

Cinematic Isolation and Entrapment in *The Lobster*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines specific elements of film form in the final scene of *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015) to illustrate how they contribute to the film's meaning. Through mise-en-scène and cinematography, the scene enforces the sense of isolation, loneliness, and entrapment that marginalized individuals experience in a society that does not recognize their fundamental human right to live as ordinary civilians. *The Lobster* is a portrayal of human society that uses characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, religion, and ability to define "normal" and "natural." Such a society punishes and excludes members who do not fit those criteria.

Society creates rules to define "natural" citizens. No matter how logical the rules are, those who do not follow will be considered misfits and punished in one way or another. In different temporal and spatial contexts, misfits become marginalized by their society. In the world of *The Lobster* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015), having a partner is the defining characteristic of being natural. Single people are marginalized, isolated, incarcerated, and even punished by losing their right to live as human beings. Despite being a science fiction film, *The Lobster*, in many ways, resembles our world. This essay examines specific elements of film form in the final scene of *The Lobster* to illustrate how they contribute to the film's meaning. As I will demonstrate, through mise-en-scène and cinematography, the scene enforces the sense of isolation, loneliness, and entrapment that marginalized individuals experience in a society that does not recognize their fundamental human right to live as ordinary civilians.

In a dystopian future, everyone is mandated by law to have a partner. Single adults are sent to a place called Hotel, in which they have only 45 days to find a partner among other guests. Those who cannot find someone with similar "defining characteristics" will be transformed into an animal of their choice. Those animals are released into a forest near the Hotel. David

(performed by Colin Farrell) loses his wife to another man, resulting in his being transferred to the Hotel. There, he observes other guests who seek out superficial similarities such as frequent nose bleeding, limping, heartlessness, and lisp, if only to generate the façade of partnership under the law and to continue living as humans, not animals.

After a while, David is almost ready to be transformed. He even chooses what animal he wants to be: a lobster. However, one day, he manages to escape the Hotel and joins Loners, a group of single people who live outside society in the woods. To resist the mainstream society's peculiar laws, Loners have established their own rules. No one among them can have a partner or love relationship. Those who do not submit to the law will be punished by mutilation. At first, this seems like an ideal society for David because he is single. However, the situation changes when he falls in love with a group member known as Shortsighted Woman (performed by Rachel Weisz). Hiding the relationship is a challenging task. That is why, when they realize they both have myopia, David and Shortsighted Woman plan to return to the city because now they have a so-called defining characteristic that makes them a socially suitable couple. The leaders of Loners find out about their plan and, as a punishment, make Shortsighted



Fig. 1 | The restaurant's dining room, 01:45:48. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.



Fig. 2 | A medium shot of David, 01:46:08. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.

Woman blind. Now, she and David must keep living in the woods or find another common characteristic. David chooses the latter. He decides to blind himself to live with his love.

The scene under analysis comes from the film's final sequence. By this point in the film, David and Shortsighted Woman have tried to be accepted by society or the members of a community, with their efforts having failed each time. First, they lost their "eligibility" to live in the city as soon as they became single. Then, they tried to join the Loners community. However, when the group finds out about their relationship, they are ousted and escape from the forest where Loners live. They subsequently enter a restaurant on the city's outskirts, where David intends to execute his plan. In the dining room (Fig. 1), only the foreground, where the two characters sit, is in focus, a selective focus indicative of their isolation and detachment from their surroundings. They do not belong to this place because their relationship does not follow society's rules. They are technically Loners, an "illegal" couple that has sneaked into the world of ordinary people. On the other hand, they do not actually belong to the world of Loners, who live in the forest shown in the far background of the scene.

The blurred background, created by long lenses, enforces the film's claustrophobic atmosphere. Natural light—the soft diffused sunlight coming through the windows—is the only light source. This choice creates a low-key lighting effect, resulting in a somber, hopeless mood. The blue and green colour palette implies a sense of gloom and sadness. The colours are desaturated.

Such a choice produces a washed out look that suggests alienation and a bleak, unfortunate circumstance. The characters speak monotonously, which is indicative of the lack of emotion and passion in the world of the film.

The scene begins with a lateral medium shot of Shortsighted Woman. A piece of dramatic music, which ends after a few seconds, signals the transition from the previous scene. There is no establishing shot, but from the previous scene, we already know that they were going to a restaurant called Joel's, located on the city's outskirts. In the foreground, which is in focus, the woman is positioned in the centre of the frame, looking offscreen and to the left. She is sitting in a green curved-shaped booth, with a table of the same shape. Her position between the two curved-shaped objects evokes a sense of entrapment. The use of offscreen space is equally significant. Instead of positioning the two characters in a single frame or offering over-the-shoulder shots, the camera captures only one character in a single frame at a time. This technique adds to the sense of each character's loneliness. In addition, the blurred background shows trees (likely the same forest from which the two characters have escaped) and some metal columns, and cars pass through the highway.

The scene cuts to a medium shot of David (Fig. 2). He is sitting on the other side of the table, looking at the woman's fingers. Two other individuals in the restaurant are seated at the farthest point from David and the woman. In the foreground, his in-focused body occupies only one-third of the frame, on the right-hand side. The remainder of the frame is filled with the rows of booths in the restaurant, all blurred. David's placement in the frame, the blurred background, the vertical lines on the booths, and the oblique lines formed by the restaurant's windows create a sense of separation and isolation.

In contrast to the traditional approach to such scenes, in this scene, the camera does not offer over-the-shoulder shots of the two characters talking to each other. It is located beside one character, offering a lateral view of the other one. The side of the face angled towards the viewer is in the dark. Here, the camera offers a slightly low-angle shot of David looking at the woman's fingers. The part of her hands that shows up in the foreground's lower-right section of the frame is out of focus. David remains in focus, staring at the hands. The blurred hands can be interpreted as signifying David's subjective view of them. He is not looking at *them*. Rather, he is thinking of what awaits *him*.

The scene cuts to the next shot where, for the first time, we see a medium two shot of the two characters in a single frame, sitting on the opposite sides of the couch, both smiling (Fig. 3). A slight high angle shot emphasizes their vulnerability. The direction of the light makes the foreground dark, forming a dark space between the two characters, implying their distance and evoking a sense of hopelessness. This dark space is symmetrical and parallel to the mass of trees that stands in the background. Since the two characters come from the forest, where Loners reside, the frame's composition associates loneliness with the darkness. While the two characters smile at each other, a family passes by

the window. The characters' smiles, captured in a single shot, and the presence of a family within the same frame, work together to suggest a hopeful future for them, a future in which they can be together. For a brief moment, the balanced, symmetrical composition in the scene evokes the promise of hope that maybe they will be able to unite after all. In this shot, the emphasis on the vertical lines formed by water glasses, the salt and pepper shakers, the characters' bodies, the lines on the couch, the table lamps, the trees on the two sides of the frame, the metal columns, and even the road hazard cones creates a sense of unification between the two characters. This feeling is heightened by the depiction of most of the objects mentioned above in pairs: the pepper and salt shakers, water glasses, and table lamps, for example. After a short dialogue about getting used to blindness, David takes the knife and stands up to go to the restroom.

The scene cuts to a corridor that leads to the restroom (Fig. 4). The light coming through the exit door and the ceiling lamps at the end of the hall are the only light sources. Such lighting creates a dark space in the foreground and a small bright one in the background. The camera is static, but David's move provides a transition from a medium shot to a long shot.

In contrast to the end of the hall, which is in focus, the foreground is out of focus, suggesting that David is moving from ambiguity and uncertainty to decisiveness. Granted, he is supposed to blind himself, but maybe blindness is the only way to unite with someone he loves very much. In addition, in the centre midground and background, a red sign (pointing to the toilets) and a green sign (pointing to the exit door) are emphasized. David can choose the toilets or take the exit door and run. If he follows the red sign, there will be blood waiting for him in the restroom. Alternatively, if he decides to run, like the lonely icon on the green sign, he will be alone and, consequently, need to go back to the forest and live as a Loner. Further still, the two circular bright windows on the exit door metaphorize human eyes. If he takes the door, he will still have his eyes, and if not, he must turn right into an unknown destiny. The tight framing also emphasizes David's entrapment and isolation. When he reaches the end of the hall, he turns to the right, making clear that he has chosen blindness.

The scene cuts to the bathroom (Fig. 5). The camera offers a full lateral shot of David with a knife in his right hand, pointing it at his eyes. A wall divides the frame into two parts, with a window on the left side the only light source. Such lighting, in addition to the composition, put David in a white vertical frame. It also mirrors a much darker version of the room on the right, foreshadowing what is to come.

The camera cuts to a medium shot of David with the knife in his hand (Fig. 6). He picks up some tissues and puts them in his mouth. The natural backlighting renders his face dark and undetectable. His face is seen in the mirror as well. When he raises his hand to put the knife in his eye, his hand is masked by the tissue holder. We only see the tip of the knife pointing at his eyes, as if someone else—perhaps society, culture, the law, or the



Fig. 3 | A medium two shot of David and Short-sighted Woman, 01:46:45. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.



Fig. 4 | The corridor, 01:48:03. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.

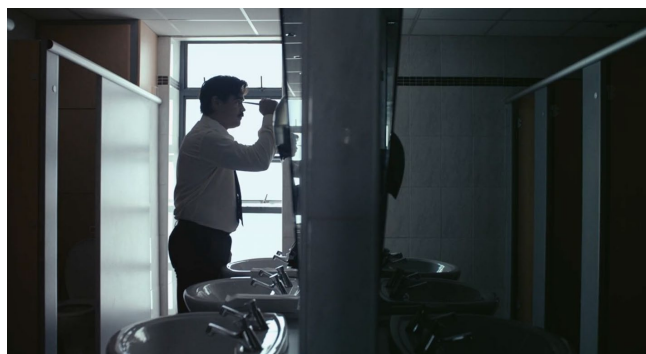


Fig. 5 | David is trying to blind himself in the bathroom, 01:48:16. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.



Fig. 6 | A medium shot of David with the knife in his hand, 01:48:50. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.



Fig. 7 | The final shot, 01:49:00. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.

government—is doing it to him. He wants to be with someone he loves, but he cannot unless he blinds himself.

While David struggles with executing, the scene cuts back to the restaurant’s dining room, where Short-sighted Woman, sitting in the same booth, waits for David (Fig. 7). The camera replicates the scene’s earlier two shot of David and Short-sighted Woman, except this time, the woman sits alone, her blind eyes looking at where David had sat before. Her glass is empty, suggesting the passage of time. She moves her head to the window as if she is looking outside, at the forest. Maybe it has been enough time for her to realize that she must go back to the woods because David will not be coming back. A couple passes by the window. The family life the woman and David had planned is passing in equal measure, becoming unreachable. The scene then cuts to

darkness and focusses there for a few seconds before the film’s credit reel begins. Does it mean David has blinded himself, or does this dark interlude allude to the tragic fate of these two characters?

Whatever the case may be, *The Lobster* is a portrayal of human society, a society that defines “normal” and “natural” through the lenses of various criteria, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, religion, ability, etc., and punishes and excludes those who do not fit those criteria. These rules may change from time to time and from one place to another. They might even seem ridiculous in the eyes of outsiders and observers. However, as *The Lobster* shows, any form of exclusion is dangerous and absurd and can potentially hurt all members of a society regardless of their status and qualifications. ■

WORKS CITED

The Lobster. Yorgos Lanthimos. Film4, Screen Ireland, 2015.