much understood in line with its usage in debates on digital-media practices, as the technical possibility of – or even need for – user intervention as a distinct feature of an information space such as a hypertext or a game. Nor is it understood in strict opposition to narrative. Rather, in pairing navigation with temporality, I wish to refer to the simultaneity of mapping out time and mapping with time that I believe is inherent to the cinematic practices I am interested in here, and thus has a strong impact on our engagement with them. For even though most of these films are constructed as irreversible linear narratives with clear beginnings, middles, and ends, and do not allow the user to intervene within the film’s plot, I argue that they nonetheless operate on a variety of temporal planes and appeal to a multi-cursive, non-linear conception of time. In doing so, the films, I contend, draw attention to cinema’s capability to envision time as something other than linear transformation; as something that is simultaneously perceived and conceived in our encounter with cinematic practices such as those under investigation here.

To frame this aesthetic historically, I will first briefly reflect on handheld camera usage within predominantly documentary and avant-garde practices in the first
half of the 20th century. I will argue that many of the concerns that prevail within (the discourses on) handheld aesthetics today find their roots in earlier discussions and usages of the handheld camera technique. I will highlight three of these concerns, each in relation to a different media practice, namely authenticity vis-à-vis documentary, reflexivity vis-à-vis avant-garde films, and corporeality vis-à-vis the handheld camera’s difference from the Steadicam.

The analytical part that follows is divided into three sections, each dedicated to a specific film and titled after the kind of encounter each generates. In the first section, Authentic Encounters, I will look into what handheld aesthetics’ pursuit of a new mode of authenticity entails in terms of the films’ temporal configuration. Through an analysis of the Dutch film Zusje I will demonstrate that the films dislodge us from our sense of “now” by duplicating it within the diegesis. The now that is generated, however, is highly fragmented, multiple, disconcerting, and ultimately, I will argue, inaccessible to the viewer.

To clarify this process I will then, in Affective Encounters, consider the specific ways that this handheld aesthetics engages us affectively, using the Belgian film Rosetta as a case in point. My starting point is the observation that the handheld camera’s close proximity to the action instigates what Giuliana Bruno has called a disorienting space-affect, a disorientation that seems to be counterbalanced by the performed immediacy that is characteristic of this aesthetics. The “now” made available to us, however, is accessible to the viewer only when and if that viewer navigates the film with and within the time of affect. The film puts the viewer-listener in a state of anticipatory alertness that is indeterminately linked to the past but nonetheless takes shape in the present. Such temporality of emergence is indicative of the thickness of the “now” of our contemporary encounter with the cinematic. Incidentally, this thickness is also suggestive of the viewers’ engagement with this aesthetic as a body in motion, even if seated in an auditorium or in front of an LCD screen.

In the section Traumatic Encounters, finally, I take up Thomas Elsaesser’s understanding of trauma as a “negative performative,” and suggest that it is through the temporality of trauma that we can come to understand some of the paradoxes inherent in this temporal thickness of the “now” that characterizes our encounter with the cinematic today, a “now” that brings together past, present, and future, motion and stillness, the instant and a multitude. The case study here is the Danish film Idioterne, which, despite its apparent spatial and temporal continuity, radically breaks with every suggestion of logical coherence. The result is a (latent) lack of temporal orientation that is comparable to the spatial disorientation caused
by the camera’s spatially limited point of view. I argue that by navigating the film with and within the time of trauma, we are challenged to renegotiate a sense of self in relation to a potentially mediated here-and-now that is no longer necessarily knowable.63

Handheld Histories: Authenticity, Reflexivity, Corporeality

Handheld cinematic devices are not unique to this specific historical moment, and early examples of the handheld technique can be found as far back as cinema’s silent era. Although the earliest movie cameras had been too bulky to be operated by a single person, several cameras introduced in the 1920s could be operated by hand: examples include the Newman-Sinclair, the Eyemo, and the De Vry. Instead of being hand-cranked, these cameras contained a spring motor that could manually be pre-wound to last continuously through a roll of film. Because such cameras could only hold a short length of film, however, they were of limited use for fiction filmmaking.64

The emergence of sound in the late 1920s and the 1930s necessitated that movie cameras be further motorized in order to maintain a constant film speed, as well as encased. They were also encased so that the mechanism’s sound was dampened. This resulted in a generation of weighty cameras, like the Mitchell BNC, that more or less precluded handheld usage and dictated the limits of the “reality” that could be (re)presented onscreen. (Allen and Gomery, 1985: 220) The introduction of innovative lightweight reflex cameras, such as the Eyemos, Arriflex, and Cameflex, made professional in the years surrounding World War II, brought about a radical change in terms of portability. (1985: 221) With motors integrated into a handle supporting the camera’s body, these cameras facilitated (though they did not dictate) easy handheld usage, as evinced by the rise of several documentary and avant-garde movements in the 1950s and 60s that, each in its own way, made an effort to liberate the moving image from the constraints of the heavy static camera: free cinema in Britain, candid eye in Canada, direct cinema and the New American Cinema Group in the United States, and cinema vérité and the nouvelle vague in France.65 Despite apparent differences in style and viewpoints between the various movements and individual directors, these trends cannot be conflated on grounds other than the handheldness they shared.
The films of the cinema vérité and direct cinema movements were deeply embedded in a rhetoric of authenticity that partially derived from the shaky hand-held imagery of these films. They embraced and reinforced this claim to authenticity in their hyperbolic rhetoric of proclaimed spontaneous observation, anchored in self-imposed methodological constraints, e.g., no tripods, no scripts, no artificial lights. With the rejection of the traditional staged camera set-up, the cameraman’s immediate and often improvised gestures became ever more important. The idea was to be fully engrossed in the observed world – either “without” intervention (direct cinema) or through provocation (cinema vérité) – that is, to allow the camera(man) to capture that moment that reveals the thing one could not otherwise see. The American observational documentaries in particular were especially organized around a set of strategies, Paul Arthur has argued, in which spontaneous performances of both subjects and cameramen are embedded in, first, a register of resistance to the conventions of both Hollywood and the traditional documentary, and second, a rhetoric of authenticity, i.e., the images’ proclaimed neutrality and their openness to multiple perspectives.

Yet despite the often-cited claim that these documentaries changed the way human events are reported and recorded, their rhetoric of neutrality and authenticity in particular was soon condemned by post-1968 film scholars who, as Jeanne Hall puts it, started to “call into question the very nature of the cinematic sign.” (1991: 27) Far from being unbiased or neutral, Arthur claims, these films – in agreement with the political climate of their time – valorized the political progressive-ness of the cinematic, not by mobilizing the personal as political, but rather by constructing “everyday life as a temporally distended preserve of idiosyncratic behavior.” (1993: 112) This is evinced by the celebrities-as-individuals at the center of many of these films, such as John F. Kennedy (Primary), Bob Dylan (Dont Look Back) and Paul Anka (Lonely Boy). Apart from offering a locus of performance that justifies the presence of the camera, these celebrities endowed direct-cinema filmmakers with established identities and role expectations needed to mask their interventions. For, rather than providing insight into character, the manifestation of “personhood” lent force to a heightened sense of authenticity and immediacy embodied in the restless long take. (1993: 122) What was at stake here, Arthur contends, was not so much “neutrality but mastery: how to realize the ideal performance for image/sound recorders in the theatricalized role of ‘pure observer,’” or, one might add, the provocative interrogator. (1993: 118–123) Direct cinema’s virtual metaphysics of presence (indeed a “reality effect” in Roland Barthes’ sense) is therefore grounded in an almost transcendent belief in technology, in the very
performance of recording itself, and in the professed accumulation of decontextualized “non-signifying details” open to the perceptual freedom of the viewer. (1993: 118–123)

Mastery – against its potential loss in the face of the unanticipated – is precisely what was at issue for the young directors who embraced the portable lightweight cameras with sound synchronization for making feature films in the postwar years. By the end of the 1950s, the handheld technique was used most notably in the various emerging New Waves that revolted against previous generations of filmmakers. The looseness afforded by the new technological possibilities – not only handheld cameras and direct sound, but also reflex viewfinders and light-sensitive film stock – gave the films a rough documentary look. In addition, the handheld camera’s spatial navigation and its potential incorporation into the action of the film itself, which was unthinkable with a Dolly, reinforced the impression of real life.

Frequently employing cinéma-vérité techniques, American underground artists started to make films that were – to quote the New American Cinema Group’s manifesto – “rough, unpolished, but alive,” such as Shirley Clarke’s *The Connection* (1961) and John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1957, 1959). The latter film, in which a gang of street-smart thugs confronts a modern art exhibition, is perhaps most exemplary of the embrace of the handheld camera by this generation of filmmakers to develop an aesthetics based on (suggested) spontaneity and improvisation. In France, too, nouvelle vague directors – for whom in particular “hand-held cameras served to foreground authorial presence” – adopted the handheld camera in their attempts to break with the formulaic and studio-bound “quality” tradition of their cinematic forebears. They wanted to develop an audiovisual language comparable to writing that could fulfill their belief in cinema as a medium of personal expression. Here the handheld camera technique did not operate in a vacuum, but was part of a range of strategies aimed at generating a new mode of address, including the use of complex camera movements; on-location shooting and interior staging; shooting in close proximity to the characters; zooms to generate a sense of immediacy; long takes, often combined with abrupt, fragmentary or discontinuous editing; and, finally, narratives built around chance events whose unforeseen turns and mishaps prompt a visual rush.

Despite vast variations and differences in their work, what these filmmakers had in common – and, incidentally, what called for the historical survey I am writing here – was a responsiveness to cinema’s history, includes its technological history. Their varying film styles were all highly self-referential, i.e., they reflected
on their own emerging conditions and history. Out of this awareness, writes Jean Douchet, addressing the French New Wave in particular, “a new and unexpected style exploded across the screen and added a sense of buoyancy to otherwise serious issues.” (1998: 205)

The popularity of the handheld camera technique dipped in the 1970s, a drop that coincided with the introduction of yet another mobile cinematic device, i.e., the Steadicam, which responded to Hollywood’s demand for continuity, a clear limitation of handheld camerawork. Like the handheld equipment used by direct-cinema and New Wave directors, and in contrast to the Dolly’s massive physicality, the Steadicam – introduced in 1975 by Garrett Brown and most commonly known from Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) – was flexible, easily brought up to speed, extremely mobile and responsive. The combination of its relative lightness and its physical detachment from the hands and eyes of the operator, gave rise to a specific scopic regime that was completely different from the handheld aesthetics I am referring to here.69

The difference resides especially in the camera’s detachment from the body, or rather, the hands of the operator. Where the massiveness of the Dolly and the instability of the handheld camera both anchor the presence of human agents behind the camera’s movement (investing it with the intentionality and historical reflection of a director), Jean-Pierre Geuens contends, the Steadicam, by contrast, captures and presents its images with a clinical distance. (1993) Ostensibly emanating from a non-space and timeless time, the Steadicam’s disembodied vision no longer reflects the production of a human agent. As such, Geuens suggests, it dispenses with the subjective enunciation of the cinematic author and virtually sucks the life out of the image’s former self. Conversely, the crystallization of time through the intentionality of camera movement – of either the Dolly or the handheld camera – makes us aware of our self-presence, as, in the words of Vivian Sobchack, it is “perceived existentially and experientially as *bodily perception* and *expression*, as a *being* and *becoming* in the world, as intending toward that world or towards its own acts of being and becoming.”70

This brings me to the 1990s and the new handheld aesthetic I see emerge there. In the 1990s there was an enormous increase in the use of often relatively cheap, (high-resolution) digital video equipment, most notably in European art-house films, although this technological circumstance doesn’t always pertain: of the films I will be discussing in more detail below, only *Idioterne* was shot using a dv-camera. *Zusje* and *Rosetta* were shot using different formats: *Zusje* was shot on Betacam, and *Rosetta* on super 16. The latter film in fact only appropriates a
video look, remediating, if you like, video into and onto 16mm film. How, then, should we frame the use of handheld equipment in this specific moment against its earlier usages?

What this brief historical survey indicates is that the discourses surrounding earlier usages of the handheld camera mainly revolve around three major topics: the asserted authenticity of the imagery (here discussed in relation to documentary), its appeal as a medium of or means to (self)reflexivity (as discussed in relation to the avant-garde), and finally its foregrounding of corporeality as an expression of intentionality (here addressed in its contrast to the Steadicam). As will become clear in the following sections, these notions of authenticity, reflexivity, and corporeality still prevail in the handheld aesthetics of the 1990s, when the use of handheld camera techniques reach a new state of vibrancy and richness exceeding anything that had come before. I will argue, however, that even though the conceptual pillars of the debate have largely remained the same, the content they are given has been subjected to a radical transformation that is in tune with contemporary cinema’s renegotiation of its spatio-temporal markers. As I will demonstrate in the section on Idioterne in particular, today’s handheld aesthetics takes an overtly ironic stance towards its own self-reflexivity, instead of taking seriously its ability to reflect on cinema’s history and language. Mastery here thus devolves to mockery. In the section on Rosetta, moreover, I will argue that the performative corporeality of handheld aesthetics no longer primarily serves to draw attention to the intentionality of the director, but rather – especially in its coupling with a changed notion of authenticity – has come to foreground the problem of spatial and temporal orientation in our encounter with technologically mediated sounds and images.

Before I return to the issues of corporeality and reflexivity, however, I will first look at handheld aesthetics’ new claim for authenticity. The claim of authenticity in the 1960s was embedded in a rhetoric of truth and verisimilitude. But the 1990s handheld aesthetics’ pursuit of authenticity is actually quite ambiguous, and is inflected by the demise of photochemical indexicality. As Caroline Bainsbridge remarks with regards to Idioterne, “The hand-held camera style in itself becomes iconographic of a particular drive towards authenticity in the context of cultures of postmodernism.” (2007: 110) For what is specific about the gritty handheld aesthetics of the 1990s, states Thomas Levin in “Rhetoric of the Temporal Index,” is its revival in the context of the loss of what he calls the “referential surplus value” of photo-chemical indexicality. (2002: 584) One rhetorical consequence of the post-indexical image, writes Levin, is cinema’s adoption of the rhetoric of television,
whose major category (its base and reference), according to Mary Ann Doane, is not space but time. (1990: 122) Where cinema’s impoverished spatial rhetoric resided in its photochemical indexicality and the coupling of pro-filmic and narrative space, television’s temporal indexicality consists in its insistence on presentness, the instantaneous and, indeed, the event. The ambiguous prevalence of the temporal index, I will argue in the next section on Zusje, is what lies at the core of handheld aesthetics’ claim for authenticity; it forces the viewer to navigate time differently than in traditional cinema.

**Authentic Encounters: Zusje (Little Sister)**

A recurring feature of the films under consideration is the camera’s “subjective” point of view, which becomes particularly clear in the example from Zusje I mentioned in this chapter’s opening section. In Zusje (1995) we see the world from start to finish through the camera’s I/Eye of the narrator(s) from within the story. This mode conveys a very intimate vision of the diegetic world, in which direct address (a person looking straight into the camera) is not so much a possibility as it is the norm. Rather than appropriating a documentary look, the film adopts a different cinematic style – that of the amateur home video, which also connotes authenticity but of a radically different kind than the traditional documentary film.

Home movies are marked by what renowned home video archivist and filmmaker Peter Forgács has referred to as “vernacular narrative imagery.” (2007: 49–51) That is to say: they are rites of narration under permanent construction, which include all kinds of filmic mistakes, perfect imperfections, random sequences, and shifts in time and space. Although Zusje is structured like a traditional feature film, all its visual imagery is narratively motivated, meaning that all images (except the opening credits) stem from within the film’s diegesis, either from Martijn’s (Romijn Coonen) camera or, later, also from a second video camera (operated alternately by his little sister Daantje [Kim van Kooten] and her boyfriend Ramon [Roeland Fernhout]), or from the old 8mm footage that intersects the film’s suggested “live” streaming.

One consequence of this cinematic trope, which is not unique to Zusje but typical for the handheld aesthetics of the 1990s in general, is that it generates a sensation both of being there and of bearing witness to the film’s coming into being, to its very process of construction. In other words, its “nowness.”

Although not, strictly speaking, a “live” film, I argue that the film’s performed immediacy is characteristic of the handheld aesthetics under investigation here. In
using the term performed immediacy I take my cue from Stephanie Marriott, who
in her book *Live Television* observes that although only a modest amount of televi-
son’s output actually is broadcast (and received) live, liveness is often considered
to be a - if not the - defining feature of the medium of television. (2007: 49) To
understand this discrepancy Marriott distinguishes three discrete strands in the
conception of television in which liveness is considered to be its defining charac-
teristic. (41-48) Whereas the first two definitions of liveness – either as a property
of television’s scanning beam technology (e.g. Zettl, 1978), or as instantaneous and
endless flow (e.g. Williams, 1975) – imply that all television is live in essence, the
third understanding of television as immediacy treats liveness “as effect, rather
than a concrete question of time and space.” (Marriott, 2007: 53) Though not real-
ized on every occasion, this immediacy effect is enhanced by the “propensity in
certain genres at least, to shoot events ‘as live,’” (2007: 53) for example by means of
direct address, spatial remoteness, the use of continuous takes, or by what Paddy
Scannel has referred to as the *pervasive effect* of broadcast television, i.e., the effect
whereby the duration of the captured event is equivalent to the duration of its
reception, suggesting real-time duration.74

In *Zusje*, this performed immediacy is mainly achieved through the appar-
et prevalence of what Thomas Levin has called the temporal index, which he
describes as:

> an image whose truth is supposedly “guaranteed” by the fact
> that it is happening in so-called “real-time” and thus – by virtue
> of its technical conditions of production – is supposedly not
> susceptible to post-production manipulation. (2002: 592)

Yet unlike the continuous flow of surveillant real-time, the condensed real-time of
the suggested home-video *Zusje* is decided upon via the click of the button. Real-
time here thus comes to connote the real-time of the performance, of the event of
filming that has fractured the time of the filmed event. With hindsight, what seem
to be randomly captured moments “culled from the continuous flow of time” add
up to what appears to be a private history that nonetheless encompasses only
select moments of the subjects’ waking lives. For this reason Forgács speaks of the
private film as a “paradoxical mirror.” (2007: 51) The small portable camera seems
to erase the gap between the filmed event and the event of filming, which is ac-
centuated in *Zusje* by the frequent looks into the camera that draw attention to the
apparent lack of distinction between the camera and its operator.75 (see fig. 2.7-2.9)
Such looks are projected into a future that coincides with the present moment of our encounter, from the perspective of which the “local time” of the look itself is marked as the past. (Forgács, 2007: 53) Yet the frequent looks into the camera are not targeted at an anticipated audience, conforming to the default value of direct address in live television, nor do they serve to short-circuit the fictionality of the film, conforming to the default value of direct address in fiction. Seemingly in line with the default value of direct address in home videos, the looks appear to call attention to the lack of distinction between the camera and its fictional operators (Martijn, Daantje, Ramon). However, an awareness of the film’s fictionality instantly breaks down this illusion, which leaves the looks to draw attention to nothing but the performative presence of the camera itself.

The suggestion of real-time recording in Zusje is further emphasized toward the end of the film by the introduction of a second camera, with which the performance of the first camera is put under surveillance. We actually get to see big brother Martijn filming his little sister Daantje. (see fig. 2.10-2.12) The use of sound in the film also enhances the suggestion of real-time duration. As Babette Mangolte stresses, the inability to separate sound from image is one of the greatest hallmarks and burdens of the shift from analogue to especially early-electronic and digital-recording technologies. (2002) In Zusje sound and image are interdependent. The sound fully matches the visual imagery; there are no smooth audio transitions between one shot and another, no apparent added extra-diegetic sounds, and
each visual jump-cut is accompanied by a sonic one, anchoring the temporal index of the image through sound.

In its incarnation of the home video, then, handheld aesthetics’ claim for authenticity, which is governed by the rhetoric of the temporal index, is ambiguous, for it does point, at least in part, towards the feasibility of its own fabrication. In fact, Zusje shows us not only that images, even home videos, can be both manipulative and revealing, but also how they can become such. To persuade Daantje to drop her boyfriend Ramon, who is an obstacle in Martijn’s quest to gain narrative mastery over his childhood trauma, Martijn shows Daantje a clip of film in which Ramon appears to be in the company of another woman. Daantje initially kicks Ramon out, but later in the film she discovers that Martijn has deceived her by editing together unrelated – and for the viewer initially unseen – footage.

In contrast, in the film’s final scene the second camera, now no longer operated by a human hand, is placed on a cupboard or table in such a way as to witness the reenactment of the traumatic moment captured on 8mm film when Martijn and Daantje were caught in bed together, naked and in a seemingly compromising position, after which the boy was sent off to boarding school. In front of the small surveillance handycam it turns out, however, that Martijn has been falsely accused of abusing his sister, because Daantje had actually challenged him just to lay on top of her without his clothes on. The reenactment thus discredits the 8mm footage that both the protagonists and the viewer have taken to be a faithful representation of real events, revealing it to be fragmentary and therefore biased. It seems to do so without further questioning the credibility of the temporal index. In fact it is by means of the contrast between possible manipulation and eventual revelation that the reliability of the temporal index is ultimately validated, or so the film suggests, since only in real-time can the truth be revealed. The reenactment scene, however, also hints at the opacity of the film’s temporal map. It does so because it conflates repetition with revision – a revision not of the pro-filmic real but of the 8mm footage – in an attempt to track down the recollection of the “originary” event. The scene further suggests that memory and identity can be (re)programmed by navigating time cinematographically, that is, through (instant) replay, reenactment, and montage.

The apparent real-time, or performed immediacy, in Zusje is thus disjointed and imbued with multiple temporalities. Moreover, despite the film’s apparent offer of a reorientation in the “now” to compensate for the spatial disorientation
caused by the camera’s extreme mobility, the “now” it performs remains remark-
ably inaccessible to us. Instead, it primarily serves to thrust us forward in anxious
anticipation. This will become particularly clear in what follows, an analysis of the
film *Rosetta*.

**Affective Encounters: *Rosetta***

Take-off. A girl dressed in a factory worker’s uniform walks steadily through a nar-
row corridor. A wobbly handheld camera follows her closely from behind, staying
within close proximity. Left, right, a slamming door, a flight down a staircase. Then
a rapid maneuvering through a labyrinth of machinery, jump-cut after jump-cut,
as the camera cannot keep up with the woman’s pace. And finally, a violent strug-
gle, captured only with difficulty by the devoted camera, between the girl and the
factory manager as she tries to resist being released. Time-out. Heavy breathing.

![Fig. 2.13-2.18: Opening sequence Rosetta (Jean-Luc and Pierre Dardenne, 1999)](image)

This is the opening scene of *Rosetta* (1998, see fig. 2.13-2.18), directed by the
acclaimed Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. The film tells the story
of the seventeen-year-old Rosetta (Emilie Dequenne), who desperately attempts to
lead a normal life despite harsh circumstances: stuck in a trailer camp with her
alcoholic mother, she is often bereft of food and money, and, unwilling to accept
charity, she cannot find a proper job that lasts for more than a few days. The only
thing that keeps her going is her anger, which is mirrored in the unsteady use of
the handheld camera that is always kept close to her body. In this way the film es-

tablishes a link between the socio-economic hope and despair of the protagonist,
and the film’s confining mode of address.
Although the film won the Palme D’Or at Cannes in 1999, online reviews of professional and non-professional critics reveal that the film was not only praised but also fiercely criticized upon release. Most reviewers refer to the unsteady camera and its extreme proximity to the main character. The camera, one critic remarks, is “often so tight that we can’t see what it is Rosetta is doing.” (Urban, 2000) Whereas the rickety camera-work of the relatively lighthearted Zusje was mostly met with giggles and even loud outbursts of laughter by viewers, user comments refer to Rosetta as being “intimate” (Guthmann, 1999) and “immediate,” (Smith, 2004) but also “claustrophobic” and “suffocating,” “disorientingly close,” even “dizzying,” (Travers, 2001) or “sickening.” (Edelstein, 1999).

Others suggest that despite the camera’s closeness to Rosetta we are hardly if ever allowed access to her feelings, other than her visibly vented frustration. We remain emotionally detached, not through rational distancing practices (as in a post-Brechtian cinema) but rather through immersion in a sensation, which, according to one commentor, has a forceful effect:

Aside from enhancing the immediacy of [Rosetta’s] experiences [the film] forces us into her physical plane, intensifying her determination and suffering. (Smith, 2004)

What is lost because of the camera’s close proximity to Rosetta is first and foremost our sense of spatial overview and orientation, a sensation that Giuliana Bruno, in The Atlas of Emotion, has called a destabilizing space-affect. She defines this space-affect as the “simple desire to know the location, or more commonly, a fear that develops into the need to be reassured of one’s whereabouts” within the film’s diegesis. (2002: 271) Whereas this reassurance is conventionally provided by means of, for example, an establishing shot, Rosetta explicitly refuses to offer such reassurance. For, as Joseph Mai rightly observes in his extensive monograph on the Dardenne brothers, in Rosetta

[N]obody and really nothing shares the frame with her. Space is distended, alienated from her, and unlike many realist filmmakers, the Dardennes rarely exploit depth of field. (2010: 68)

Pushing the space-affect to its limits, the camera in Rosetta remains at all times suffocatingly close to Rosetta’s body, so that, for example, we never know where she is headed until she reaches her destination, as we never get an overview of the spaces which she occupies – not even of her tiny mobile home. The result is a lack of spatial orientation that puts the viewer in a state of anticipatory alertness,
thrusting us forward into a “now” that is ultimately inaccessible. It only serves to trigger our anticipation for what is yet to come.

*Rosetta* is indeed physically difficult to watch, for there is no escape from the camera’s shaky imagery. But is it true, I wonder, as one reviewer suggests, that because “you can’t see anything when it’s pressed up against your face [...] it won’t engender any kind of real thought”? (Adams, 2002) This view is based on a confusion between physical and emotional space. Physically, extreme proximity does indeed preclude clarity of vision, as we know from Proust. In the famous passage in which he recalls kissing Albertine on the cheek, Proust observes that as he approached her cheek, as if in slow motion, his “eyes, in changing position, saw a different pair of cheeks,” triggering a sense of displacement of his object of vision (for “What I saw, in the brief trajectory of my lips towards her cheeks, was ten Albertines”), until eventually, when he actually kissed her, his eyes “ceased to see” at all. (2004: 361) What is lost in the coarseness of proximity, of his nose crushing against her cheek, is neither sensation nor thought, but rather his pre-conceived idea of the kiss, of the “taste of a rose,” and arguably of the illusion of unity via physical contact. (2004: 361)

In the case at hand, the camera’s close proximity to Rosetta’s face and body indeed prohibits us from obtaining narrative mastery over the story space. Yet, rather than discouraging thought, what the reviewers’ vocabulary connoting corporeality suggests, in my view, is that our “thinking” may be provoked on a plane other than that of visual perception and reason. Instead of the lack of clarity suggested by such a physiological conception, I speculate that in that particular combination of seeing and imagining that is film viewing, the extreme proximity entails an intensity that I see in terms of affect.

The term “affect” alludes to the moment or energy that precedes perception and thought and adds a sense of urgency to proprioception. The latter term is here understood with Kaja Silverman as “the egocentric component to which concepts like “here,” “there,” and “my” are keyed.” (1996: 16) To illuminate its operation, let me highlight some of the key characteristics of affect that are particularly relevant for our purposes. First, affect is a physiological, material thing or, rather, process; it is embodied, part of our lived experience. “When properly conjured up,” writes Jill Bennett in *Empathic Vision*, it “produces a real-time somatic experience, no longer framed as representation.” (2005: 23) Second, although affects can arise within a person, they can also be “conjured up,” transmitted in our encounter with others or with the world, as with a work of art or a film. The fact that affect can be transmitted in our encounter with cultural artifacts and practices like cinema suggests
that affect works to disintegrate the distinction between subject and object. This is so, cultural theorist Teresa Brennan writes, because

[The transmission of affect means that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the “individual” and the “environment.” (2004: 6)]

Affects, therefore, Brennan maintains, are social rather than personal or subjective.78

Third, in terms of the specific temporality of affect, it should be noted that affect emerges in the present, where it produces “a real-time somatic experience,” an increase or decrease of what Deleuze refers to as intensity. Its process is one of becoming, involving a temporality that has little if anything to do with phenomenological time, as it resists chronologization and localization. The time of affect is one without diachrony. What is transmitted through affect is the past as presence, rather than a representation of the past in memory or narrative; an instance of pure pastness that in its transmission emerges in the present and primarily serves to thrust us forward, into a future that is unknown. What a work of art registers, at least potentially, is such an instance of pure pastness. The pastness it registers is in the first instance that of what Brian Massumi calls the “expression event.” (2002a: 27) In Deleuze’s famous and oft-quoted reflections on the work of Francis Bacon, the expression event that is registered and transmitted is the bodily sensation of the artist, sustained in his paintings. At stake here, Deleuze maintains, is not a representation of Bacon’s body, but a “sustained sensation” of a body manifested in the materiality of the painting, as energy, a moment of pure, unformed, and unstructured potential that precedes content and meaning and operates independent of it. (Deleuze, quoted in Bennett, 2005: 37)

In the case of Rosetta, the expression event that is registered, I argue, is the sustained sensation of the hand and body holding the camera, up close, too personal, which is transmitted to us in our encounter with the film. To say that the image affects us means it “touch[s]” us, stirs a sensation in us, and in doing so, through the process of contagion, induces us to become that image. The image we become is a position to look from, to feel from, while nonetheless being able to maintain a sense of difference. We keep hold of the difference between, first, the image and oneself; second, between being affected as a partaker and being affected as participating observer; and, third, between being affected by a real body and being affected by an image of a body. For, writes Bennett, “[B]y sustaining sensation, we confirm our sense of the ontological status of the image and inure
ourselves to its effects – effects that are, nevertheless, felt.” (Bennett, 2005: 43) Important for our purposes here is that this sensation is not an end in itself (it is in this sense not a spectacle) but rather serves as a means through which we can come to a different, more profound kind of understanding, a deeper truth. Already hinting at the linkage between affect and thought, Deleuze, in his early book *Proust and Signs* (2000), speaks of the “encountered sign” when talking about the transmission of affect, a sign that is felt rather than recognized. As Jill Bennett nicely sums up, affective imagery does not serve to draw us into the narrative, but rather

promotes a form of thought that arises from the body, that explores the nature of our affective investment, and that ultimately has the potential to take us outside the confines of our character and habitual modes of perception. (Bennett, 2005: 43–44)

Far from foreclosing thought, then, affect must be understood as the means through which thought proceeds: it is that which incites us to look, to interpret and, to think.

It is through its transmission of affect, I contend, that *Rosetta* mobilizes our bodies and redirects our engagement with the film away from the level of representation and interpretation towards an embodied mode of critical inquiry grounded in affect. Rather than being about Rosetta’s struggle to survive or inciting a moral response to her poverty, the physical nearness and unsteadiness of the handheld camera in *Rosetta* compels us first and foremost to register her determination and despair as lived experience, in the “now” of the encounter, triggered in particular by the use of what Luc Darnenne has called the body-camera. What this notion of the body-camera hints at, writes Joseph Mai, is

a reciprocal relation between the terms, one in which vision is not an independent entity but is reseated in the body, (moving) the emphasis away from the psychodrama of the characters, from representation, towards the physical encounter between the camera, the person holding it and the one it records. (2010: 56)

In other words, it suggests that the handheld camera is a point of contact between Emilie Daquenne, the actress who plays Rosetta, Alain Macoen, the cinematographer (the man whose hands hold the camera), and Benoît De Clerck, the boom
operator responsible for the sound recordings. It is through this physical encounter, I speculate, that the film affects us physically and draws us into a temporality that is other than that of a linear transition. Moreover, it sets our body in motion, even if, for the full duration of the film, we remain seated, either in the cinema or in front of our television or computer screen. Rather than teleporting us into the film, as the idea of (primary) identification or immersion would have it, the affective imagery and framing in Rosetta above all offers us a position to “see” and feel from, physically, while at the same time being reminded of our own immobility and lack of agency in relation to the camera’s mechanical eye. It enacts and even physically demarcates our reliance and dependence on the camera’s necessarily restricted point of view.

This becomes particularly clear in the final scene of the film. (see fig. 2.19-2.24) Lying on her bunk bed after eating an egg, Rosetta stares unsentimentally off screen, listening to the hissing gas, which she has turned on in an attempt to kill herself. More than a minute passes until her stare is interrupted by the sound of the valve running out of gas. In what follows we bear witness to her arduous journey through the desolate terrain of the trailer camp, as she carries the observably too-heavy cylinder to the camp manager in order to have it replaced. Upon her return, now carrying an even heavier cylinder, we hear the remote sound of an approaching moped. The sound is familiar. The moped belongs to Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione), the boy Rosetta has just double-crossed in order to take his job.

Throughout the film the encounters between Rosetta and Riquet are marked by physical clashes. When he comes to tell her that his chef has a vacancy, they end up in a brawl on a muddy patch of grass. When he tries to help her catch her fishing rod and tumbles in the water, she nearly lets him drown in quicksand. Conversely, after she has betrayed him, he obstructs her passage on an overpass, demanding, with hardly any words, an explanation. But all we see now, for the longest time, is simply Rosetta, fully aware of the approaching moped we still cannot see, carrying the far too heavy cylinder, dropping it, picking it up again, walking, dropping, lifting, losing heart. With the sound of the bleating moped now threateningly near, the camera’s unyielding gaze at Rosetta is almost unbearable: where is he, what are his intentions, what is he here for, is it even him at all?

Riquet finally enters the frame when he aggressively starts driving in circles around Rosetta, anger written all over his face. Then he disappears again, the sound of his moped briefly fading away. On the verge of collapsing, Rosetta stubbornly continues her journey. She ignores Riquet, throws rocks at him; finally, she gives in to the weight of the cylinder and drops to the ground, leaning on it, crying.
We hear the sound of the moped’s engine being turned off. Then, all we see and hear is Rosetta’s sobbing, until, eventually, after more than three minutes, Riquet’s arm and back enter the frame as he helps her to her feet. The film ends with an image of Rosetta, standing now, catching her breath, looking slightly towards but not into the camera, facing Riquet, whom again we cannot see.

It is through the spatial mobility of the handheld camera that mimics corporeality, then, that the transmission of affect brought about by Rosetta – and by extension, by other films with this aesthetic – is at once multidirectional and temporally fragmenting. That is to say, on the one hand the camera releases intensity through an intimate corporeal confrontation between the camera and the actress who is challenged at once to resist and endure the camera’s presence. The shooting of the scene discussed above, for example, was repeated more than a dozen of times, so that, writes Mai, “the exhaustion on Daquenne’s face” is not staged but real: what we see here is not “someone acting a role” but “someone suffering.” (Mai, 2010: 79–80) Partaking in the captured event, the body-camera penetrates the actor’s protective layer of professionalism. This phenomenon also occurs in Idioterne and The Blair Witch Project. As a result, the viewer experiences the event as being more real, more live. On the other hand, the intensity that is released is both suspended and prolonged through storage and transmission. This has consequences for the “nowness” of the film. The “now” of the affective encounter between camera and actress collides with the “now” of our affective encounter with the film, the one past, the other future-oriented, yet both taking place in the present, in our presence, time and again. As such, we are framed as witnesses to an arguably traumatic event, while the encounter at the same time renegotiates the very conditions of witnessing in the face of mediated encounters. For, after
all, such encounters happen somewhere else and to someone else, and thus they challenge and compromise the customary emphasis on authenticity and truth.

While temporally severing the viewer from the release of affect in the confrontation between camera and actress/character (we are, after all, not there, in the “now” of then), the image as an entity in itself affects the viewer through a disorienting space- and time-affect. Whereas we are spatially constrained by the image frame, in terms of temporality we are trapped in a perpetual present that is inaccessible as it feeds on the erasure of images of past moments and on the potential of what is yet to come. We are constantly invited to virtually touch the boundaries of the image frame, and continually tumble into a “now” that remains unattainable, as it only serves to thrust us forward into an unknown, virtual future. As a result, the viewer is always untimely in his or her encounter with the captured event. It is precisely this untimeliness, I suspect, that is responsible for the discomfort produced by *Rosetta* and other films like it. It simultaneously substantiates our presence in the here and now and produces a sense of being dislocated from it, if only briefly, time and again. For, as Gareth Evans has pointed out, we always conceive of ourselves as being somewhere and, so to speak, some-when. This is the position from which we speak, listen, watch, and to which we have maximal sensory commitment. It is the zero point from which all other places and times are indexed as somewhere else. (here quoted in Marriott, 2007: 6–10) To argue that the body-camera offers us a position to see or feel from, and at the same time reaffirms our physical presence in relation to it, is to suggest that the position from which we speak, listen, and watch within such a cinematic encounter can no longer be placed, need no longer be placed. For it is a punctuated “here,” at once situated and in motion, and a warped, multiplied “now” for which our normal categories of chronology and linearity no longer seem to be the appropriate time-frames.

Enduring the disorienting temporal and spatial affect of handheld aesthetics and its ambiguous claim of authenticity, then, entails taking the risk of losing ground, of letting go of our protective shield of banal, linear temporality. For the moment of the encounter itself, for the full length of the film, remains, at least partially, dislocated in time. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in the following section, the encounter leaves the viewer trapped in an echo of a traumatic event that is in itself traceless, perhaps even nonexistent, except in its endless iteration. To clarify this I will look at one final example: a film that especially disrupts the traditional forms of cinema that are familiar to us, *Dogme#2: Idioterne* (*The Idiots*).
Traumatic Encounters: *Idioterne (The Idiots)*

*Idioterne* (1998) is the second film in Lars von Trier's Golden Heart Trilogy, which also includes *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). The film centers on a commune of seemingly anti-bourgeois residents who spend their time seeking their “inner idiot.” They do so by releasing their inhibitions and behaving, both in private and in public, as if they are mentally retarded – a behavior they call *spassing* – and commenting on each other's success or failure to do so. Built up out of “real-time” material seemingly collected at random, *Idioterne*, like *Zusje*, makes an ambiguous claim of authenticity that is destabilized in its very process of construction. Like *Zusje* and *Rosetta*, the film is shot with an unsteady handheld, and in this case digital, video camera. Unlike in *Zusje* and *Rosetta*, however, the camera in *Idioterne* is not primarily fixed on one person but rather on a group of people. Yet, although its optical range is not as spatially constrained as in the other two films, it remains limited and spatially disorienting for reasons that will become clear below.

In the previous two sections I have argued, first, that despite the apparent claim of authenticity, anchored in the suggestion of real-time recording and the performed immediacy of the films under consideration, our encounter with handheld aesthetics is organized around a temporality of a “now” that is not only disjointed but also multifaceted. Second, I have proposed that to fully grasp the “now” that is negotiated we have to approach it through the body, that is, through affect, which has a temporality of its own and operates outside of the habitual modes of perception. In what follows I will take this argument one step further and suggest that the aesthetics of the handheld camera not only challenges us to navigate cinema with and within the time of affect but also with and within that of trauma. Here, trauma is understood, with Elsaesser, as a “negative performative,” as a presence that is marked by the absence of traces, that nonetheless affects the texture of our experiences by suspending the categories of truth and falsity, here and there, then and now. (2001: 199–201) Such an understanding of trauma, states Elsaesser, allows for an understanding of a self that no longer needs to be placed. The time of trauma is one of repetition and deferral, of a delay between an event that is too shocking to be registered, and its compulsive, repetitive return as affect without apparent reason or cause. More specifically, the time of trauma is that of *nachträglichkeit* or belatedness, a skewed temporality that is “simultaneously outside time and eternally, disruptively, present within” it. (Pozorski, 2006: 76)
In “Postmodernism as Mourning Work” Elsaesser refers on the one hand to the persistence, in the late 1990s, of the institutionally more acknowledged theories of trauma concerned with the primary experience of trauma (as in Holocaust studies and clinical cases), and on the other hand to the emergence of a relatively recent body of work that addresses trauma first and foremost as a hermeneutic principle. In the context of these two frames, Elsaesser suggests that trauma has become such an abiding concern within the humanities because it prompts a revision of our very understanding of hermeneutics. This new understanding is one that is relative to the critique of poststructuralism and deconstruction, but nonetheless coerces us to rethink theories of referentiality so as to allow for paradox and non-linearity. The term trauma, moreover, he writes, is of particular interest for the study of ubiquitous sound and image technologies for which geography and chronology no longer seem to be the appropriate space-time frames.

Although I have already briefly touched on the topic of trauma in the previous two sections when referring, first, to the thematic reenactment of a traumatic event in Zusje, and second, to the performative staging of a traumatic event in Rosetta, I am not referring here to the presence of a traumatic encounter on the level of representation nor on that of the performance. Like so many of the films I have put under the label of handheld aesthetics, Idioterne, nonetheless, also deals with the topic of trauma on a thematic level. Here it is the death of Karen’s child that constitutes the first blow of trauma, an event the viewer learns about only towards the end of the film, but for which the rest of the film, Caroline Bainbridge has convincingly argued, is nothing but preparation. What is crucial about this final sequence, in which we learn about Karen’s recent, unspeakable loss, is not so much its thematic occurrence as the fact that, as Bainbridge has observed, it coincides with a significant shift in cinematic mode-of-address. Whereas the film up until that moment is shot in a cinéma vérité documentary style, engaging the viewer as witness to the unfolding events, in the final sequence the camera reverts to an overtly pre-scripted fictional mode, in which it anticipates rather than reacts to the action. Here, the viewer is no longer addressed as a witness but rather as an onlooker drawn into the narrative trauma so violently and unexpectedly that “our relationship to the cinema and to cinematic form has been undone.” (Bainbridge, 2004: 398) The only way to work through the embodied emotional response invoked by this violence imposed on the viewer, Bainbridge argues, is to go back to the film and watch it again, even if the film continues to disrupt our patterns of seeing and knowing without offering any real closure as to the “truth”
and status of the cinematic events. Here trauma thus presents itself as the need for retro-causality, the desire to “read” the film through its future consequences.

*Idioterne* indeed lacks many of the traditional stabilizing devices that give viewers the necessary clues to “read” the film and to assure them of their relation to it. This immediately becomes clear in the opening scenes. The film begins with a shot of Karen (Bodil Jørgensen), who, in the opening sequence, is introduced to the odd group of wanna-be idiots in an expensive restaurant where they are having dinner. When the waiter asks the group to leave because they are causing a scene, Stoffer (Jens Albinus), one of the “idiots,” grabs hold of Karen’s hand and refuses to let go. This is how Karen comes to join the group. In a taxi on their way to the next outing, with Stoffer still obsessively holding on to Karen’s hand, the now-no-longer-idiots suddenly burst out laughing, except for Karen, who (like us) only then learns about the group’s *spassing*-trips. She herself is one of the people they have fooled into believing they were really mentally retarded. Then a number of interview-clips are introduced in which various spassers reflect on their period of *spassing*. The clips are crosscut with a scene showing the now larger group of spassers on a field trip to a factory. It is in these images, too, that, for the first time, we “accidentally” see the recording microphone manifestly within the image. Since this is not the default mode of the film up until that moment, the sudden appearance and disappearance of the microphone disrupts the film’s own mimetic pact, a strategy that continues and intensifies as the film progresses.

In contrast to the highly media-literate, citational and self-reflexive cinematography in von Trier’s earlier films such as *The Element of Crime* (1984), *Epidemic* (1987), *Europa* (a.k.a. *Zentropa*, 1991) and the miniseries *The Kingdom* (1994), in *Idioterne* von Trier thus shrewdly alludes to his own approach to filmmaking, and to the *Dogme* rules themselves. These rules, Timothy Walters states, are “blatantly played out by his characters’ *spassing*.” (2004: 47) What the film suggests, Walters argues, is that “spassing” – both thematically and cinematographically – is not more strange or pointless than actions in other films or other ways of filming, only less familiar. Instead of generating a belated understanding of a conventional cinematic style through pastiche, identifying an established film form as the first blow of a trauma, *Idioterne*, in its play with film form and content, thus circles back to its own mode of filming. It taints the moment of our encounter with the film with a traumatic affect in which the first and second blow can neither be distinguished from each other nor located. This muddles our sense of the moment, our “nowness.”
The one-to-one interviews offer little if any explanatory value. Conducted by von Trier himself and recorded long after the shooting of the film had been completed, they only serve to deepen our confusion. Moreover, we are denied any sense of narrative direction or closure, as the film keenly resists identification with either the camera or one of the characters. Not only is Karen’s passive observing gaze soon discredited as the “outsider with whom we can identify in order to ease our discomfort” when she starts spassing too. (Walters, 2004: 50) Also, as a mockumentary the film as a whole resists identification both with the characters and the allegedly all-knowing eye of the seemingly authentic reporter, in this case von Trier himself. As a result, we are constantly challenged to adopt different interpretive strategies, not only successively but also retroactively. While on the one hand the handheld fly-on-the-wall style of shooting, the added interviews, and the apparently accidental visibility of the overhead microphone or cameraman, make the film’s documentary look seem more substantive, on the other hand it is precisely due to these cinematic devices that we are constantly reminded of the fact that what we are watching is in fact a fictional narrative. By explicitly foregrounding this double role of cinematic image technologies, i.e., their capacity to both claim and fake authenticity and immediacy, Idioterne is indeed suggestive of what Elsaesser refers to as “the now definitely ‘traumatic’ status of the moving image in our culture as a symptom without a cause, as the event without a trace.” (2001: 197)

But how then does this “event without a trace” manifest itself in the film, and how does it affect the “now” of our encounter with it? In many instances Idioterne radically disrupts its own peculiar spatial and temporal continuity, which it owes to its suggested real-time recording and home-video montage, in such an ambiguous manner that it may well be unnoticed on a first viewing. Although these instances occur throughout the film, there is one scene in particular, towards the end of the film, that is exemplary in this regard. When the group is about to part company, right before Karen returns home and we learn about her traumatic loss, she summons everyone together in a small corridor in the house where they have been staying. Face to face with the camera in the cramped passageway between various rooms, she tells everyone how much she has enjoyed her stay. The scene – especially upon closer inspection – reveals a blatant lack of spatio-temporal coherence, as all characters, except for Karen, seem to be in different places after each cut, without there being, on the level of narrative, the suggestion that time has passed. We can only determine the location of the various characters by following their looks, which are at all times directed at Karen, who serves as our focal point. When Karen praises Susanne (Anne Louise Hassing) for her kindheartedness,
Fig. 2.25-2.26 (top), 2.27-2.28 (second), 2.29-2.30 (third) and 2.31-2.32 (bottom): Corridor sequence. Idioterne (Lars von Trier, 1995)
for example, the camera tilts to Karen’s right and faces Susanne standing in the doorway across the hall from Karen (see fig. 2.27-2.28) – even though we had just seen her sitting down next to Ped (Henrik Prip) to Karen’s left (see fig. 2.25-2.26). The camera cuts back to Karen, and eventually follows her look to her right, facing Susanne again now standing to her close right (see fig. 2.29-2.30). The camera cuts back to Karen once more, who after a short moment of contemplation glances to her left, yet again facing Susanne, whom Karen asks to join her on her trip home, where she plans to release her “inner idiot” among her family (see fig. 2.31-2.32).

Besides posing a radical break with the rules of continuity editing, the film, here, as in the examples from *Rosetta* and *Zusje* discussed earlier, compensates for a lack of spatial orientation by a reorientation in the “now” of the film’s suggested real-time recording. But it is a “now” beset with the skewed temporality of trauma that resists chronologization and localization. Karen’s voice, surrounded by a silence of listening that masks the sonic cuts, suggests an uninterrupted real-time performance and recording of the event. This illusion, however, is instantly shattered by the complete lack of logical spatial and temporal coherence between the shots. This becomes even more evident when (if!) we realize that one of the characters, Jeppe (Nikolaj Lie Kaas), has not only teleported from Karen’s right to her left, but is also wearing an entirely different outfit and mysteriously has grown a two-day beard. (see fig. 2.33-2.34)

![Fig. 2.33-2.34: Jeppe, corridor sequence. Idioterne (Lars von Trier, 1995)](image)

Constructed rather freely out of material collected from dispersed moments of shooting, the film charges the performed immediacy of Karen’s speech with a disjointed temporal order that identifies neither a before nor an after, neither a beginning nor an end. This creates a sense of suspension, which is different from classical suspense or surprise, and constantly keeps the viewer on edge. Rather
than merely alienating us from the film’s fiction or defamiliarizing the conventional language of cinema, instances like these immerse us in the specific temporal configuration of nachträglichkeit. It simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the “now” of the event through editing and recording, and reconstructs it as a cinematographic “now” composed out of a multiplicity of instances. In other words, there is no consistent (indexical) trace of the event, despite the film’s suggestion to the contrary. What remains is a deictic (indexical) “now.” The fact that this uncoupling may very well go unnoticed upon a first viewing suggests that, as in a traumatic encounter, the experience comes too early for us to understand at the level of consciousness. Instead it affects us physically, with an intensity that thrusts us forward in anxious anticipation. And, by the logic of retro-causality and the power invested in us by our capacity to see and to imagine, this intensity may indeed – to speak with Massumi – shock us to thought. (Massumi, 2002b)

This thinking extends far beyond the duration of the film itself: it manifests itself in hindsight and in an accumulative and traumatic awareness of the ambiguous status of indexicality proper. Trauma here alludes to the loss of the possibility of an authentic encounter. This is not to say that this particular film can be identified as the “originary” moment of the traumatic affect instigated by the loss of photochemical indexicality. On the contrary, if it is an exemplary case, it is so because the locus of trauma as a “negative performative” lies not in the traumatic event nor in its distortion or narrative integration, but rather in the specific structure and disjuncture between seeing and knowing that manifests itself in traumatic affect. This affect is brought about in our encounter with the cinematic today, whereby the handheld aesthetics under scrutiny merely functions as a case in point.

Navigating Cinematic Time: Now

In this chapter I have looked at the aesthetics of the handheld camera to assess the thickening of the “now” that in my view is key to our encounter with the cinematic today. After briefly extending the scope of the aesthetics of the handheld camera to include its prior cinematic usages, I have argued that the films under investigation cultivate the “now” as their primary temporal marker through their suggested real-time recording that points towards the handheld camera’s propensity to shoot “as live.” Even though we know, if only because of the (ambiguous) fictional status of the films, that these films are not actually brought to us live, they reveal the
capacity of the medium to do so. Although this is true for any camera shooting moving images, it is emblematic for the handheld aesthetics I have discussed here that it has incorporated this reorientation in the “now” into its aesthetics, into its constructed perception of the world. I have further suggested that this is enhanced by the spatial disorientation prompted by the camera’s constrained optical range, i.e., the fact that we seldom see beyond the subjective or otherwise restricted camera’s eye that stays in close proximity to the action. Additional establishing shots or a narratively motivated exploration of the story space sometimes make up for the lack of spatial orientation. Most of the time, however, such compensation is missing. The result is a disorienting space-affect that puts the viewer in a state of anticipatory alertness, provoking a sensation of untimeliness that is comparable to the lack of spatial orientation caused by the camera’s limited point of view. Taking our cue from Bruno, we could thus speak of a disorienting time-affect.

What is particularly striking about the “now” of our encounter with the cinematic today is that it does not share the commonality of either phenomenological or historical time; the thick time of the cinematic is outside of causality. For what we are dealing with here, in particular when referring to the handheld aesthetics under scrutiny, is a type of film that disjoints time in certain ways, generating a sense of “now” that is ultimately inaccessible to the viewer – unless, I have argued, he or she navigates the films with and within the time of affect and trauma, a temporality that forces us to renegotiate our sense of self in relation to a potentially mediated here and now that are no longer necessarily knowable.

This aesthetics of a thickened “now” carries several consequences that I see as the inherent features of such films. By mapping time in an often refreshing and at times provocative manner, the films produce forms of intelligibility that we normally do not have. Thus, the films can be said to offer a meta-commentary on a culture and aesthetics in which real-time media technologies predominate. But they do so within a more or less traditional narrative framework, i.e., fiction film, thereby subjecting the technology through which they have been established. The handheld aesthetics’ affective surcharge in this sense can be seen as a return of the repressed, the surfacing of a technological complexity that can no longer be comprehended. In the next chapter I will elaborate on the implications of this intensification of the cinematic material for the sense of self of the viewer, the “me,” that it affords.