Strathern (in) Television

This chapter is comprised of two movements. In the first, longer part, I offer a close and sustained reading of a few key texts by Marilyn Strathern — *Partial Connections*, “The Relation,” and “Environments Within” — and a related unpacking of a stunning, recent response to her theoretical work, Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen’s essay, “Planet M: The Intense Abstraction of Marilyn Strathern.” I do so in order to lay further and fuller groundwork for a Strathernian approach to television studies, sketched more summarily in this book’s “Introduction.” Focusing on a deliberate and deliberative neologism, *abstension*, that propels Holbraad and Pedersen’s extended gloss on Strathern, I introduce a nearly allied one of my own, *obstension*, and posit its interpretive value for scholarship. Then, in a second, shorter movement, I turn from the abstract to the concrete and home in on a couple of seemingly unrelated examples of television — ones that I connect partially, through obstension — in order to model in miniature and with specificity the kinds of work that my Strathernian model for television studies may galvanize, both in the remaining chapters of this book and beyond.

In the foreword to *Partial Connections*, Strathern indicates that she will address “[s]ome commonplace, persistent, but also interesting problems […] in the organization of anthropological materials,” and those “interesting problems” hinge, as she pro-
ceeds to elaborate, on questions of scale and complexity.\(^1\) Let me quote a passage in which these two terms begin to acquire their thick salience for her study — and then ask us to submit the passage to a playful thought experiment:

[T]he question of complexity seems from one point of view a simple matter of scale. The more closely you look, the more detailed things are bound to become. Increase in one dimension (focus) increases the other (detail of data). For example, comparative questions that appear interesting at a distance, on closer inspection may well fragment into a host of subsidiary (and probably more interesting) questions. Complexity thus also comes to be perceived as an artefact of questions asked, and by the same token boundaries drawn: more complex questions produce more complex answers. Across Melanesia as a whole, it might seem intriguing to look, say, for the presence or absence of initiation practices. When one then starts examining specific sets of practices, it becomes obvious that “initiation” is no unitary phenomenon, and there appears to be as broad a gap between different initiatory practices as between the presence or absence of the practices themselves. As an effect of scale, all this might seem unremarkable. But it does, in fact, produce some trouble for the anthropological understanding of the phenomena in question.\(^2\)

Why do “effect[s] of scale” that “seem,” at first blush, to be “unremarkable” tend, if treated properly, to “produce some trouble” for anthropology? What this passage begins to intimate but does not yet spell out explicitly is that the “trouble” stems from the manner in which, in Strathern’s view, equivalent and irreducible levels of complexity obtain — replicate, if you like — at every scale at which an anthropologist may wish to study phenomena. Now, the thought experiment: substitute the phrase across tel-

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2 Ibid., xiii–xiv.
vision as a whole for Strathern’s, “Across Melanesia as a whole”; pick one or another key television phenomenon — syndication, advertising, documentary, cosmetic, and so forth — to substitute for “initiation”; and you may begin to discern how germane Strathern’s identification of “some trouble” may be to a television studies as sensitive to irreducible complexity, at a numerous variety of scales, as is her version of cultural anthropology to the stuff of fieldwork.

Just a little later in the foreword, Strathern spells out more plainly what is stake in thinking through the problem of replicative complexity across differently scaled interpretive frameworks:

It is conventional to imagine […] scaling as a kind of branching, as though one were dealing with a segmentary lineage system or a genealogical tree, where the more embracing or more remote orders contain derivative or recent ones. But the interesting feature about switching scale is not that one can forever classify into greater or lesser groupings but that at every level complexity replicates itself in scale of detail. “The same” order of information is repeated, eliciting equivalently complex conceptualization. While we might think that ideas and concepts grow from one another, each idea can also seem a complete universe with its own dimensions, as corrugated and involute as the last.3

According to Strathern’s argument, complexity inheres in such dimensions of phenomena, as well as in our conceptualizations of these phenomena, as texturality and intrication (and, potentially, in intricate texturality) — hence her stunning introduction of the metaphorical language, “corrugated and involute” to conjure a vivid and precise sense of the complexity that she imagines. Moreover, scale’s relationship to such “corrugated and involute” complexity is itself complex — which is why, alongside her adoption of one kind of metaphorical language (“corrugated

3 Ibid., xvi (emphasis added).
and involute”), she rejects another, less complex metaphor, that of the branching tree, as a way to account for scale’s ontology and the epistemology that it ought to conduce. (As she charts elsewhere in the foreword, the metaphor of Cantor dust does better than that of the branching tree to proffer an accurate, salutary notion of scale’s beings and doings.\(^4\)) Having positioned scale, complexity, and their relationship to one another in this fashion, Strathern raises an implicit question that it remains for the body of Partial Connections to endeavor to answer: what should a scholar do methodologically with her materials, both descriptively and interpretively, once she has recognized the persnickety challenge that staggering complexity, asymptotically approaching infinity, may be recognized at each and every scale—that is, through each and every lens—with which the materials are apprehended? Unsurprisingly, the answer to the question is complex, polyvalent, and expressed across a number of more and less explicitly linked passages in a text that deliberately introduces “cuts” across which Strathern playfully, if also headily, invites the reader to jump with her.\(^5\) Let me highlight what I take to be the three most crucial parts of the multipart answer to the question of how to handle complexity as a supra- and trans-scalar problematic.

First, one should not be stymied but persist in intellective work. More specifically, one should endeavor to make connections among things that are dually partial—connections pretending neither to be exactingly or exhaustively complete nor to emerge from a somehow simultaneously neutral and omniscient perspectival position—and, at the same time, to know, and to mark reflexively that one knows, that the connections one is making are thus partial. Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway, Strathern invokes the image of the “cyborg, half human, half machine,” as an illustrative one through which to comprehend the embodied subjectivity of the scholar making these kinds of partial connections: an apt image because a cyborg, like

\(^4\) Ibid., xxiii.
\(^5\) Ibid., xxix.
the thoroughly relational being that Strathern otherwise calls a *dividual*, has the capacity to convey “the idea of a person capable of making connections while knowing that they are not completely subsumed within her or his experience of them” — and who “can then,” and thereby, “be neither one nor a particle in a multiplicity of ones, neither sum nor fragment.”  

The nonetheless “rational knowledge” produced by this kind of subject “would not,” as Strathern writes more summarily and straightforwardly, “pretend to disengagement; partiality is the position of being heard and making claims, the view from a body rather than the view from above” — that is, a view from a body that is itself viewable and, when viewed with appropriate sophistication, understood as possessed of inward and outward-oriented complexity: a body neither whole nor part of a whole but rather a self-differential node in a network, a non-singular “one” connected variously to other, likewise variously self-differential nodes in that network.

Second, making partial connections on this cyborgian model undoes any putative ease with which the connections could be called comparisons. By contrast, and because of a cognizance of the partiality with which any perspective would be provisionally centered, the partial connector displaces *comparability* — predicated on the simultaneous fictions of center and periphery, of subject and object — and reckons rather with the co-extensivity and thus the *compatibility* of things in relation:

The cyborg supposes what it could be like to make connections without assumptions of comparability. Thus might one suppose a relation between anthropology and feminism: were each a realization or extension of the capacity of the other, the relations would be of neither equality nor encompassment. It would be prosthetic, as between a person and a tool. Compatibility without comparability: each extends the other, but only from the other’s position. What the extensions yield are different capacities. In this view, there is no

6 Ibid., 27.
subject-object relation between a person and a tool, only an expanded or realized capability.\footnote{Ibid., 38.}

In other words, partial connections are both generous and generative. They do not presuppose that privilege or mastery will be entailed by any conditional position, because that position is recognized in its relation to another or to others. And, more than recognized — because also “realized” in relation to another or others — the position is endowed with a specific kind of multiplicity, the multiplied “capacity” or “capability” that could be construed as making of the position a \textit{composition}, a composite and compositing form.

Third, if the compositions available for rendering by and as partial connections are rich in potential capacity, one such potential capacity richly worth actualizing is the capacity to connect components \textit{at different scales}. The “person” and the “tool,” named in the passage from \textit{Partial Connections} that I just quoted, would be a paradigmatic example of connected things that are “not built to one another’s scale”\footnote{Ibid., 39.}, yet just because a “lack of proportion” appears to obtain in this partial connection does not mean that one should revert to the kind of thinking of, with, and through wholes and parts that, as I have already suggested in my gloss on the dividual or cyborgian body, is incompatible with the version of compatibility that Strathern advocates, short-circuiting the logic of “parts and total systems”:

At first sight, a “tool” still suggests a possible encompassment by the maker and user who determines its use. Yet our theorists of culture already tell us that we perceive uses through the tools we have at our disposal. Organism and machine are not connected in a part/totality relationship, if the one cannot completely define [among other qualities, the complexity of] the other. Switching perspectives — as between anthropology and feminism — requires neither that a position left
behind is obliterated nor that it is subsumed. In turn, neither
position offers an encompassing context or inclusive per-
spective. Rather, each exists as a localized, embodied vision.9

The work of “[s]witching perspectives” that Strathern explicitly
conceptualizes and implicitly champions here is also, often a
matter of \textit{switching scales} — or, more nearly, of sliding scales, of
slipping scales, and of determining, in any “localized, embod-
ied” enactment of such sliding and slipping, the most sanguine
relation between the two orientations to scale. Indeed, Strathern
produces just such an enactment in this passage when she slides
from one scale of conceptualization (at the level of discrete per-
son and tool) to another, putatively more “encompassing” — but
only \textit{partially} more encompassing — one (at the level of abstract
organism and machine); when she then slips to yet another scale
of conceptualization (at the level of scholarly discipline, anthro-
pology, and political discourse, feminism); and as she negotiates
the connections among the sliding, the slippage, and the mat-
ter distributed across them by refusing either to “subsume[]”
person and tool to the schema of organism and machine or to
“obliterate[]” the anthropological person/tool or organism/ma-
chine dyad through a cyborg-feminist deconstruction thereof.
Instead, she lets these rhetorical and argumentative moves stand
in propinquity to each other, no one of them exactly “encom-
passing” or purporting to be “inclusive” of the rest as, alterna-
tively, they extend out and toward each other in radiant reach,
touching nearness.

Of course, this enactment of connecting partially and, in the
process, of navigating scale is highly abstract and almost sub-
terranean, beckoning for a way like mine of reading Strathern’s
way of thinking to draw out how it works. A more concrete
demonstration of the method emerges later in the book, when
Strathern elaborates an imaginatively associative yet also deeply
informed meditation on the partial connections among Melanesian “men and trees and spirits and flutes and women and

\footnotesize{9 Ibid., 40 (emphasis in original).}
canoes.” In her interpretive dance with these figures, Strathern argues that they “can all be seen as analogs of one another,” if we attend with her to “[w]hat is being cut and being made to move”—including “imagery itself”—in the various and variable yet related practices in which (for instance) “people are cutting [a] tree out of [a] forest as an image of a man,” or in which a “man dances with [an] effigy above his head” and “makes [a] combined image of tree and forest move between himself and the edifice he supports.” Yet just as important as this demonstration is Strathern’s meta-critical meditation thereupon, which in glossing the demonstration provides an instruction for further work of this sort.

The instruction also figures as a rejection of the mode of obviational analysis championed by prominent anthropologists like Roy Wagner, for whom the notion of prefiguration is key to the interpretation of Melanesian myth and ritual. By contrast, and in highlighting the limits of obviational analysis, Strathern understands Melanesian dividuals not to depend on the predictability of chains or sequences of activity, in which one thing substitutes for another that prefigured it—and will be replaced by yet another that it prefigures—so that the world may be composed and recomposed reliably. Rather, she views Melanesian dividuals acting in such a way that their perpetual remaking of the world is also, paradoxically, its breaking down or decomposition. As she puts it:

I have indicated that there are some very fine analyses to hand in contemporary Melanesian studies [such as Wagner’s]. We would be deceived, however, to think they afforded a self-sufficient dimension, as though they were simply completing the prefigured world which Melanesians take as their starting point. Melanesians use movement between persons to decompose their world

10 Ibid., 112.
11 Ibid., 79.
As Strathern attends to them, we see that these decomposing movements have two further, crucial qualities: in their pulsations, expansions, contractions, and perspectival shifts, the work that they do is scalar; and in their borrowings from other paradigms, they provide a model for the Strathernian anthropology that in its turn borrows from said movements:

Communities expand and scatter again as, gathered in from their dispersed gardens, people become momentarily conscious both of their own centrality and of the necessity to maintain relations with other centers on their periphery — a contraction and expansion of focus. That contraction and expansion is mirrored in the way individual men decorate to expand themselves and then shrink to human size afterwards. [...] The view from the periphery is another view from the center, a version composed of the diverse named communities brought into communication with one another through men's efforts in ritual congregation and outward exchange. [...] What is at issue for these Western Lowlanders is the further possibility of making one's own interior out of the interiors of persons centered elsewhere, of “borrowing” culture.\(^\text{12}\)

In this account, Melanesian borrowings of knowledge, predicated on movements that are themselves predicated on scalar shifts, enable the composition of partial, provisional views. And these views are at the same time decompositions of putatively settled worldviews (and of the likewise, putatively settled interiorities of beings, as well as of any centrality associated with those beings’ positions). By extension, Strathern is not just partially connecting her own “conscious [...] contraction and expansion of focus” to the foci of her Melanesian counterparts, but also conceptualizing the very method of connecting partially as work requiring such reflexive scale management. In other words, Strathern is, like the “individual men [who] decorate to expand themselves,” making a concrete move — connecting her

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 84–85 (emphasis added).
work to their practice to expand, likewise, her work’s circumference — that also constitutes an abstract proposition (or, perhaps, preposition) about how to do such work. In the process, she arguably undoes, or decomposes, the very distinction between concretion and abstraction and transforms how we might weigh abstraction and concretion against each other (indeed, whether to weigh them thus, at all).

In one of the finest meta-critical readings of Strathern’s own meta-critical maneuvers and provisions, Holbraad and Pedersen tease out one crucial effect of her transformation of abstraction as it relates to concretion: she gives us a way to identify scales that become things and things that scale themselves. Building on — and intensifying — this insight, they call Strathern’s own intensification of abstraction an effort in abstension:

Abstension is what happens to abstraction when the distinction between abstract and concrete itself is overcome, as it is in Strathern’s postplural universe. Indeed, one way of characterizing abstensions would be to say that they are what abstractions become when they are no longer thought of as generalizations […]. Rather, abstension is what happens to abstraction when it turns intensive, […] and […] refers to the way in which comparisons are able to transform themselves in particular ways.

With a slight recalibration — and building on my prior thinking about the ob- prefix, as well as on Strathern’s magnetic attraction to ob(prefixed) words in Partial Connections’s salient passages in and on abstraction — I would rather call Strathern’s version of abstraction a method of obstension. If “the prefix ob- may mark the paradoxical conjuncture of seemingly opposed meanings,” if “an ob- position can be oriented both ‘toward’ and ‘against’ an object,” and if “an ob- movement may obtain as a ‘fall down’ […]

or as a ‘complet[ion] in intensification,” then obstension may well name the kind of intensive, abstract intellection that works toward making connections, and thereby completing compositions, by also moving against them: by exposing their partiality through decompositions and fallings down.\(^{14}\)

In the chapter of _Partial Connections_ that I have been citing for its meditations on de/composition and (as) transformation, Strathern also moves recursively to the idea of the “remainder,” a term that her foreword introduces, in thinking about questions and their answers, to designate “material that is left over, for it goes beyond the original answer to [a] question to encapsulate or subdivide that position (the question-and-answer set) by further questions requiring further answers. Or, we might say, it opens up fresh gaps in our understanding.”\(^{15}\) In revisiting the remainder in the context of conceptualizing what I call obstensive intellection, she adds: “One of my present purposes is to show the way anthropologists’ activities constantly create ‘remainders’ for themselves, starting points for apparently new but not quite independent dimensions.”\(^{16}\) Indeed, _Partial Connections_ itself creates just such remainders, of which I would highlight two as most intriguing: (1) what happens to scale as a concept — or, put another way, to _scale as scale_ — in de/composing processes of obstensive intellection? And (2) what more may we learn about de/composition as such by also learning more precisely what it does to scale?

Strathern herself takes up these remainders in two seminal pieces from the 1990s, “The Relation” and “Environments Within.” In the first, Strathern is once again theorizing connectivity, or what in this instance she calls the relation, about which she asserts that, on one view, the relation or connection is unaffected by scale. Moreover, she associates the relation with holography on the basis of the assertion that it is unaffected by scale; and in that relation or connection _of the relation itself_ with

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15 Strathern, _Partial Connections_, xxii.
16 Ibid., 79.
holography, the relation produces scale-slippage (relations and holographs do not appear to belong to the same order or level). At the same time, and on another view, the relation is also associated with the irreducible complexity that (as we have seen before) exists as a constant across and despite scales. Yet in order to recognize such complexity across and despite scales requires *ipso facto* some recognition of scale — so that in the relation or connection of the relation itself to complexity, the relation produces scale-maintenance. Working with and through these remainders from *Partial Connections* creates a further one, which we could aim to capture with the question: What exactly does the overlaying of scale-slippage and scale-maintenance produce? Logically, perhaps a paradox; affectively, perhaps ambivalence for scale; intellectively, perhaps cognitive dissonance about scale; and formally, I would argue — and argue that it is most important — Strathern presents a composition of scale in scale-maintenance that cannot be reckoned apart from, indeed that cannot be generated apart from, its decomposition in scale-slippage. In other words, at the level or scale of scale itself, de/composing practices of obstensive intellection corrugate and involute — and thereby intensify — their originary investment in de/composition.

Keep this intensification in mind as I pivot now to “Environments Within,” where Strathern associates scale with the Western philosophical position that environments are outside humans and their activity (that is, their activity “on” those environments). By contrast, she associates analogy with the non-Western philosophical position that environments exist within beings. The first position is scale-sensitive, the second scale-insensitive; and an attendant irony — or, more plainly, insight — is that, ethically speaking, one may need to connect (partially, in both senses) the second position to the first in order to take proper responsibility for activity that is perceived to be “out there” in the world. Beings, Strathern posits, will care more

about and more fully appreciate the dimensions of their activity — and the likewise dimensional responsibility for that activity — if they understand outside environments, at least in part, as also within.\textsuperscript{18} Thus Strathern establishes a relation between two positions that would seem to oppose each other; and, in this case, the remainder also thereby established might be said to obtain in the question: What happens to scale itself when a scale-sensitive and a scale-insensitive philosophy are connected partially to each other? To which we might answer, it neither stays nor goes. Indeed we could say, from another perspective on an issue already under exploration, that in this philosophical conjuncture, scale is decomposed in such a way that we can still apprehend the composition within the decomposition.

In so reading the two essays, I have been moving — partially — toward the notion that there is a relation between “The Relation” and “Environments Within.” Both pieces could be said to point toward the production of, and at the same time really to be producing, scale’s de/composition. But where the former routes that de/composition through questions about fundamental acts of creativity and cognition undertaken by subjects like Strathern, the latter adds dimension to the de/composition by drawing a relation between (for instance) Strathernian acts of creativity and cognition and (for instance) Melanesian acts of creativity and cognition. That drawing of a relation establishes a connection \textit{between} two ostensibly separate things: a movement outward. Yet the second thing in the relation, Melanesian perspective, demonstrates its own internally complex relationality or connectivity. It is a thing with a relation \textit{within} itself (the recognition or emplacement of the environment \textit{within} the be-ing) — that is, a reflexive relation within itself \textit{about within-ness}. As she discloses as much, just as reflexively, in writing, Strathern uses an outward-oriented move (drawing her connection

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between herself and others) to enable an inward-oriented move (describing the further connection within her connection’s second element), which redoubles the movement inward constitutive of the second thing. In this simultaneously amplifying and pressurizing the stakes of her lines of thinking, Strathern introduces a scale-maintaining extensiveness in the move from “The Relation” to “Environments Within” and a scale-slipping intensiveness in the move from “The Relation” to “Environments Within.”

As we chart the movements partially connecting one of Strathern’s writings to another and another, we would be mistaken if we took her to be constatively prefiguring and then refiguring a conclusion about scale—namely, that it is at once unusable and indispensable. Rather, she is performatively enacting and reenacting an abiding belief about scale, with different inflections, accents, and emphases (motivated changeably because the related concepts and phenomena with which she reckons alongside scale, like holography, complexity, and analogy, also change). And that abiding, organizing belief is that scale must be perpetually composed in, through, and as its own decomposition—and, better still, in ever more intensively spiraling, also extensively soaring, ways. Performing in this fashion connects Strathern (again, partially) to the Melanesians about whom, as she claims, we would likewise be mistaken if we were to take prefiguration as a cornerstone of their sociality. Near the end of Partial Connections, and in what she calls “a footnote to the concept of prefiguration,” Strathern “adds” of the concept:

In one sense, everything is in place: sociality, the values, relationships. But what must be constantly made and remade, invented afresh, are the forms in which such things are to appear. Potency has to appear as a new-born child or a bursting yam house, or a successful hunt, strength as shouldering a tall spirit-effigy, in the same way as social persons have to appear as members of this or that group. So those Melanesians who have origin stories, speak of heroes scattering the land with the right form in which tools or food or sexual attributes
or named groups should appear, just as the Gawan ancestor did. She did not have to show the men how to make a canoe— that they knew—but in showing them the appropriate materials, she showed them the appropriate form it should take.19

Turning to television with Strathern’s lessons in mind and her tools in the arsenal, one could compose and decompose television’s scales again and again—and, on each recursive and intensive iteration of thus de/composing, one could do so with the intention to match the changing form of the de/composition to the likewise changing televisual concepts and phenomena that one is arraying in constellation. For the remainder, as it were, of this chapter, I will perform one localized version of such scalar de/composition, in the case at hand taking the particular form that it does because the de/composition entails an examination of the key televisual phenomenon of miniaturization.

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Perhaps readers are now poised to find it fitting that I begin the next and final movement of this chapter with a turn to a striking appearance that Marilyn Strathern herself made in television in 2002. The occasion was the airing on U.K.’s Channel 4 of an episode of *In Your Face*, a series of eighteen ten-minute films produced by the network, in which prominent Britons and their portraitists share reflections about the portraiture with documentarians Christopher Swayne and Bruno Wollheim. In Strathern’s case, as viewers learn through a series of cross cuts from interview footage of her in her Cambridge office to interview footage of her portraitist, Daphne Todd, in her studio, the portrait was commissioned by Girton College, where Strathern was headmistress in the early 2000s, and it was meant to join the series of portraits of all the prior headmistresses of

19 Strathern, *Partial Connections*, 98 (emphasis in original).
the college, dating back to its founding.²⁰ Wishing to establish a relation with Todd through which an unconventional artwork would be made — and thus arguably wishing also to preempt the determining process of prefiguration and refiguration through which the next installment in such a series of institutional portraits could be expected to participate — Strathern presented Todd with a piece of her own writing on portraits, which she had been invited to produce for a conference and which, in this event, seemed fortuitously poised to share as a gift with Todd. Yet if, following Strathern’s own gift theory, the detachable part of oneself that one proffers can only be proffered as a gift when its recipient recognizes it properly, the paper was no gift, as Todd found its argument both wrongheaded and over her head: “My words failed,” Strathern recounts. All the same, the putative failure figured as just one node in a network of con-

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versation, posing, and painting that did, in the fullness of time, yield the effect of unorthodoxy that Strathern hoped the portrait would achieve: Todd found her way, during the course of Strathern’s sitting, to representing Strathern as two-headed (and thereby dividual), both looking down as if to read and meeting the gaze of Todd, whose striking approach won the resultant work the Royal Society of Portrait Painters’s Ondaatje Prize for Portraiture in 2001. Notably, in the television documentary, the dividualizing effect of making Strathern two-headed — literalizing by drawing out a relation of Strathern to herself, otherwise pulsing within herself — is recursively amplified and also intensified, as television frames a picture of Strathern sitting in her office beside the framed portrait that pictures her in that office (Figure 1). Simultaneously, an environment without, the exterior of Girton College represented in the painting in side panels, becomes an environment within the office once the painting is situated there for the duration of Strathern’s interview.

Partial connections abound in the documentary, as well as in the embodied acts before and behind its making: of the commission to its precursors; of Todd’s hands to her materials as she applies brush to birchwood; of Strathern materially to her office and symbolically to the institutional role that it emblematizes; and — most important — of Strathern and Todd to each other and to the painting, whose final incarnation, to re-cite language of Strathern’s, takes “the right form” because of the ways in which the encounter of the sitting provoked recursions and reciprocities. In their turn, those recursions and reciprocities enabled Todd to innovate, generating and crossing what Strathern might call *cuts* (themselves mirrored in the cross cuts of the documentary). In the painting, and then redoubled in the documentary, one Strathern “exists cut out of or as an extension of another” (and another), at the same time that “these extensions — relationships and connections — are integrally part of the person” who is more singularly discernible as Strathern because “[t]hey are [Strathern’s] circuit.”

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language adapted from Strathern and to connect it partially to the language of cutting and circuitry, I would add that Todd’s composition comes to take what I have been calling “the right form” because, in the circuit of its making, composition itself is “remade, invented afresh” in the form of a decomposition of Strathern and her Cambridge world. Moreover, the decomposition testifies to the irreducible complexity, at every scale of Strathern’s being and of her world, to which the painting — and then television — asks us to attend.

This analysis produces a remainder: the Strathern (and Strathernian) episode of In Your Face may be taken as a thing that scales itself, maintaining but also slipping scales in the service of animating the decomposition that also animates the making of the portrait. If so, then where may we locate an adjacent (or perhaps not-so-adjacent) scale that makes a thing of itself — to which to connect the episode, partially? One answer — the pop-music mash-up — suggested itself to me as the result of a dream that I had in a hotel in the course of writing this book (and after all, television, or at least television as partially represented by The Sopranos, instructs us to take seriously the strange connections between hotels and dreaming). In my dream, singer-songwriter Tori Amos shared with me a photograph of her embracing a woman whom she described as her mentor — and whom she named (and the photograph portrayed) as Marilyn Strathern. In a playfully associative way, the dream prompted my thinking about a remainder from my book Obstruction (more specifically, from the meditation therein on Amos’s career), an object about which I did not write explicitly in the book but well could have: a live mash-up performance, recorded by a fan and posted to YouTube, in which Amos draws surprising — but once heard, unhearable — lyrical and musical connections between “Pictures of You,” a hit for the band The Cure in the 1980s, and “The Big Picture,” the opening track from her obversely, disastrously failed late-80s album, Y Kant Tori Read.22

To understand the mash-up as a self-thingifying scale is, or at least should be, fairly straightforward. Embarking on a mash-up means conceptualizing in a scalar way, measuring variously sized bits of lyrical and musical information in order to discover how, eventually, putting two songs into contact with each other—a thinging enactment of the scalar conceptualizing—may yield a pleasing aesthetic surplus. Similarly, to call the amateur video of “Pictures of You/The Big Picture” a species of television is, or at least should be, basically uncontroversial in our current media ecology. As we see in any number of directions in which we might turn, television, as a phenomenal and material field, capacious arrogates many things to itself; because, for instance, the Apple TV connected to my living room’s flat screen incorporates YouTube, I can watch “Pictures of You/The Big Picture” on exactly the same couch and in more or less precisely the same posture and position in which I watch How to Get Away with Murder as it airs in real time on ABC, Project Runway through my DVR, Juana Inés via Netflix, and on and on. Potentially more controversial, by contrast, is the eking of a partial connection between the Amos video and the Strathern documentary. (Wouldn’t it be more sensible, say, to think about the documentary alongside contemporaneous Channel 4 programming, or the video in the context of similarly conditioned fan labor?) Yet I find value in the partially connecting move to the extent that observations may be made, propositions tested, and questions posed, that would not likely be glimpsed except through the eccentric partial connection.

Some of the questions begin as formal ones, then prosthetically extend their reach. When a fan records Amos drawing a partial connection between “Pictures of You” and “The Big Picture,” to what extent is the resultant artifact—and its viewing—individual? How many heads are brought together? Similarly, when Swayne and Wollheim film Todd, Strathern, and her portrait, to what extent are they performing a mash-up—and what things, potentially, are not only mashed in the sense of mixed but, in another meaning of the term, also smashed in the process? Reliably measurable size, as an instantiation of scale, may be one of them.
As the title of Amos’s failed, then redeemed, song would have it, Todd’s portrait of Strathern is a literally big picture, an aspect of its being that we would grasp readily if we saw it hanging in Girton College. Yet on the small screen, any available sense of the portrait’s bigness diminishes precisely because of television’s tendential function as an apparatus of diminution—or, more nearly, of miniaturization. Yet if the televisual version of miniaturization volatilizes scale, one upshot may be the invitation to enjoy scale-slippage and the complexity that it does not diminish if, in this case, we ask of and through the slippage: What is bigness, in the end? A level or grade (as in the place in the charts of The Cure’s hit song)? A status (as in the respective prominences of Amos and Strathern in their professions)? A force (as in the norms and imperatives regarding, for instance, age and gender that both women have had to navigate, albeit quite differently)? A destination—or its voiding—or its generation as void? This last question emerges, partially, from my attention to what happens to “The Big Picture,” a song about youthful career ambition and vanity, when it is reimagined by a fiftysomething
Amos in collision with “Pictures of You” — which is to say (once more, with Strathern), when it is “remade, invented afresh” on the other side of ageing through ambition’s gradual loosening and through a reassessment of vanity, now viewed from a more autumnal perspective. In the process, the song transforms into a poignant reckoning with Amos’s and her multiplied audiences’ inevitable mortalities, the big unifying picture of death. Here, in other words, may we find another composition as decomposition, and the poignancy that I hear in it could be both amplified and intensified through one, last partial connection of the decomposed to the decomposed. In one room, a darkened auditorium, lyrics in Amos’s mouth lose shape and form as she sings, “You finally found all your courage to let it all go, to let it all be, let it all, a—oo—ll, a—ooo—h”; in another, a brightly lit office is now empty of its holder, as a final documentary shot images an academic robe no longer possessed of the shape and form that the body would give it, a remainder hanging slack over the back of a chair — and Strathern gone into the cut (Figure 2).