

# MISE-EN-SCÈNE

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Junior's outlook in Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo/Bad Hair*. Pragda, 2013.

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader:

Relight the marquees because the Cinematic Return is afoot.

By now, you have likely begun transitioning to new realities that will include a return to movie theatres, followed soon by film festivals, conferences, and cinematic events that live outside of your computer screen. Rest assured: these comebacks are poised to reboot our community of film and media studies. I celebrated Vancouver's re-opening this weekend by venturing out to the local cineplex to experience a film that speaks to our zeitgeist: Jon M. Chu's musical, *In the Heights*. Its theme of finding or rediscovering what is "home"—all set to exuberant song and dance numbers in the NYC streets—is a reminder that our reunion dances and homecomings lie just ahead.

Thematically, Issue 6.1 concerns the challenges, triumphs, and intersectionality of those braving a spectrum of transitions. I would like to highlight two features carrying this theme: In our lead article, Damon Reed investigates why Junior—featured on our issue's cover—is having "More than Just a *Bad Hair Day*" in Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo*, while Tara Lyons reports on the KDocsFF screening of Alex Sangha's *My Name Was January*, a documentary about the late trans activist, January Marie Lapuz. Both address the power of self-discovery and allyship when patriarchal systems attempt to deny your existence. BIPOC, LGBTQ+ resistance is the only way through it, as illustrated in these two features. Other analytical discourse focusing on variations on the transitions theme can be found throughout the pages of Issue 6.1.

*MSJ* itself has been reimagined through its recent transition to a new platform, which signals its return to its sponsoring university, KPU. While it maintains the functionality of the former site, it has a new outlook and additional features. The journal's back issues, for instance, are now available as interactive flipbooks courtesy of ISSUU. If you have not done so already, please re-register and bookmark *MSJ*'s new homepage: <https://journals.kpu.ca/index.php/msq/index>. I am grateful to the Public Knowledge Project's Jason Nugent, our in-house OJS consultant Karen Meijer-Kline, our website programmer Janik Andreas, and our layout editor Patrick Tambogon for guiding *MSJ* through its site migration. After six years, *MSJ* has found its permanent home at KPU.

Honouring all transitions,



Greg Chan  
Editor-in-Chief

## CONTRIBUTORS

### KYLE BARRETT



Dr. Kyle Barrett is a Lecturer at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and an award-winning filmmaker. His research focuses on global, low-budget production cultures and cinemas, gender representations, and creative practice. He has been published in *Directory of World Cinema: Scotland*, *European Journal of Communication*, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, *MECCSA: Special Edition Journal on Screenwriting and Gender*, *Iperstoria: Journal of American and English Studies*, and *AMES: Media Education Journal*. He has also directed several documentaries which have been screened internationally and is currently working on several new film projects.

### LEE BEAVINGTON



Lee Beavington, Ph.D., is a river walker, forest seeker, and island dweller. He is a TEDx speaker, award-winning author, interdisciplinary instructor, and learning strategist. His research explores environmental ethics, contemplative science, and arts-based learning across the curriculum. He served as co-curator for the *Wild Things: The Power of Nature in Our Lives* exhibition at the Museum of Vancouver, recipient of the Award of Merit for Excellence in Exhibitions. Lee has worked and taught in five faculties at KPU. An ardent film lover, he also directs his own video essays. To watch his SSHRC Storytellers 3-minute research video, “Bringing Biology Back to Life,” please see: <https://lnkd.in/gXu9ja5>. More about Lee at [www.leebeavington.com](http://www.leebeavington.com).

## TARA LYONS



Tara Lyons, Ph.D. (she/her), is a faculty member in the Department of Criminology at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Her research examines how legal and health systems and policies impact the health of criminalized communities. Specifically, her work examines how intersecting social and structural factors shape the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ2+ people, sex workers, and people who use drugs. Her community-based research with trans and queer individuals engaged in sex work and/or substance use has contributed to some of the only Canadian evidence in this area of study.

## MINATURE MALEKPOUR



Miniature Malekpour is a Ph.D. scholar and artist at the Australian National University. She is a contributing writer for *Diabolique Magazine*. Her writing and photography have also been published in *The Dillydoun Review*, *Drunk Monkeys+ Literature & Film*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, and *Fatal Flaw Literary Magazine*. As an academic, she has published multiple peer-reviewed papers for journals such as the *Journal of Performance, Religion and Spirituality*, the *Middle Eastern Journal of Research in Education and Social Science*, and the *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*. She is currently also on the editorial board of the *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*.

## JULIE MICHOT



Dr. Julie Michot specializes in British Culture and classical Hollywood Cinema. She defended her Ph.D. thesis on Gibraltar's identity in 2003 ("Les Gibraltariens: des Britanniques à part entre Europes et Afrique" ["The Gibraltarians: A British People on Their Own Between Two Europes and Africa"]) and has been an associate professor in English at the Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale since 2006. She is a co-editor of six volumes of conference proceedings, and the author of two research monographs—one on diegetic music in Billy Wilder's films (*Billy Wilder et la musique d'écran: filmer l'invisible* [*Billy Wilder and Source Music: Filming the Invisible*], Éditions et Presses Universitaires de Reims, 2017); the other on *Rear Window* (*Fenêtre sur cour d'Alfred Hitchcock : sortir du cadre* [*Beyond the Frame of Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*], Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2019). She is currently co-editing two issues of an academic journal on "The Figure of the Musician in the Cinema," to be published in 2022.

## DAMON REED



Damon Reed is an activist-scholar who holds a M.A. in art history and a graduate certificate in gender, sexuality, and women's studies from Virginia Commonwealth University. His current research focuses on twentieth-century German and Latin American art, visual culture, and film, particularly the intersections of marginalized identities, artistic representation, and totalitarianism. More broadly, he is interested in feminist and queer discourses in modern and contemporary art as well as debates surrounding historical memory and the memorialization of the Holocaust. Reed is currently at work on two projects: an examination of Christian Schad's portraits of women during the Nazi period and an analysis of male homosexual representation in Javier Fuentes-León's *Contracorriente*.



## GRIFFIN VICTORIA REED



Griffin Reed is a graduate student and instructor of record in the Department of English at Saint Louis University, with an undergraduate degree in comparative literature and French from Washington University in St. Louis that included time spent at the Nouvelle Sorbonne Paris III. In addition to her graduate studies, she is the assistant managing editor of *Boulevard*, and has published short fiction of her own—most recently, “The Talking Cure” in *december*. Having presented a paper at the 2021 meeting of the Graduate Association of French & Italian Students and looking forward to participating in the 2021 Cultural Studies Association Conference, her academic research currently focuses on 20th century literature and film, transmediation, affect, and the idea of perfection.

## PAUL RISKER



Paul Risker is an independent scholar, freelance film and literary critic, and interviewer. Outside of editing *MSJ*'s interview and film festival sections, he mainly contributes to *PopMatters*, although his criticism and interviews have been published by both academic and non-academic publications that include *Cineaste*, *Film International*, *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Little White Lies*. He remains steadfast in his belief of the need to counter contemporary cultures emphasis on the momentary, by writing for posterity, adding to an ongoing discussion that is essentially us belonging to something that is bigger than ourselves.

## PETER TOTTEN



Peter Totten (they/she) is an Emmy Award-Winning filmmaker and video artist based in Toronto, Ontario. Currently she is a Graduate Assistant and MFA Candidate in Ryerson University's Documentary Media Department. Peter's academic work is centred in nonfiction film history, utilizing various forms to deepen our understanding of how moving images affect society, individuals, and institutions. Their film work has been screened in galleries and festivals in Asia, Europe, and North America and her most recent film project will be debuting at the 2021 DocNow Film Festival in August 2021. Both their creative practice and academic pursuits are founded in feminist care ethics, highlighting the need for trans\* representation and championing ideas associated with the essay film form, place-making, and embodied experience.

## ELIJAH YOUNG



Elijah Young is a recent graduate of the English and Comparative Literature department at Goldsmiths, University of London. At Goldsmiths, his research centred on realising theories of postmodernism and post-structuralism in textual practice, with a focus on film studies. Currently, he is contributing to a research dossier on adaptations of Shūsaku Endō's *Silence* for *Film Matters Magazine*, for which he will be writing on the original novel. Alongside his academic work, he is developing a short experimental play about communication, *Igloo*, as part of the upcoming Camden Fringe festival in August. He is based in South London.



**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**



# It's More than Just a Bad Hair Day:

## Exploring Adolescent Sexuality in Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo/Bad Hair*

BY DAMON REED | *Virginia Commonwealth University*<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Mariana Rondón's 2013 film, *Pelo Malo (Bad Hair)*, sensationalized the cultural landscape, as it illuminated questions of sexuality, race, age, and class as it relates to the nine-year-old child protagonist, Junior. This essay employs an intersectional, feminist, and queer lens to investigate the multifaceted forms of oppression that Junior simultaneously experiences while attempting to reconcile and develop a more profound sense of self. In many aspects of Junior's life, the child protagonist lacks agency and is vulnerable to trauma. Despite these socio-cultural barriers, Junior must choose between self-articulation and submission to larger patriarchal institutions of authority. More specifically, the most potent symbol of Junior's identity, in addition to his marginalization and victimization, is his hair; it represents not only his desire to be a pop singer but also marks his Afro-Latino heritage. Problematically, Junior's yearning to find himself through his hairstyle is futile. By straightening, maintaining, or cutting his hair, he rejects one aspect of himself in favour of another, reifying an unauthentic and vexed identity. In many ways, however, Junior's post-modern search for self holds socio-cultural currency, as the film transcends fiction into a depiction of a disconcerting, contemporary reality that few filmmakers elect to depict in their works.

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MARIANA RONDÓN'S 2013 film *Pelo malo (Bad Hair)* illuminates questions of sexuality, race, age, and class in the life of the nine-year-old protagonist, Junior (Samuel Lange Zambrano), against the backdrop of social, political, and economic calamity during Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's battle with cancer. This essay interrogates the multifaceted forms of oppression that Junior experiences while attempting to reconcile and develop a more profound understanding of self. From the pernicious psychological castigation of his mother due to her perception of his deviant, homosexual orientation, to the harsh reality of physical violence within his impoverished microcosm where the chilling reality of rape and gunfire unsettle even the child characters, Junior must choose between self-articulation and submission to larger patriarchal institutions of power. The most potent symbol of Junior's identity throughout the film is his hair; it not only represents his desire to be a pop singer but also marks his Afro-Venezuelan heritage, both of which his society understands in counter-normative and even dangerous terms. Problematically, Junior's yearning to find himself through his hairstyle is futile: by straightening, maintaining, or cutting his hair, he rejects one aspect of himself in favour of another, thereby reifying an inauthentic identity. Rondón's neo-realist aesthetic allows viewers to engage with her film through various

critical frameworks, lending itself well to sexual, racial, and political interpretations of the work. In this essay, however, I will argue that, despite its well-intentioned design as a tool of meaningful socio-cultural critique, *Pelo malo's* openness to interpretation unintentionally reinforces and perpetuates many of the stereotypes and prejudices that the film is meant to undermine.

Among the broader and implicit discourses performed in the film, *Pelo malo* is laden with references to Hugo Chávez's regime. From prayers for the president's health due to his terminal illness, to the political graffiti that covers walls and buildings in Caracas, to depictions of Venezuelan citizens shaving their heads in solidarity with their ailing leader on television, one cannot extricate the figure or influence of Chávez from an understanding of Rondón's work or the Venezuelan socio-cultural landscape more broadly. It is important to note the significance of Fidel Castro's influence on the formation of Chávez's socialist agenda as the two became personal friends during the early stages of Chávez's political career (Marcano and Tyszka 214–15; 220). As film critic Charles St-Georges notes, Venezuela followed the social model Castro operationalized in Cuba, which exalted the *hombre nuevo* ("new man") who actively combats US cultural imperialism and perpetuates the patriarchy while making empty promises



**Fig. 1** | Junior and la niña play “I spy” in their apartment complex in Mariana Rondón’s *Pelo malo*, 00:05:02. Pragda, 2013.

regarding policies that relate to gender and sexual equality (294). For example, despite Chávez’s ostensible participation in the Latin American Pink Tide Movement—a radical shift beginning in 2008 in which many governments became politically leftist and more liberal—Venezuela did not experience the same social progress as other nations, such as Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina, which legalized gay marriage. Consequently, much like in Cuba, Venezuelan society continued and continues to promote heteronormative and hegemonic displays of masculinity as the zenith of the social hierarchy. This film (albeit problematically) reflects the tenuous and limited identity that male subjects can articulate, which Rondón illustrates through the way Junior’s mother, Marta (Samantha Castillo), treats him regarding his effeminate behaviour and homosocial desires.

In one of the film’s opening scenes, Rondón establishes the narrowminded and traditional socio-cultural environment of the protagonist’s neighbourhood, as Junior and his unnamed female friend, la niña (María Emilia Sulbarán), play a game similar to “I spy” in their destitute apartment block. According to Rebecca Jarman, the children’s desolate surroundings serve as a reminder of the failed promises of modernization and social progress under the Pink Tide Movement (169). In their game, one child calls out something they see, such as wet clothes laid out to dry, graffiti that says “Te amo,” or a person based on their race, and the other child attempts to find that object or individual (Rondón 4:22–5:48; “I love you”).<sup>2</sup> The children’s neighbourhood in Caracas is constructed vertically, one level of run-down apartments stacked upon another (Fig. 1).

The cubic division of the building creates a literal box around the subjects, which, in many ways, represents the rigid structure of the contemporary Venezuelan socio-cultural landscape. The visual signifier of the rectilinear building supports the notion that one should neither step out of the box nor the essentialist framework that supports the prescriptive logic of the child protagonist’s society.

The buildings that frame the film’s scene function as an apparatus that reinforces traditional gender norms and illustrates the contemporary Venezuelan political climate. According to Giorgio Agamben, an apparatus is “a set of strategies of the relation of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge,” in this case, the edifices as well as the political messages that are displayed on them bolster patriarchal authority and resistance to social progress (2). For example, in addition to the graffiti highlighting key socialist leaders across the globe as if they are members of Leonardo da Vinci’s iconic fifteenth-century masterpiece *The Last Supper*, the buildings that line Junior’s neighbourhood serve as a dogma supporting Venezuelan traditionalism (Fig. 2). Furthermore, the reverential treatment of the figures within this work of street art demonstrates not only the community’s political orientation but also its support of patrilineal authority, as emphasized by the fact that all the figures depicted are men. As Junior and his mother travel through Caracas, Junior gazes out the window while the camera focuses on a building with a partially intelligible message (Fig. 3). Although one cannot read the entirety of the passage, a few words stand out: “purificándote ... sangre ... estoy a esparcirte por la patria,



**Fig. 2** | *Pelo malo* street art uses visual allusions to the Renaissance to elevate the value of socialist leaders, 00:42:21. Pragda, 2013.



**Fig. 3** | Political poster on the side of a building in Caracas, 00:31:31. Pragda, 2013.

la lucha, la vida” (Rondón 31:33; “purifying yourself ... blood ... I am deploying you for the country, the fight, [and] for life”). The bottom of the poster appears to read “germinando la revolución sociocultural” (“germinating the socio-cultural revolution”). In this way, the text purportedly promotes a socio-cultural revolution, yet this revolution is rooted in traditional Christian diction. The idea of deployment for a cause alludes to a type of missionary or even militaristic activity while also maintaining a reference to purifying oneself. Moreover, the word “blood” implies sacrifice, suggesting blood spilled during the persecution of Christ, sacrificed on the battlefield, or perhaps even the blood consumed during the eucharist. Regardless, one thing is clear: it is a reference to the militant religious tradition that historically mistreated people with counter-normative desires and identities. Consequently, although the ways in which other characters engage with Junior clearly indicate the need for a socio-cultural revolution, the rhetoric that covers the buildings that literally anchor the city implies that impending changes may be less than positive—or, perhaps, that little is changing at all.

As the bus ride sequence progresses, Junior sees another section of graffiti highlighting a religious figure who is holding a child with an assault weapon in one hand and a *globus cruciger* (the orb and cross icon that began symbolizing

Christian authority in the Middle Ages) in the other (Fig. 4). Above the two figures the text reads, “¡Al pasado no regresaremos jamás!” signifying a desire to move forward as a country under the authority of Venezuelan socialist traditionalism, or *chavismo* (Rondón 31:47; “We will never return to the past!”). A depiction of the passion of Christ appears in the same scene, and in fact, this religious figure is rendered on the very same wall. The Christ figure wears a crown of thorns and holds the *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (*Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*), a product and symbol of the Chávez regime. Between these two vignettes appear the words “¡La piedrita venceremos!” (Rondón 31:47; “We will defeat the *Piedrita*!”). The *Piedrita* is one of Venezuela’s most politically engaged community organizations, based in Caracas, which fights to maintain the left-wing ideology of Hugo Chávez through often violent means and with apparent impunity. This collective holds significant influence in the Venezuelan political landscape, as various leaders within the *Piedrita* community, despite their established and violent reputations, publicly engage with leading officials within Chávez’s government (Velasco 3). This conglomeration of political imagery juxtaposes the political messages that lay the foundation for the ideology of Junior’s society. The juxtaposition of the graffiti that Junior sees in this scene of the film, including one segment of the wall that features a saviour figure holding the 1999 Chávez-endorsed constitution as if it were a sacred text and another with a religious appeal to never revert to the past, calls the viewer to combat *chavismo*.

Throughout Rondón’s film, one of the central anxieties for Junior and his friend, *la niña*, is getting their photograph taken for school. From the manner in which the two children wish to have their images captured, to the way in which the man at the photography studio wants to pose them, questions of gender and sexual identity are inextricable from these scenes. The photographer attempts to lure the young children into his studio by offering to take a photograph of *la niña* as Miss Venezuela and Junior as a soldier (Rondón 12:53–13:08). By offering to portray the two children in this way, the photographer makes assumptions regarding the way in which the children want their images rendered according to traditional and dualistic gender propriety. His assumptions are partially correct, in that the highly sexualized and feminized character of *la niña* does, in fact, want to be portrayed as a beauty queen. Junior, however, does not wish to have his photograph taken as a soldier, as the man at the studio recommends. Importantly, the figure that the photographer shows Junior is an image of an Afro-Venezuelan boy who is depicted holding an assault rifle while standing in front of a fabricated and photoshopped military parade (St-Georges 307). Instead,



Fig. 4 | Political art along the streets of Caracas, 00:31:47. Pragma, 2013.

he quickly corrects the photographer by saying, “Yo voy a tomar la foto vestido de cantante con el pelo liso y con esto atrás,” pointing to a backdrop depicting an idealized mountain landscape with a waterfall (Rondón 13:08–13:15; “I’ll take the picture dressed as a singer with straight hair and this as the background”). Despite Junior’s precarious social position, he does not struggle to articulate his desires, even if they are counter to dominant discourses of masculine identity. Junior’s need for a photograph to attend school, as well as the complexities of representation, permeate the film’s entire plot; however, the most profound and humane dialogue about the way in which Junior’s identity is counter-normative occurs between the same two child characters regarding their school pictures:

La niña: “¿Y si te pasa lo mismo que en carnavales?”

Junior: “No es igual porque mi abuela me está ayudando.”

La niña: “Y si mejor, te disfrazas de militar.”

Junior: “¿Por qué?”

La niña: “Para que tu mama te quiera.”

(Rondón 51:18–51:34; La niña: “And if the same thing happens to you as at Carnival?”

Junior: “It is not the same because my grandmother is helping me.”

La niña: “It would be better if you dress up as a military man.”

Junior: “Why?”

La niña: “So that your mother will love you”)

### ***Junior must choose between self-articulation and submission to larger patriarchal institutions of power.***

Although the film’s plot never directly informs the viewer of what happened at Carnival, one can assume its outcome, given recurring allusions to the event that Junior received negative treatment because of his performance of non-heteronormative masculinity. It is important to note that, according to la niña’s claim, the love Junior will or will not receive from his mother is contingent upon his conformity to traditional gender norms rather than the idealized and natural bond that mother and son are assumed to share.

Throughout the film, Junior’s mother, Marta, attempts to impose traditional, heterosexual gender roles on her susceptible son. In many ways, Rondón’s choice to centre her film on a child, rather than an adult, creates a radical shift in social agency while exposing the vulnerability of the nine-year-old protagonist to his mother’s damning abuse. Chiara Santilli argues in her analysis of the film that one should not analyze Junior within a framework of sexuality because, due to his young age, he has not yet consolidated an authentic sexual orientation (47–49). Santilli’s reductive argument complicates the viewer’s understanding of homosexual identity in *Pelo malo*. I argue that, while the



Fig. 5 | Junior gazes at Mario, the boy at the newsstand, 00:32:37. Pragda, 2013.

cinematic and socio-cultural gaze often stereotypes adult homosexual men, especially feminized adult homosexual men, Junior's age also marginalizes him from queer discourses as well as available masculine identities, as society assumes the child subject to be incapable of embodying such complex identity politics. Yet, in the case of Rondón's protagonist, he has clearly developed a sense of self despite his age. Although Junior is arguably a pre-pubescent character, that is not synonymous with a pre-sexual one. In fact, it is quite common for homosexual individuals to share later in life that they knew they were sexually *different* at ages far younger than puberty. As a result, my claim that Junior is already aware of sexuality is, therefore, hardly a stretch of the imagination. Jarman suggests that "the figure of the child itself has become a site of tension, regarded either as vacant vessel for heteronormative ideals or a site of queer resistance" (169). Despite Santilli's argument that Junior has not yet developed a sexual identity, I argue, instead, that Junior displays a clear interest in Mario (Julio Méndez), the teenage boy who works at the newsstand in their community, thereby illustrating his existing and developing sexuality. Junior takes advantage of every opportunity to interact with and observe Mario, and this interest becomes a sinister development in the film's plot as regards Junior's relationship with his mother. Junior, for example, often *loses* his matches so that he can return to buy more from the boy downstairs. And following a physical altercation with his mother, in which Marta chases Junior around their apartment attempting to forcibly cut

his hair, Junior finds comfort in the same teenage boy, who gives him his hooded sweatshirt to wear and a place to stay before returning home. I suggest that these homosocial interactions with Mario are, in fact, early manifestations of Junior's homosexual desire and even lust for the teenage boy at the newsstand.

Although some may argue that Junior's yearning to interact with Mario derives from the absence of a father figure in his life, I do not support this interpretation, due to the film's potent sexual undertones. Importantly, Junior keeps returning to the newsstand to purchase matches from Mario. Symbolically, matches are significant in that they produce a spark, suggesting Junior's romantic desire for the older boy. Furthermore, throughout the film, Junior gazes, often furtively, at Mario (Fig. 5). The fact that Junior needs to hide his gaze not just from Mario, but also from the community at large, illustrates that there is something in that gaze that those around him perceive as perverse. During one scene in which Mario catches Junior looking at him from the window, Junior quickly hides behind a wall and waits ten seconds before resuming his downward gaze at the newsstand worker, who has already returned to his duties (Rondón 19:03–19:12). Junior also watches Mario and his friends play basketball at various moments throughout the film. One of these occasions in particular is quite significant because, after one game of basketball, Junior walks back to the newsstand directly beside Mario (Fig. 6). The two boys, however, are separated by a chain-link fence, representing the obstacles that Junior will have to





**Fig. 6** | Junior and Mario walking back to the newsstand after a basketball game, 00:38:00. Pragda, 2013.

overcome in order to openly express his homosexual desire within his traditional society (Rondón 37:06–38:12). After a conversation with Carmen (Nelly Ramos), Junior’s paternal grandmother, in which Carmen acknowledges the genuine reason why Junior keeps returning to the newsstand to buy matches, Marta and Junior have the following dialogue:

Marta: “¿Cómo es Mario?”

Junior: “Él tiene ojos largos como de mentira.”

Marta: “¡No tienes el porque mirarle los ojos de varones! ¡No vas mas nunca para el abasto!”

(Rondón 1:06:33–1:06:54;

Marta: “How is this Mario?”

Junior: “He has large eyes as if they’re fake.”

Marta: “You have no reason to look at another man’s eyes! You’re never going to that store again!”)

As indicated by this exchange, the very act of noticing the other boy’s eyes is enough of a queer marker to merit Marta’s chastisement, as she does not believe that heteronormative men should pay attention to each other’s physical attributes.

Although my argument here is primarily rooted in complicating the viewer’s understanding of Junior, the male protagonist, it is necessary to consider the role of the other sexualized, pre-adolescent character, Junior’s unnamed companion, *la niña*. While scholars have been

### ***By offering to literally purchase Junior from Marta, Junior’s grandmother objectifies and monetizes her grandson.***

more concerned with parsing out Junior’s complex identity, the female child is equally complex. Unlike Junior, *la niña* articulates a reductive and traditional feminine identity, as her greatest preoccupation throughout the film is her desire to look like Miss Venezuela (Fig. 7). Throughout the film, Rondón portrays *la niña* watching beauty contests, and in one scene, she even sings the show’s anthem: “Hoy en la fiesta de la belleza, todas podríamos ganar. Tú, yo, ella. Todas podríamos ganar” (Rondón 11:09–11:24; “Today in the beauty contest, everyone could win. You, me, her. All of us could win”). Dubiously, the anthem’s poetic voice assumes the audience to be female by its use and repetition of the feminine word “todas,” reinforcing traditional gender roles that associate femininity with aesthetic and physical beauty. Although *la niña* is a female character, Rondón did not cast a girl who looks like she could easily grow up to assume the crown. Instead, *la niña* is a corpulent young girl who does not satisfy hegemonic beauty standards, which further compounds the cruel irony of her obsession: she *cannot* win. Nonetheless, the two child characters watch the beauty contest together, reifying both



**Fig. 7** | La niña poses for her school photograph as Miss Venezuela, 01:23:22. Pragda, 2013.

la niña's normativity and Junior's difference, as only one of the two characters represents the show's intended audience. Furthermore, la niña's house serves as yet another reminder of the character's hyper-femininity and upbringing, as her mother practices weight-loss hypnosis for groups of women in the family's living room. The mother's dual profession illustrates the ways in which the patriarchy oppresses her as well as her clients: she makes a living caring for children from her community while also helping women lose weight. She assumes the traditionally female role of the caregiver, but also supports an oppressive dogma that criticizes female bodies for being anything other than the idealized and svelte beauty contestants la niña idolizes quietly in the other room.

While watching the pageants with Junior, la niña tells him that he would look good as a "Miss," referencing the winners of the many beauty pageants that the two children watch together. Junior would "por lo menos estar[ía] flaca" (Rondón 50:22–50:30; "at least be skinny"), a positive

feminine physical attribute of special importance to la niña, as her weight will prohibit her future as a beauty queen in addition to the fact that her mother works as a weight-loss coach. One reason this scene is crucial is that there is a linguistic shift when referencing Junior. For the first and only time in the film, la niña refers to Junior in a beauty contest using the feminine adjective "flaca" rather than the masculine adjective "flaco." In this way, although Junior's society clearly extols biological determinism over social constructionism, la niña's comment clearly illustrates gender's performative quality, as if by assuming the role of a "Miss" he, too, would receive feminine adjectival treatment.

Many of Junior's behaviours incite his mother's scrutiny and retribution as she perceives him to be effeminate and, therefore, counter-normative. From Junior's dancing fluidly to hip-hop music and singing on the bus, to falling down in public and attempting to straighten his hair, Marta considers Junior's public comportment to be feminine, inappropriate, and even a medical ailment. It is important

to note, however, that Marta does not treat both of her children this way. For example, in a scene where Marta is bathing her infant child, she gently caresses the baby's skin and talks sweetly to them (Rondón 33:23–34:04). In stark contrast, Junior's mother rarely treats him with humanity, let alone kindness. In one scene, Junior's mother follows him into a public restroom to reprimand him for urinating sitting down, by exclaiming, “¡Los varones no se sientan para marear!” (Rondón 29:27–29:31; “Men do not sit down to piss!”). In the next scene, she takes her nine-year-old son to his healthcare provider to have him examined for illness and “normal” physical development. Despite her concern, the doctor assures her: “Él no tiene nada” (Rondón 30:48–31:00; “There is nothing wrong with him”). Notwithstanding this favourable report of health, however, Marta remains unsatisfied with this diagnosis and later in the film returns to the doctor alone, expressing her concern that her son may be a “maricón” (Rondón 53:27–53:30; “fag”). According to cultural scholar Rafael Ramírez, the term *maricón* is the “worst insult” that one could give, as it represents the societal devaluation of and scorn for the feminized male subject (97). In addition, through sexual difference, traditionalist society perceives the counter-normative, queer individual to be “subhuman, inhuman, [or even] non-human,” as Gloria Anzaldúa explores (40). Furthermore, Marta's attempt to employ medical healing practices to address and remedy her son's counter-normative identity demonstrates her own prejudices toward homosexual communities, as well as her active role in the perpetuation and reinforcement of patriarchal systems of hetero-normative authority.

Recent criticism of *Pelo malo*, in which scholars critique the relationship between the film's child protagonist and his inability to consolidate a true sense of self due to his age, raises useful, even urgent, questions in the evaluation of Rondón's work. If the child protagonist has not fully articulated an authentic sexuality, what, then, are the grounds for his mother's ire and castigation? I suggest that, due to Marta's perceptions, one can read her as an inverted white saviour figure, as she attempts to save her son from the damning reality of being a “maricón” within a traditionalist and hetero-normative society. According to Latin American film scholar Andrea Meador Smith, “The cultural heft of the white saviour trope thus lies in its portrayal of positive images of whites as liberators” (326). In this way, reinforcing a racist hierarchy, Marta is the most light-skinned of the film's named characters, yet her actions squarely designate her as the film's antagonist: her attempts to be a good mother and protect him from his counter-normative identity actually constitute dangerous psychological attacks on, and abuse of, her son. For example, due to Marta's status as a widow, Junior's doctor tells Marta that

***The fact that Junior needs to hide his gaze not just from Mario, but also from the community at large, illustrates that there is something in that gaze which those around him perceive as perverse.***

she needs to “buscar una figura masculina para que [Junior] tenga un ejemplo” of proper masculine behaviour (Rondón 54:10–54:15; “look for a masculine figure so that [Junior] has a model”). In response to this advice, Marta decides to have sexual intercourse in front of her young son, forcing him to keep his bedroom door open and watch. The scene implies that this is Marta's idea of providing a “model” of masculine behaviour and sexual expression—in the form of her former boss, who is extorting sex in exchange for promises of a return to her former job. Understandably, Junior rolls over in his bed in an attempt to shield himself from his mother's perverse modeling of supposed normative and compulsory heterosexuality. To accentuate this point, Rondón employs the prolonged gaze of the camera to capture this rigid and provocative sexual display. The director thus exploits the viewer in the same way that Marta manipulates Junior, forcing the audience to observe Marta's sexual acts voyeuristically.

The more Marta attempts to correct Junior's developing sexuality, the more Junior begins to behave in a traditionally machista manner. The morning after Marta's sexual display, for example, Junior violently demands that she prepare him plantains for breakfast, specifically in the way that he likes them. As Jarman argues, the child protagonist's “chauvinistic outburst shores up concepts of masculinity that are bound up with the violence associated with the *barrios*, as though heterosexual desire is premised on domestic aggression” (171). In this way, Marta's attempt to change her son's sexuality by subjecting him to a performance of toxic heterosexual masculinity results in Junior's aggressive attempts to force her into a traditionally subservient female role.

As the film progresses, Junior finds comfort in his Afro-Venezuelan paternal grandmother, Carmen (Nelly Ramos), as she provides the much-needed support and affection that Marta continues to deny him. Unlike *Pelo malo*'s other characters, Carmen embraces Junior for who he is, regardless of his sexual orientation. She tells Marta, “Tú no puedes hacer nada. El es si es, no se lo quita” (Rondón



**Fig. 8** | Junior wearing the flamboyant suit Carmen made for him, 00:58:07. *Pragda*, 2013.

1:05:40–1:05:45; “You cannot do anything. He is who he is. You cannot change him”). Throughout the film’s narrative, Carmen supports Junior’s aspiration of being a pop singer by singing with him into hairbrushes at her home and even sewing him a highly flamboyant suit appropriate for a pop star. Simultaneously, Carmen pushes to get custody of Junior, as she does not believe that Marta is emotionally or financially capable of caring for the nine-year-old boy. When Marta confronts Carmen in response to her desire to get custody of her grandson, Marta claims, “Si te lo dejo, ellos lo van a matar en un par de años,” directing Carmen’s attention to the streets of their Afro-Venezuelan community and alluding to the violent death of Junior’s father (Rondón 21:52–21:54; “If I leave him with you, they will kill him in a few years”). In response, Carmen argues, “No, él es distinto. Él no quiere armas. Él solo quiere ser bonito y arreglarse” (Rondón 21:54–22:05; “No, he is different. He does not want guns. He just wants to be pretty and get dressed up”). This conversation references the scene that occurs between the two child characters in the photography studio, in which Junior expresses for himself that he does not want to be depicted as a young soldier with weapons. Moreover, the two female characters allude to the racialized Venezuelan social landscape that categorizes Junior as Afro-Venezuelan and “fantasizes a future of military service” (St-Georges 307). In this way, from the gang violence associated with Carmen’s ostensibly Afro-Venezuelan community, to the role of soldiers who sacrifice their lives for the Venezuelan polity, this dialogue

hints at various ways in which violence intersects the Afro-Venezuelan experience. While Marta believes that Junior’s feminized qualities will be those that lead to his downfall, for Carmen, they serve as an opportunity for social and economic ascendancy and escape, as he could work as an effeminate performer, which is, according to St-Georges, “a specialized niche in the Venezuelan socio-economic fabric” (307). Given Junior’s age, however, I do not contend that Junior is aware of this specific Venezuelan community.

Carmen attempts to exacerbate the conflict in Marta’s relationship with her son so that she will no longer want him and pleads with Marta for assistance in her advancing age. Her desire to get custody of her grandson pushes her so far that she offers to purchase Junior from Marta for whatever price she demands, targeting the single mother’s financial struggle to find work, as her unemployment constantly threatens her and her children’s survival. By offering literally to purchase Junior from Marta, Junior’s grandmother objectifies and monetizes her grandson. In this way, his Afro-Venezuelan queer body becomes an object for purchase rather than an independent entity with agency of its own. During this conversation, Carmen calls attention to the fact that Marta’s other child is a product of her infidelity to Carmen’s own son, pointing out that the infant “ni se parece a él,” due to the infant’s light-skinned complexion, yet she does not criticize Marta for her affair, as her only desire is to have Junior (Rondón 21:02–21:04; “does not even resemble him”). As Carmen illustrates consistently throughout the film, she is clearly aware of Junior’s homosexual qualities



**Fig. 9** | Junior's rejection of self while his peers sing the national anthem, 01:28:54. *Pragda*, 2013.

and desires. Her comments to Marta regarding her own old age seem to imply that, if she were to obtain custody of the young boy, she would force him to assume the traditionally feminine role of the caregiver to support her in her advancing age. Consequently, while Carmen's intention is to foster Junior's queer identity, she also wishes to exploit it in a self-serving manner. Despite her superficial appearance as a supportive, positive, and accepting figure in the child's life, a more critical consideration of her behaviour suggests that her motives may be more nuanced and malevolent than they initially appear.

Once Carmen presents the suit she has made for Junior, he realizes that it is counter-normative to traditional male fashion in both colour and design (Fig. 8). Junior even protests: "Soy un varón y no voy a usar tu vestido," and his distaste for the outfit leads to an analogous sentiment for his grandmother, as well (Rondón 55:45–55:55; "I am a man, and I am not going to wear your dress"). This turning point in the film's plot illustrates the ways in which the child characters are unable to separate themselves from their stifling socio-cultural conditions, as the suit's overtly feminized appearance exacerbates Junior's internalized oppression and, to the degree that he feels disdain for his grandmother, distances him from the one woman in his family who has treated him with any measure of compassion. Furthermore, this scene solidifies Junior's conception that masculinized male subjects are preferable to effeminate ones. While, at first, his response to the outfit seems unwarranted, Carmen's dress reinforces the aforementioned

conversations between Junior and la niña, in which the girl comments on Junior's femininity and warns her friend to conform to hegemonic gender and sexual propriety in order to receive favour and love from his mother.

Because Marta does not want Junior to live with his grandmother but faces the economic strain of being an unemployed single mother, she agrees to have sex with her former employer in exchange for a return to her post as a security guard, a typically masculine job. Paradoxically, Marta, the character who has uncompromisingly attempted to combat Junior's developing—if not already reified—homosexual identity, performs a counter-normative identity of her own by working as a security guard. By sexually commodifying herself, Marta gains the financial agency to purchase a pair of hair clippers that she uses to give her son an ultimatum: cut his hair or move in with Carmen, his now estranged grandmother. As St-Georges notes, "With no agency or autonomy of his own, Junior is forced to agree to shave his head indefinitely, to commit to ongoing processes of self-censorship to render invisible parts of himself viewed as undesirable by others" (294). By shaving his head, Junior metaphorically dismisses his truest self, the Afro-Venezuelan, queer-nine-year-old boy who likes to sing and dance in public. At the end of the film, Rondón captures the young protagonist, bald in the schoolyard, glum and silent as his peers sing the national anthem (Fig. 9). The fact that the school children are singing the national anthem alludes to the very societal norms that have marginalized, victimized, and excluded the



Fig. 10 | Venezuelan woman shaving her head in solidarity with President Hugo Chávez, 00:26:38. Pragda, 2013.

nine-year-old protagonist from living his most authentic life. Furthermore, in the one scenario when it is socially appropriate for the young male character to sing in public, he no longer desires to do so. Junior, therefore, no longer expresses the qualities that his society deems inappropriate for male subjects, such as singing, an action his mother reprimands him for earlier in the film.

The topic of Junior's hair is omnipresent throughout Rondón's film, and even provides the title of the work. It is difficult to disentangle the complex relationship between Junior's race, sexuality, and hair. Throughout the film, the

and have what society considers to be unattractive hair. Although the term "pelo malo" is not exclusive to the Venezuelan context, Rondón jokes "that the second most profitable industry [in Venezuela], after oil, is hair straightening. Because everyone here wants to have straight hair" (qtd. in Garsd). Yet, despite the ubiquity of this desire, Junior's relationship with his hair is a constant site of struggle and frustration within the film. Although Junior employs various hair straightening methods throughout the film, the only way he is able to achieve the straightness he desires is through his grandmother's brush and hairdryer

***In this way, the act of forcing her son to shave his hair cements the destruction of their relationship, as well as the young character's most authentic identity.***

child protagonist attempts to relax or straighten his hair in order to look like a pop star. Even after obsessively brushing, blow-drying, and applying mayonnaise to his thick, tightly curled hair, he is unable to achieve the straightness he desires, and he receives the unwelcomed physical and psychological abuse of his mother in response to altering his appearance in a feminine way. According to the film's director, however, in the Venezuelan context the term "pelo malo" holds "common currency" because so many Venezuelans come from a racially mixed background

(Gillam 9). Importantly, these tools work in the context of Junior's love and affection from his grandmother, Carmen. Following the collapse of their relationship—despite its shortcomings—Junior finds himself unable to straighten his hair and, by extension, authentically express himself because of his inability to access these unique devices within the sanctuary of his grandmother's home.

In addition to Junior's journey to find himself through his hair, Rondón punctuates *Pelo malo*'s plot with scenes that depict head shaving. During the scenes that show

Venezuelan people shaving their head in solidarity with Hugo Chávez, the banner that runs across the bottom of the image reads “Oración ecuménica de sanación” (Rondón 26:13–26:41; “Ecumenical Prayer of Healing”) (Fig. 10). In the Christian tradition, ecumenical prayers refer to spiritual practices intended to unite the various sects of Christianity and promote unity (Fig. 9). Similar to the way in which Venezuelan citizens shave their heads in solidarity with their president to support his healing, Marta forces her son, Junior, to shave his head; however, hers is an attempt to correct his counter-normative, homosexual desire. Despite the national unity implied by the shaved heads on the television screen, this action does not promote unity for Marta and Junior, as illustrated by their final words in the film, when Junior tells his mother, “No te quiero” (Rondón 1:27:04–Rondón1:27:09; “I do not love you”). Marta responds, “Yo tampoco” (Rondón 1:27:06–1:27:09; “Me neither”). In this way, the act of forcing her son to shave his hair cements the destruction of their relationship, as well as the young character’s truest identity. Thus, the head-shaving that connotes patriotism and ostensible good citizenship at the national level instead symbolizes the death of the mother-son relationship at the microcosmic level.

According to Rondón, in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), her film’s ending is a sign of hope for the future, that “there is a possibility that things won’t be the way they’ve always been” (qtd. in Garsd). Contrastingly,

Vinodh Venkatesh, a scholar of queer Latin American cinema, argues that Junior “has no pretensions of harboring a ‘new’ or ‘better’ Latin America; rather, he simply and brutally shows how homophobia and hegemonic masculinity regiment expressions of difference” (198). While the young queer character outlives his text, a phenomenon in comparison to many cultural productions that highlight homosexual male characters in which the counter-normative male often dies within the narrative, Junior simultaneously submits himself to the larger systems of authority that vilify him and even impede him from consolidating an authentic sense of self. Therefore, I suggest that the protagonist’s survival in the film is contingent upon his submission to patriarchal systems of authority and the reification of a more normative identity, perpetuating the fallacy that queer identity is something that can be remedied. In fact, according to the logic presented in the film, it is as easy to change one’s sexual orientation to satisfy hegemonic expectations as it is to change one’s hairstyle. Despite Rondón’s superficial nod to future social change and Venkatesh’s theory about Junior’s role in queer cinema, I contend that the film suggests that those most vulnerable to exploitation should suppress their identities rather than disrupt the traditional patriarchy. By analyzing Junior in this extraordinarily compromising socio-cultural position, Rondón’s film advocates for him to remain within the bounds of traditional sexual and gender expectations and live a fallacious rather than an authentic life. ■

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## NOTES

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- 2 Unless otherwise indicated, all English-to-Spanish translations are mine.

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# When Someone's Death Makes Someone Else Blossom:

## How Hitchcock and Wilder Successfully Combine Corpses and *Joie de Vivre* in *The Trouble with Harry* and *Avanti!*

BY JULIE MICHOT | *Université du Littoral-Côte d'Opale*

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### ABSTRACT

Much has already been written on Alfred Hitchcock and Billy Wilder - separately; yet, many of their films do share common features. Although *The Trouble with Harry* can be seen as a fanciful utopia while *Avanti!* is more realistic and serious, the approach to death offered by these movies is, in fact, similar: not only corpses and burials are turned into comic motives but the dead are more than lifeless bodies and they “help” the characters who survive them to learn the art of living and of loving, and also to see death in a less tragic light. Hitchcock and Wilder take risks by reversing the values of their audiences and by breaking some taboos; still, they manage to produce movies that are all but ghoulish. This article aims at analyzing the filming and narrative techniques allowing the two directors to do so.

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Detective Mulligan (Pat O'Brien):

Better bring a check in case the joint is raided.

Speakeasy waiter (John Indrisano):

Who's gonna raid a funeral?

Mulligan:

Some people got no respect for the dead.

*Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959).

Cemetery caretaker (John Steadman):

None left. Bad business, that.

George Lumley (Bruce Dern):

You mean the fire?

Caretaker:

Never liked them multiple funerals.

Too much work involved all at one time.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Family Plot*

(Universal Pictures, 1976)

“BLOOD AND JOKES DO NOT MIX” (Zolotow 203): that is how David O. Selznick famously predicted the failure of *Some Like It Hot*, a film which turned out to be one of Billy Wilder's most successful. Building a comedy around the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre, having gangsters use

coffins to hide smuggled bottles of whiskey, or transforming a funeral parlor into a speakeasy was indeed rather daring, especially in the United States of the 1950s. But *Some Like It Hot* takes place in 1929 Chicago and the initial killing is neither surprising in such a context, nor poignant for the spectators. After all, Toothpick Charlie (George E. Stone) and his henchmen got what they deserved for having betrayed Spats Colombo (George Raft)—it is the hard law of the mob. Moreover, the massacre is just the starting point of the movie whose main interest for the public is to see the male protagonists struggle with their new “female” identities, wondering how they will get away with their lies.

The case of *Avanti!* (1972), another comedy by Wilder, is different: the film's plot is contemporary of its shooting; there are not so many crazy characters or situations; and the story revolves around the tragic end of two lovers who happen to be the hero's father and the heroine's mother. In *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), Alfred Hitchcock also puts death at the heart of the picture though his film is anything but a drama. It is not unusual for Hitchcock to do so. In *Rope* (1948), the corpse is hidden in a chest in the very first scene. While “there's no body in the family plot,” according to some original posters of the eponymous movie, the late Harry (Philip Truex) is physically present

all through *The Trouble with Harry*; in fact, the movie is rhythmically by the dead man who is regularly dug up and buried again. In the same way, Wilder's *Avanti!* features numerous and complicated formalities for the repatriation of the corpses, and also their snatching by local Mafiosi at one point. The dead are thus full-fledged protagonists. Yet, both films could be considered as hymns to life: whether in *Avanti!* or *The Trouble with Harry*, the *mise-en-scène* enhances the beauty of the landscapes while good food and drinks as well as art—whether painting or music—are vital ingredients, too. If death is an integral part of life, then the newly-formed couples in the two movies do more than simply cope: they learn how to live better and are reborn emotionally when other characters, sometimes their loved ones, pass away.

By analyzing the nature of dialogues as well as the role of props and the types of shots used, this paper aims at revealing the methods and tricks used by Hitchcock and Wilder in *The Trouble with Harry* and *Avanti!* to turn what could be grim or even sordid stories into films that are not only funny but also imbued with poetry. In doing so, the second purpose of this article is to highlight the close connections between Wilder's and Hitchcock's art.

#### LAUGHING AT DEATH?

Although *The Trouble with Harry* and *Avanti!* are different in their style and screenplays, both Hitchcock and Wilder take up the challenge of using death and dead people as the driving force behind their comedy films. As Kevin Lally wonders in his 1996 biography of Wilder, “how many romantic comedies revolve around the retrieval of two parental corpses and include murder among their subplots?” (380). The original American posters set the tone. That of *Avanti!* features a group of smiling pallbearers wearing suits of diverse colours—none of which are black—carrying a coffin in an unorthodox manner; they are surrounded by various characters, including a maid with a roll of toilet paper, and all are rushing forward. The focal point of the poster for *The Trouble with Harry* is Captain Wiles (Edmund Gwenn) dragging a man's corpse; but only the legs are visible, and they are drowned in autumn leaves, as if to familiarize the spectators with the omnipresence of death in the movie. Hitchcock's film is adapted from the novel of the same name written in 1949 by Jack Trevor Story; interestingly, the cover design of the 1970 Penguin edition, by Alan Aldridge, is a runaway coffin—technically, the coffin has legs and this image announces the posters for *Avanti!* which will come out two years later. The publicity material makes it clear that neither movie will equate death with sorrow, dignity, or utter contemplation, which could make a western audience feel uncomfortable right away.

Two key elements in enabling the spectators to accept death as a subject for comedy are characterization and dialogue. In *The Trouble with Harry*, none of the characters seem to be sorry for whatever happened to the dead man. This detached, carefree mood is inevitably communicated to the public. As Lesley Brill notes in *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock's Films*,

no event or person in *The Trouble with Harry* is allowed to cause or suffer real pain. Nor do they seriously threaten to do so. The comic mode of the film finally results from its obsessive repetition of the theme of rebirth; for if time and death have no power to injure, what terrors can remain? (290)

Early into the film, Jennifer Rogers (Shirley MacLaine), upon recognizing her husband, could not be happier: Harry “is in a deep sleep, a deep, wonderful sleep,” she says, suggesting that his death will have fantastic consequences for her and possibly for him, too. Actually, the public will later learn that Harry was a complicated and tormented man and that he was not particularly likeable—he was “horribly good,” as Jennifer will put it. Harry insisted on replacing his late brother by marrying his pregnant widow, Jennifer, but only out of family loyalty. The fact that he stood her up “on [her] second wedding night” on account of an unfavorable horoscope is something Jennifer could never forgive. Harry is found dead in the woods after having come to his wife's house because he wanted her back. He passes away soon after Jennifer hits him on the head with a milk bottle, but the thought that she may be the one who killed him gives her no remorse; quite unexpectedly, it makes her laugh. As Lesley Brill writes, “Hitchcock's pastoral comedy takes place in a New England countryside that appears prelapsarian; the knowledge of sin and of death is excluded” (284). This lack is why all the protagonists—and not only Jennifer—never hesitate to say what they think straightforwardly, as a child would.

If Jennifer is not at all upset when seeing the dead Harry, it is also because there is absolutely no difference between the corpse and the man he used to be; she confirms that “he looked exactly the same when he was alive, except he was vertical.” Beyond the irony of the line, Jennifer gives crucial information: because Harry was definitely not a funny guy, he never was truly “alive,” as opposed to his sparkling young wife. It seems that Harry died the way he lived: insignificantly. Neither the spectators nor the other characters can really judge for themselves since Harry is already dead when the film starts, and those who live in the small village barely knew him or never met him at all. Therefore, Harry will not be missed by any of the characters, and the public hardly has sympathy for him. “Some people are better off dead,” a vehement Bruno (Robert

Walker) tells Guy (Farley Granger) in *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951). Jennifer implies this very conviction when she talks about Harry but the choice of words is different. There is no violence in her attitude and, above all, she never intended to murder her husband. Arnie (Jerry Mathers), her little boy, looks at the corpse and asks, "Will it get better?" and Jennifer's answer is unequivocal: "Not if we're lucky." Later on, she will also tell Miss Gravely (Mildred Natwick), "I don't care what you do with Harry, just as long as you don't bring him back to life." The young woman's frankness is disarming and endearing. Her second husband was "too good to live," she believes. If she said that Harry was "born to be dead," the spectators would probably not be shocked either.

The fact Jennifer does not shed a tear on discovering she is widowed for the second time is thus rather logical. What is more surprising is her reaction to the death of Robert, her first husband and Arnie's father, with whom she was madly in love. Soon after their marriage, Robert "got killed"; although no detail is given, it must have been a violent and sudden death. While any loving wife would be devastated in such circumstances, Jennifer only briefly comments, "I was heartbroken... for six weeks." Consequently, in *The Trouble with Harry*, it appears that not even the death of a loved one is a tragic event. One line by Pamela Piggott (Juliet Mills) in *Avanti!* gives the impression that the characters of this Wilder film are also taking death lightly. Pamela explains that when her boyfriend inelegantly left her, she attempted suicide: "I . . . bought myself a suitcase full of fish and chips and a dozen bottles of Guinness stout and tried to eat myself to death. Took them hours to pump my stomach out. It was stupid, but I've learned my lesson: no more fish and chips." The moral of the story might as well come out of Jennifer's mouth in *The Trouble with Harry*.

Nevertheless, basically, the relationship to death and corpses is not the same in *Avanti!* In Wilder's film, there is more than just one body and the emotional link between the dead and the living is much stronger. Wendell Armbruster, Jr. (Jack Lemmon) is an American executive travelling to Ischia to claim the body of his father who died in a car crash. He learns upon arrival that Wendell Armbruster, Sr. had an affair with a woman for ten years, and that the woman in question was also killed in the accident. Pamela, an English young lady he met on his way to Naples, happens to be her daughter. Wendell's attitude is often dictated by anger more than by sorrow, and his comments on the first draft of his father's eulogy, which he recorded on a Dictaphone before he learnt the truth, are a source of laughter: "He died suddenly and tragically far from his loved ones alone in a distant land where he used to go to rest his mind and heal his body. *Bullshit*.

He was a philanthropist, a pillar of the church, a tireless crusader for all that is decent. . . . *Dirty old man. That's what he was.*" But there are also tears in *Avanti!*, notably during the scene at the morgue, when Wendell and Pamela are asked to identify their parents' bodies—the non-diegetic music arranged by Carlo Rustichelli heightens the poignancy of the passage.<sup>1</sup>

Wilder's framing is all but weepy: there are several long shots and no close-ups or subjective cameras, which minimizes the public's identification with the characters, and in particular with Pamela, who is the more afflicted of the two: the spectators will only be able to see one tear rolling down the young woman's cheek. The way sunlight filters through the few windows is also essential in giving the scene its nuances and poetic atmosphere: sunshine commonly symbolizes life and this element of *mise-en-scène* is fundamental in making the passage neither oppressive nor depressing for the audience (Fig. 1). This, once more, underscores the dialectics of life and death present throughout the film. After Wendell has left the place, Pamela stays there alone with the two bodies. In their 1979 monograph, British authors Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner provide an insightful analysis of the scene:

With the romantic theme music heard softly on the soundtrack and with a gesture which surely recalls Sabrina's when hearing "La Vie en Rose" outside her Paris apartment, Pamela moves to the window and opens it. And for the first time in the scene the screen suddenly becomes suffused with sunlight. It is a magical, cathartic moment—an infusion of light and life into a scene of darkness and death and a strangely beautiful pointer to the way the example of the dead lovers is to irradiate the lives of their descendants. (53)

Another important point is that the corpses are never shown as such, contrary to what happens in *The Trouble with Harry*. The audiences of *Avanti!* only "know" the dead illegitimate couple through what the other characters say about them, and not even their picture is produced. Thus, in spite of the physical and central presence of the sheet-covered bodies in the long scene at the mortuary, a certain distance is kept, adding to the detachment already achieved through the eschewal of close-ups. The other infallible technique of Wilder is the comic relief provided by the coroner (Pippo Franco) just after Wendell and Pamela have sworn that the bodies are those of their parents: he takes all the supplies he needs from his many pockets and rhythmically stamps forms of different colours with the utmost professionalism, under Wendell's reproving eye.<sup>2</sup>

All along *Avanti!*, the spectators' attention is also diverted from the inevitable character of death by the



**Fig. 1** | By eschewing close-ups in the scene at the morgue, Wilder avoids voyeuristic filming and whimpering, 42:47. MGM, 2006.

## **Hitchcock and Wilder turn what could be grim or even sordid stories into films that are not only funny, but also imbued with poetry.**

practical realities associated with the repatriation of the bodies, and in particular by the necessity of using appropriate caskets. This diversion even becomes a running gag: the director of the hotel, Carlo Carlucci (Clive Revill), is supposed to provide the coffins, which proves difficult. When Wendell tells him: “Come on, you can dig up a couple of coffins,” Carlucci takes it literally: “You want second-hand coffins?”<sup>3</sup> Later, Wendell tells his wife, who is in Baltimore, that it is not easy to find “two zinc-lined coffins,” which could betray the fact his father had a double life. When the coffins are finally secured, there are three of them and “there is no refund, no exchange.” The same holds true for *The Trouble with Harry* in which the repartee of most characters tends to downplay the seriousness of the issue. One striking example is that of Miss Gravely (Mildred Natwick), the spinster, who calmly asks Captain Wiles: “What seems to be the trouble?” when she finds him in the woods dragging Harry’s body. Interestingly, this character appears to crystallize the conflict—or potential harmony—between life and death. She is upset by Harry’s body but not because she is confronted with death; instead, she sees the body as an unfortunate hiccup. Furthermore, as Brill notes, “Miss Gravely’s first name, ‘Ivy,’ balances her funeral surname” (285). Later on, while the captain is having coffee at her house, Miss Gravely says, “Let’s get back to our *little* [emphasis added] problem” to allude to Harry, whose body they have yet to get rid of.

Another salient feature of the two films is that the dead—Harry on the one hand, and Wendell’s father and Pamela’s mother on the other—are some kind of

cumbersome “objects,” with Hitchcock’s title being quite explicit in that respect. When interviewing Hitchcock in 1966, François Truffaut remarked, “The whole humor of the picture hinges on a single device: an attitude of disconcerting nonchalance. The characters discuss the corpse as casually as if they were talking about a pack of cigarettes,” to which Hitchcock answered: “That’s the idea. Nothing amuses me so much as understatement” (227). In a 2007 book, Anne-Marie Baron explains that

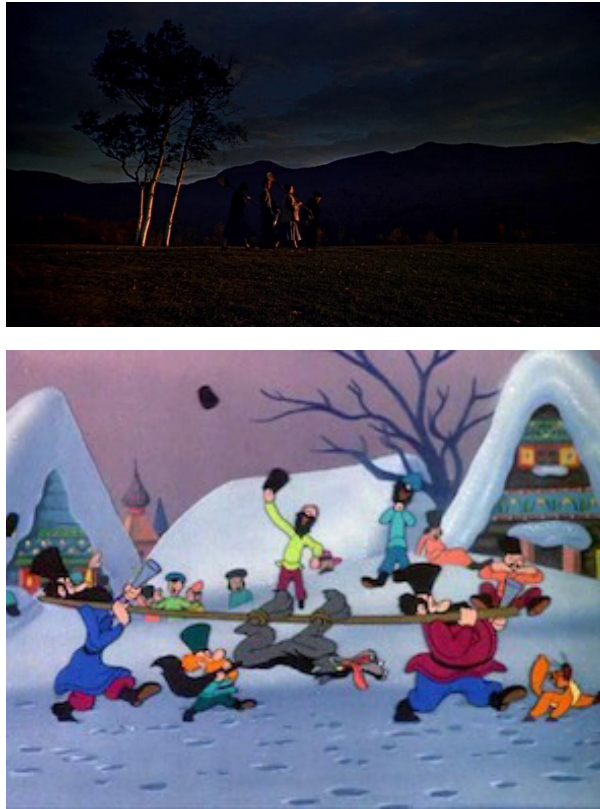
Understatement . . . is a stylistic device in literature, defined for the cinema by Alfred Hitchcock. . . . It consists in saying little to suggest a great deal, expressing all emotions with restraint, toning down all effects and rejecting tragedy and pathos. This is the speciality of humor, which arises from the asymmetry between signifier and the signified, and between the method of expression and the reality expressed, with systematic underrating of serious events while exaggerating the insignificant to the point of scandal. (16-17)

The absurdity resulting from this euphemistic approach and from this continuous mix of comic and macabre elements allows the spectators to remain even more distanced from the story. Another short scene from Hitchcock’s movie is never commented upon by scholars or critics, yet, its symbolism and visual impact is compelling. The passage in which the two men carry Harry’s burdensome body out of the woods and back to Jennifer’s house, accompanied by the two women with a shovel on their shoulders, poses similarities to the ending of a Walt Disney cartoon, *Peter and the Wolf* (Clyde Geronimi, 1946), where the hunters bring back the proud little boy’s catch (Fig. 2). While this element of *mise-en-scène* gives the shot a sense of misplaced triumph—a final solution seems to have been found, and Harry (or his body) will not bother or threaten the protagonists anymore—it definitely downplays the solemnity of the moment in particular, and the ineluctability of death in general. After all, no one dies in Disney’s child-friendly adaptation of Sergei Prokofiev’s musical tale, not even the Big Bad Wolf.

In *The Trouble with Harry* as well as in *Avanti!*, Harry, Wendell’s father and Pamela’s mother really are dead, but they are also characters in their own right, for they “go on living,” especially thanks to the way members of the burial party behave and look to the future.

### **HARRY’S SOCKS AND JACK LEMMON’S UNDERPANTS**

The most famous still from *The Trouble with Harry*—and certainly one of its only visual effects—is that of Arnie discovering his dead stepfather. The camera is placed at



**Fig. 2** | The irreverent way of carrying Harry's body parallels *Peter and the Wolf* by Disney, highlighting the childlike and playful atmosphere of Hitchcock's movie, 1:24:42/13:29. Universal Pictures, 2001.

***In The Trouble with Harry, the presence of the older couple shows that it is never too late and that death alone is irrevocable.***

ground level; only the (oversized) feet and legs of the man are visible, in the foreground, and little Arnie's body, seen from the waist up, is "completing" the dead man's. This vantage point gives the image a grotesque character—all the more so as Arnie is holding a toy space gun—and the spectators thus tend to forget that a child is in fact observing a corpse in vivid detail (Fig. 3).

After a tramp (Barry Macollum) has stolen Harry's shoes, Hitchcock uses the same short focal-length shot, this time without the little boy, but it still looks incongruous since the dead man's socks are red and blue (Fig. 4).

Harry is buried (without any coffin or shroud) and dug up several times until Jennifer, Sam Marlowe (John Forsythe), Miss Gravely, and Captain Wiles decide that they should put Harry back where Arnie found him. Thus, his clothes have to be washed and ironed in Jennifer's

home where she remarks, "Isn't it odd? After refusing for so long, here I am finally doing Harry's laundry." Of course, Jennifer's attitude is mostly selfish since she thinks of her own future before anything else: she wants to avoid being suspected by the police. Although Harry's body is often "blamed" for being such a nuisance, he is sometimes treated with care, as if his comfort did matter. On one occasion, Captain Wiles insists that Harry should be buried "facing west so that [he] can watch the setting sun"; the place will be "cozy in winter" (Sam) and "cool in the summer" (Captain Wiles). Harry is even addressed by the captain who says, "You're a lucky fellow, Harry Worp," before digging a hole in this chosen spot. Earlier on, not knowing that he is dead, Sam talks to Harry bluntly because his socks are an anomaly in the lovely landscape he draws. But even after taking the man's pulse, Sam decides to complete his portrait rather than tell the police. He, too, has a purely selfish interest in Harry and is irreverent enough to put his box of pastels on the dead man's stomach, which leads to the idea of the corpse being a simple object or "piece of furniture" (Fig. 5).

In *Avanti!*, the characters also talk to the dead. For instance, because an export license cannot be obtained in time, Jo Jo Blodgett (Edward Andrews), from the State Department, appoints Wendell Armbruster, Sr. as "commercial attaché to the embassy in Rome," so that he will have diplomatic immunity. The ceremony is carried out in an official way, as if the man were alive, with Blodgett addressing a coffin, and inviting it/him to swear, "rais[ing] [its/his] right hand and repeat[ing] after [him]." When it comes to their burial place, the "well-being" of the deceased is also taken into account in *Avanti!* After realizing that administrative procedures are inextricable, Pamela thinks of a solution that would not only save her and Wendell a lot of hassle but that would, above all, have pleased the two lovers: "Why subject them to that? Why don't we bury them here? There's a lovely old cemetery up on the hill. They could be there together. They'd like that." Later, Pamela mentions the weather, as Sam and Captain Wiles do in Hitchcock's film, and she compares the climate of Ischia to that of Baltimore or England: "Here you have the sun twelve months a year. There's no need to lie in a damp grave. It gets so cold and . . . so lonely." Although Wendell initially determines to take his father's corpse back to the USA, he will finally surrender and there will be a double funeral in the Carlucci family plot at the end of the movie. Wendell will be thoughtful enough to have his father's coffin placed on the left side of the grave, on account of "his good ear," and another important point is that the orchestra of the hotel will play the dead couple's favourite tune during their burial—the poetic quality of the film also comes from the *live* music filling the air at all times.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that

even Bruno (Gianfranco Barra), the blackmailing valet who has been shot dead by Anna (Giselda Castrini), the Sicilian maid, will see his dream come true since his body will pass for that of Wendell's father and he will thus "go back to America." Of course, this situation is arranged by Wendell, with the complicity of Carlucci, not to "please" the late Bruno but to take advantage of his death so that the body of Armbruster, Sr. will remain in Ischia. Thus, as Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner point out, not only does Bruno unintentionally bring Wendell and Pamela together (because of his murder in Pamela's room, the young woman's luggage is moved to Wendell's suite) but "like the dead lovers, Bruno has more effect dead than he had when alive" (56) for the parents will rest side by side in their dream island thanks to his murder. Remarkably, Pamela manages to see the good side of the cruel accident that took the lives of her mother and Wendell's father despite her sorrow. She goes as far as using the adjective "ideal" to describe its romantic context: "Warm night, full moon, island in the Mediterranean."

As a matter of fact, in both films, the gorgeous landscapes make death less unbearable, whether for the heroes or for the public. Many authors have already highlighted the care with which Hitchcock had his sets designed for *The Trouble with Harry*.<sup>5</sup> The autumnal Vermont scenery in the opening shots could be a perfectly bucolic locale if a body were not revealed lying among the dead leaves: "[Harry's] inopportune body mars the Vermont fall," as Dominique Sipièrè puts it (151). Hitchcock himself explained the decision: "Where did I lay the dead body? Among the most beautiful colours I could find. . . . We did it in counterpoint. I wanted to take a nasty taste away by making the setting beautiful" (Gottlieb 312). The director told Truffaut, "It's as if I had set up a murder alongside a rustling brook and spilled a drop of blood in the clear water" (Truffaut 227). The yellow, red, and orange foliage gives the film its visual quality. If this period of the year is synonymous with decay, it also announces the renewal of nature a few months later, which perfectly fits the central theme of the movie: "death's fertility and life's indefatigable rebirth" (Brill 288). In the same way, the blue skies of the Bay of Naples in Billy Wilder's *Avanti!* would be quite idyllic should the movie not deal with the loss of the protagonists' parents.

But in spite of its rather melancholic mood, *Avanti!* is a predominantly optimistic film. In her 2007 chapter, Trudy Bolter considers that it "is very black and grim, and rather caustic. It is neither romantic nor in any deep sense comic" (8). She also writes that the movie's ending "is not really happy" (18), which indeed is undeniable, with Pamela having fallen in love with a man who is the outright antithesis of her former boyfriend but who is nonetheless married



Fig. 3 | A living child with a dead man's legs and feet, 03:45. Universal Pictures, 2001.



Fig. 4 | How to turn a body into an oddity with a single (colourful) shot, 14:01. Universal Pictures, 2001.



Fig. 5 | "You never know when a dead rabbit might come in handy," Arnie says. Likewise, Harry's body acts as a convenient drafting table for Sam, 27:19. Universal Pictures, 2001.

and lives on the other side of the Atlantic (19). *Avanti!* is not a screwball comedy in the vein of *Some Like It Hot*, and a wholly happy, Hollywood-style ending would have been inadequate. Despite its conclusion and a few scenes like the one at the morgue, I argue that the film is mostly a comedy, owing to the fact that sad scenes are never too long, like in any movie of the genre. Additionally, comedic value arises due to the resilience and optimism of the protagonists themselves, and to the way they handle certain situations (the Trotta brothers going from blackmailers to undertakers; the attitude of Pamela when she unexpectedly



**Fig. 6** | Now that Pamela is happy again, Wilder indulges in close shots on her face also showing, in reserve shots, several generations of Italians enjoying life and nuns unexpectedly filling a cinema screening a romantic drama, 1:37:23/1:37:34/1:37:58. MGM, 2006.

***Beyond Hitchcock's humor, the characterization of Arnie is meant to prove that time is not necessarily an enemy and that death can be deceived.***

enters Wendell's bathroom as he is naked; Blodgett's reaction on finding "half a herring" in Wendell's bathtub in the middle of a serious conversation; or the same Blodgett finally deciding to take a mud bath "to have the acidity of a man of twenty"). Another notable example is the scene in which Pamela tours Ischia alone in a horse-drawn cart. Although she has just lost her mother, she is radiant and amazed by everything she sees. The way Wilder films the

passage is in total opposition with the aesthetics of the scene at the morgue. In it, the young woman is framed in close-ups exclusively (lasting as much as 10 seconds on average), and shots/reverse shots alternate to show the public what she discovers in subjective camera: the architecture or the lifestyle of Mediterranean people (Fig. 6).

Poetry is also omnipresent in both films. In *Avanti!*, Pamela delights in hearing the Italians speak and she repeatedly compares their language to "music," even when waiting to enter the morgue. Relatedly in *The Trouble with Harry*, Dr. Greenbow (Dwight Marfield) is so absorbed by his book of poetry that he stumbles on Harry's body without realizing that he is dead. As for Sam, his singing voice fills the air. Above all, he is a painter who places art above anything else and lives in a world of his own where only creativity and imagination matter. In spite of the circumstances, he often insists he wants Jennifer to pose for him. On meeting her, he declares, "I'd like to paint you nude." Jennifer answers, "Some other time," which is exactly what Captain Wiles tells Sam when the latter proposes to dig a double grave, the captain having said that Harry was "lucky." This exchange is another way of sharing positive emotions with the audience, establishing one more link between love/sex and death, and confirming that these Hitchcockian characters should not worry about anything, not even about their own deaths. If art is inventiveness, then Sam's most valuable contribution to Jennifer's situation is when he alters one of his pastels to "resurrect" the dead man, thus destroying a significant piece of "legal evidence" all the while "mystifying Calvin [Wiggs (Royal Dano), the deputy sheriff,] with a mock-learned discourse on art" (Walker 334). This graceful way of confounding Wiggs offers an extra touch of humor, and the other characters cannot help laughing. Such a scene is typical of Hitchcock who lost no opportunity to ridicule policemen or anybody supposed to enforce the law.

What also makes death less dramatic is that Harry's body is "restless" in the sense that his many burials are never definitive, and every time the problem seems to be solved once and for all, another one arises. In the last scene of the film, Harry has been exhumed again. He still does not rest in peace because, oddly enough, it appears that it is more convenient for the characters that he should be found exactly where he dropped dead. Similarly, in *Avanti!*, the "anecdote" about the "disappearing" corpses is another way to soften the implacability of death. The long scene in which Wendell awkwardly tries to haggle over the amount of the ransom and finally has to give the (caricatured) mafia family what they asked for, allows Wilder to make fun of his (caricatured) American businessman who may realize, for the first time in his life, that he cannot control everything. Intriguingly, Hitchcock's film clearly "positions a



corpse as an object of trade” (Pomerance 39), which also happens in Wilder’s movie although in a much more down-to-earth manner.

Because Harry is never interred for good, and because the parents’ bodies in *Avanti!* are temporarily snatched, it is as if, in the two films, the three corpses refused to let themselves be buried and thumbed their noses at death: the dead almost have a life of their own, and they have a symbolic role to play by breathing new life into the other characters. In *Avanti!*, the children follow in their hedonistic parents’ footsteps and become “Willie and Kate” for one night,<sup>6</sup> which leads them to start a love story—or, rather, to re-enact the story of their parents. In fact, Pamela and Wendell are literally in their parents’ shoes since they wear their clothes, and they also swim in the nude to sunbathe on a rock at sunrise as their mother and father would always do. As Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner note,

It is not enough that Wendell should wear his father’s clothes and assume his role. He must assume his father’s values if he is to become human. . . . the sunbathing in the nude is an important stage in Wendell’s search for his true identity. . . . The process is to be completed later when he appears naked before Pamela in the bathroom. If Wilder’s characters are nearly always hiding something . . . it is appropriate that Wendell’s moments of illumination occur when, quite literally, he has nothing to conceal. (54)



**Fig. 7** | Wendell’s unwillingness to appear naked in front of Pamela is consistent with the way he sees life and love, 1:23:42. MGM, 2006.

If the dead man’s socks are discordant in *The Trouble with Harry*, so is Wendell’s attire when he jumps into the sea having kept his white underpants and black socks on. He takes off his socks to use them as an illusory bulwark against Pamela’s assumed nudity when a boat full of fishermen passes by (Fig. 7).

As for his shorts, he loses them while swimming to reach the rock; later on, Bruno, who has witnessed the whole scene and taken photographs, produces the underpants in a theatrical manner as an exhibit when trying to blackmail Wendell (Fig. 8).

After Bruno’s death, Carlucci finds the photos and gives them back to Wendell. Carlucci is not shocked by the nature of the pictures but must confess that he is “puzzled” by the black socks. He cannot help asking Wendell in the most serious way, “Is it because you are in mourning?”



**Fig. 8** | The sly Bruno ceremoniously presenting Wendell with his “fatal weapon,” 1:29:17. MGM, 2006.

## ***The dead are thus full-fledged protagonists; and yet, both films could be considered as a hymn to life.***

Wendell's reluctance to be completely naked reveals his artificial frame of mind and lack of spontaneity; it also means that he is attached to social conventions and is never quite himself. Thanks to his father's death, and with the help of Pamela, the American executive understands that life should be lived to the fullest. Wilder himself declared, "He starts to understand a father whom he'd barely thought about. . . . He's closer to his dead father than to the living one" (Sikov 535). It does not take Pamela long to indulge in the Italian way of life, and Wendell ends up being seduced, both by Pamela and her philosophy which she shared with his father. "Wendell and Pamela, in re-enacting the past, are reviving dead people and reviving themselves" (Sinyard and Turner 60), which is the antithesis of what happens in a later Wilder film, *Fedora* (1978), where a young woman takes the place of her disfigured mother to pursue her acting career, eventually losing her own identity and committing suicide. In Ischia, as well as in the rest of the country, the lunch break is sacred. Being overweight and on a very strict diet (three apples and a teaspoonful of honey is all she is supposed to have in one day), Pamela surprisingly discovers

that eating a pasta and dessert, and so being happy, will make her lose three pounds. A short scene perfectly illustrates this correlation between food and life: when Pamela visits the island on her own, she buys four ice creams at a time just after having seen three street kids. The spectators (and the kids) imagine that only one ice cream will be for her; but Pamela starts eating all four of them greedily as she walks away, ignoring the children's complaints (Fig. 9). Ed Sikov explains:

Billy [Wilder] commented once on the sense of sybaritic regeneration he meant to suggest in [this] scene . . . : "It's a montage where I tried to evoke the magic of a countryside inundated with sun, the way it touches a young woman who lived all her life in a humid and cold country. We are preparing for her evolution—but without transforming the sequence into 'Debbie Reynolds Goes to Ischia,' since it has a certain bite. It's the girl who provides it when she buys four ice creams in front of three kids and she eats them all herself." (538)

Food is also essential in *The Trouble with Harry*, and it is often contrasted with death. Jennifer's reaction after Arnie has shown her the corpse involves telling her son that she is going to "make [him] some lemonade." When Miss Gravely comes upon Captain Wiles dragging Harry's body, she is far from being unsettled; she even takes this opportunity to invite him "for some blueberry muffins and



**Fig. 9** | Life has won: a smiling Pamela passes by a wall of funeral notices just before she gormandizes the four ice creams, 1:38:17. MGM, 2006.

coffee.” Thus, they are becoming romantically involved while standing next to a corpse, even though, during most of the scene, no part of Harry’s body is visible, except for his feet, while the two characters are filmed in an American shot (Fig. 10).

Moreover, their first date is marked by a conversation continuously mixing food and death. A compliment from the captain about the blueberry muffins leads Miss Gravelly to say that she picked up the fruit “near where [he] shot that unfortunate man.” Trying to change the subject, Captain Wiles admires the cup he drinks from, and Miss Gravelly comments that it belonged to her father who died “caught in a threshing machine.” Arnie’s arrival makes no real difference: there is nothing innocent about the child who proudly carries a dead rabbit, and Hitchcock uses the young boy “as a lens for viewers to gauge a collective passivity toward death” (McEntee 39). Although Arnie says the rabbit belongs to the captain because he shot it, he swaps the dead animal for two muffins (Fig. 11).

In the same manner, after Miss Gravelly tells Captain Wiles that she killed Harry, she promises to “make [him] some hot chocolate” if he helps her dig up “[her] body.” In both films, none of the characters lose their appetites because others have died, or because of the proximity of a corpse. On the contrary, it seems that, in such circumstances, eating increases in importance, as if this activity keeps them alive. In *The Trouble with Harry*, when the millionaire (Parker Fennelly) asks Sam how much he wants for his paintings, Sam invites his friends to divulge “what . . . [they] like most in the whole world.” Jennifer’s answer is “strawberries,” and so she will receive “two boxes of fresh strawberries first of each month, in season and out of season.” Sam and his friends are not asking for money and they do not request anything expensive either. The simple pleasures of life are priceless.

In *Avanti!* too, money does not count, at least by the end of the movie. Initially, Wendell is so accustomed to buying people off that to him, being wealthy equals being happy. Pamela proves him wrong and she also tells him that her mother would never let her lover know that she was not a rich woman: “She loved him. She didn’t want any tips.” The reaction shot of Wendell shows him speechless; the businessman has just discovered what real love is. Similarly, in Hitchcock’s film, the four protagonists find love thanks to their common adventures around Harry’s dead body. Sam proposes to Jennifer, and Miss Gravelly the spinster happily lets a man “cross her threshold” for the first time. Among the many sexual innuendos pervading the story, one in particular reveals the strong link between love, food, and life. “She’s a well-preserved woman. . . . And preserves have to be opened someday,” the captain tells Sam about Miss Gravelly. Not surprisingly, the last word of the film is



Fig. 10 | Although mostly off-screen, Harry’s corpse “attends” a seduction scene, 06:57. Universal Pictures, 2001.



Fig. 11 | A still life with living people in it? Arnie’s dead rabbit plays intruders at tea time, 45:39. Universal Pictures, 2001.

“double bed,” a piece of furniture that is the mysterious payment Sam asked for his paintings.

The parents’ death in *Avanti!* offers the heroes a revelation, that of Harry being a practical liberation for Jennifer who is now a (merry) widow and can remarry. Early in the movie, Harry was concretely “in the way” when his socks stuck out of a bush and spoiled the drawing Sam was making of the glorious countryside. At the end of the narrative, the fact that Harry’s body is going to be found by the deputy sheriff will, on the contrary, allow the heroes to enjoy life, just as the late parents have shown their children the way in *Avanti!*

## CONCLUSION

In Western cultures, death is mainly seen as a point of no return and a source of constant questioning. The originality of the two films is that they gleefully celebrate life by transcending death. In *Avanti!*, Wendell’s elderly father did not visit Ischia’s health resort to take mud baths; still, his stays were rejuvenating. In *The Trouble with Harry*, the presence of the older couple shows that it is never too late and that death alone is irrevocable. In both movies, the protagonists are confronted with corpses but start life anew—it is especially true of Pamela who had tried to kill herself. Maybe the clearest indication of this renewal

***The mise-en-scène enhances the beauty of the landscapes; good food and drinks as well as art—whether painting or music—are vital ingredients too.***

is the relationship to time. In Hitchcock's film, the fruit Jennifer asks for are a healthy food symbolizing more than life because strawberries are normally harvested in spring, so the fact they will be delivered to Jennifer's house all year round means that the order of the seasons and nature is somewhat overlooked and that time is challenged. Jean Douchet goes as far as writing that the characters take the place of God (194). In Wilder's story, there is a stark contrast between Wendell's mindset at the beginning and at the end. When he gets to Italy, Wendell epitomizes the stressed businessman obsessed with efficiency; eventually, he becomes aware that the best way to live is to suspend time and enjoy terrestrial foods. The two movies come full

circle, but progress has been made. *Avanti!*'s opening and closing credits are filmed in aerial shots with the infinity of the sky as a backdrop; most importantly, the soundtrack is *Senza Fine*, a song whose title suggests some kind of immortality, or at least continuity. Moreover, Wendell and Pamela plan to perpetuate the tradition by occupying their parents' suite every summer on the same dates. Once again, a simple line of dialogue tells it all: while Wendell was reluctant to speak any Italian, he leaves Ischia saying "Arrivederci Carlo," and those are the last words of the film. Arnie "rediscovering" the corpse in the closing scene of *The Trouble with Harry* offers the ultimate solution to the problem, for the little boy has no sense of time, mistaking today for yesterday or tomorrow; thus, the deputy sheriff will not pay much attention to his testimony because Arnie is known to be whimsical. Beyond Hitchcock's (English) humor, the characterization of Arnie is meant to prove that time is not necessarily an enemy and that death can be deceived. As for the title of Wilder's movie, *Avanti!*, it is in itself a strong statement: life is beautiful and it will go on, whatever happens. ■

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**NOTES**

- 1 Similarly, the mood of Hitchcock's film is strengthened by Bernard Herrmann's score which Adrian Schober rightly describes as being "by turns playful, whimsical, and sinister" (127).
- 2 Wendell will have exactly the same kind of look when he has dinner with Pamela at the hotel and the orchestra plays a romantic tune just for them.
- 3 Towards the end of *Some Like It Hot*, the double meaning of this verb is also exploited when Spats Colombo tells Mulligan that he will really have to "dig up" the two witnesses.
- 4 See Michot 44-45.
- 5 See, e.g., Adair 104 or Duncan 145.
- 6 Pamela will also pretend to be a manicurist—which was her mother's job—when Blodgett arrives uninvited.

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# Movement Through Space:

## Deleuze's Theories on the Movement-Image in Documentary

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### ABSTRACT

The use of movement and time as medium sets film apart as an art form. While the language of film is spoken by virtually everybody to some degree, the knowledge to fully decipher the film-image is often out of reach for most casual viewers. In order to understand the images inundating the modern world, Gilles Deleuze establishes three theses for understanding the movement-of-the-image which—when applied to nonfiction film—tells a spectator what to think, who to trust, and how to view the world presented to them.

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THE CAMERA PANS back as the villain looks over the rubble: the last obstacles to his goal finally obliterated. The crackling fire around him signifies the utter defeat of the hero and his people. The scene cuts abruptly to the throne room shown upside down, the camera rotating 180 degrees as the villain—the new king—approaches his throne. In this pivotal scene from *Black Panther* (2018), camera movement and the *mise-en-scène* explain everything the audience needs to know about the transfer of power, how it happened, how they should feel about it, and what will happen next. Every movie, video, TikTok, Instagram live, and Marco Polo rely on the nonverbal language of cinema to tell their stories and make meaning. The manipulation of movement and time sets film apart as a medium and allows an infinite number of variations of form, genre, and theme. While much has been written about camera movement through historic, political, social, technical, and aesthetic lenses, there is still much to be understood about how movement within a frame affects the meaning of an image. What follows is an analysis of the use of the static, handheld, and fluid motion camera through Gilles Deleuze's writing on the movement-image as it pertains to nonfiction film, television, and social media while noting

***The voiceover situates the speaker (Keiller) as an observer of life and history, and the static shots invite the viewer into the same position.***

how movement within the frame changes the relationship between image and spectator from the latter end of the twentieth century up to the current documentary moment. Understanding how camera movement works within an image makes image production more obvious, leading creators to attempt to make rarefied images: shots or clips of such resonance and clarity that they are clearly understood and stay with the viewer. In attempting to make such images, a thorough understanding of what is happening in an image while using a given movement technique is paramount.

### BACKGROUND

Camera movement can be used in a myriad of ways, but no matter the technique it is vital to recognize its implications for one's interpretation of an image. At its core, movement physically changes the frame through which one views the image. These shifts have ideological and psychological ramifications; the inherent moving image of a video causes changes in the meanings and how it is read. The case studies explored in this analysis draw on important works of nonfiction from the twentieth century, each one using a different kind of movement within the frame to affect how the images presented are understood. This analysis of three general types of camera movement will touch on the qualities of the movement, how it impacts how time is measured within the shot, and how it impacts the spectator's experience and relationship to what is seen. To begin this analysis it's important to lay out the major theses through which Deleuze (through Henri Bergson) is viewing the movement-image. For the term of movement-image, there are some facets that get lost in translation from the

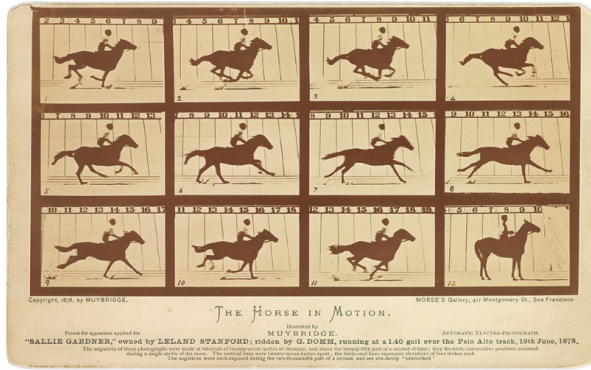


Fig. 1 | Eadweard Muybridge's "The Horse in Motion," 1878.

original French. Christopher Vitale notes that to understand Deleuze's discussion, it is best to understand the movement-image as "an IMAGING-OF-movement," the word image being a verb in this sense rather than a noun (Vitale). Through this understanding, the movement-image becomes a reflection of motion within the world, seen within the *mise-en-scène* of the film frame. In theorizing this type of artistic creation, Deleuze presents three major themes in response to Bergson's philosophies laid out in both *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution*:

1. "Movement is distinct from the space covered. Space covered is past, movement is present, the act of covering... This already presupposes a more complex idea: the spaces covered all belong to a single, identical, homogenous space, while the movements are heterogeneous, irreducible among themselves" (Deleuze 2).
2. The notion of the any-instant-whatever, which essentially is any given instant in a string of instants that make up a scene/shot (Deleuze 4).
3. "Not only is the instant an immobile section of movement, but movement is a mobile section of duration, that is, of the Whole, or of a whole... movement expresses something more profound, which is the change in duration or in the whole" (Deleuze 8).

Within these theses lie the basis of Deleuze's arguments for viewing the cinematic image as a movement-image. For Deleuze, all the objects and aspects of the *mise-en-scène* are connected, and interact and merge to form a singularity. He is also interested in the supposed liminal space between two or more images, from which he sees the motion of the image deriving (Deleuze 1). This liminality is often overlooked when speaking about film, yet it is the locus of meaning in countless films from Dziga Vertov's "interval" (Cook 86) to the essay film form (Rascaroli 69).

This way of thinking about the cinematic image goes all the way back to Muybridge's horse experiment (Fig.1). Often considered the genesis of the film medium, Muybridge set up a series of still cameras that captured the horse's motion. These images were barely ten years old when Bergson began publishing, and it is clear that these kinds of images were the basis of his contextualization of motion within the image.

Deleuze accepts this view of the medium and expounds on this position; "the cinema is the system which reproduces movement as a function of any-instant-whatever that is, as a function of equidistant instants, selected as to create an impression of continuity" (Deleuze 5). Deleuze understands that a moving image is a series of still images, and the movement is perceived rather than inherent. Regardless of the presence of actual motion, the suggested motion residing within the space between the images is where the impetus lies in theorizing these images. Deleuze describes this in the any-instant-whatever; an instant being a still frame/image within a scene or shot (4), because "movement always relates to a change," the transition between one any-instant-whatever and another implies motion, even if there is no variation between one instant and another (8). For Deleuze, the motion of the image is just as vital—if not moreso—to understanding its meaning than what the image shows, which directly contradicts contemporary image-making practices that are more interested in an aesthetics of movement that works to frame the object being shown. Image-making has shifted drastically in the twenty first century alone; in the contemporary moment barriers to access image creation is nearly nonexistent and thus a critical mass of information has been accumulated. Knowledges like those Deleuze lays out with movement-images continue to be relevant because they cut through the noise and mountains of data. They get at the heart of image making and lay out precisely how moving images use movement and duration to provide visual information and meaning to a viewer. This contextualization will structure the remainder of this analysis to more fully understand the nature of movement within the cinematic nonfiction image.

### THE STATIC CAMERA

Arguably the most fundamental image in film is the locked down image. The stillness of the camera allows for the action to be played out in front of it, a spectator to unfolding reality. In nonfiction film, this assumption of the camera as silent observer infuses the image with truthiness: defined as something *feeling* like it's the truth even if it's not necessarily true (Lexico.com). The immovable shot was the norm in cinema for the first few decades after





**Fig. 2** | Camera movement in a static position (Uncredited) and *Panoramic View of the Champs Elysees*, 1900.

its creation due to the technical constraints of the camera. The earliest examples of scenes on film—like the Lumiere Brother’s 1896 *Train Arriving at the Station*, and Louis Le Prince’s 1888 *Roundhay Garden Scene*—were captured from a static camera, and Thomas Edison’s *Black Maria* was built around the idea that the camera stayed in one place, and acts were brought in to play for the camera. When camera motion is used in these early images, the static camera is placed on a moving object like a streetcar or carriage like in Edison’s 1900 *Panoramic View of the Champs Elysees*, or the uncredited 1905 *A View Down Market Street Before the Fire* (Fig. 2).

Aesthetically, this view of a scene impacts the way the audience interacts with the image. “The frame is defined by a frontal point of view...the shot is a uniquely spatial determination, indicating a ‘slice of space’ at a particular distance from the camera” (Deleuze 24). This view of a ‘slice of space’ is seen as an unmediated look at what is in frame and is taken as an objective understanding. Seeing these images as simply existing through a specific focal

length at a specific distance from the camera releases the image from the burden of subjectivity. Looking at the static image as a disembodied, objective view of a scene or place is unfounded. Deleuze is not removing a creator or a viewer’s subjectivity by framing these kinds of images in this way. Much like photography, there are vital subjectivities working behind the viewfinder, and the lack of movement from the camera does nothing to absolve the creator from the responsibilities of creating the image. Even if this is the case, viewers often encounter static images in this impartial, detached way, especially when presented in a documentary or journalistic context.

In addition to creating a sense of objective spectatorship, the inert camera brings with it a specific way in which viewers experience time within the shot. Because the camera is ostensibly left to its own devices in observing the scene before it, time is perceived at a slower pace. Film is innately a linear medium that relies on duration and imagery to propel a story or line of reasoning. Reducing the visual flow of images by presenting a static camera or a locked down scene with minimal movement within the *mise-en-scène* slows the visual information presented to the viewer, and instead of moving towards the end of the film, the audience is asked to pause in the space shown for an indeterminate amount of time. This slowness within the frame can be used to great effect when working through multiple layers of meaning, the stillness offering time for the audience to process more than just the visual material presented to them as Patrick Keiller does in many of his works.

Case Study: *London* (1994):

Patrick Keiller’s *London* utilizes the simplicity of the static camera to upend the presupposed interactions of the spectator. On the surface, the film is a stream of consciousness, a spoken diary of one man’s explorations and strolls through the changing façade of London. The choice to use predominantly static images is purposeful in that it changes the audience’s perception of time throughout the film. The voiceover situates the speaker (Keiller) as an observer of life and history, and the static shots invite the viewer into the same position. Keiller often holds on an image or location, favoring the long take as the voiceover muses about the particular place. Sometimes he even cuts back to a previously shown shot, like when he is talking about Michel de Montaigne while showing the exterior of The Montaigne School of English (Fig. 3), located in the Soho neighbourhood of London (Keiller).

This use of cinematic stillness elongates the shot and allows the spectator their own gaze, able to meander through the image and focus on what sticks out to



**Fig. 3** | The repeated image from Patrick Keiller's *London*. 1994.

them rather than what they are forced to grasp. In mainstream filmmaking, shots are set in quick succession and contemporary editing practices streamline the possibilities of meaning by adhering to a 'one shot; one idea' approach. Recent nonfiction productions like National Geographic's 2019 series, *The World According to Jeff Goldblum*, use this treatment of images in order to keep the viewers interested. For example, in episode eight of the series, Goldblum explores the world of RV life, visiting RV parks around the U.S. and talking to residents. Between scenes of Goldblum chatting up RV enthusiasts he and the crew tour a warehouse that builds RVs. This interview-heavy show relies on cutaways and closeups to diversify the visual story and stimulate the audience. In the warehouse where the RVs are being built, slow motion shots of men welding parts together and cutting wood with closeups on their faces and the flying particles are placed next to quick closeup details of the furnishings and appliances going into the construction ("RVs"). These techniques are common in nonfiction storytelling to get a broad idea across in as short of time as possible. The need to always be moving towards a narrative goal is paramount, and the audience feels the immediacy of the images; ingesting them as they come across the screen and forget them as soon as the shot is done. In this way the film seems to be happening at the same time as the spectator is consuming it. In Keiller's use of the still frame, the viewer is forced to breathe and perceive and work on connecting all the information presented to them. At all times—movement or not—there is no agency, yet the static image presents a unique case because often, especially in the case of the long-take, the desire to stay with a given shot deteriorates as duration increases—especially to a modern viewer used to an average shot duration of three seconds (Miller). This space for connection is given because the static shot is used and is paired with an extended duration.

This invitation to explore arises from the constraints placed upon the viewer. They are faced with the objects/ locations presented and do not have any say in when to move on or when to cut. In order to engage with the material and take back their agency, the viewer must do the associative work of connecting the various messages and information presented to them, be it visual, aural, or otherwise.

This use of time correlates to the larger understanding of how duration impacts a viewer. Deleuze argues that, "each time we find ourselves confronted with a duration, or in a duration, we may conclude that there exists somewhere a Whole which is changing, and which is open somewhere. It is widely known that Bergson initially discovered duration as identical to consciousness" (Deleuze 9). When confronted with an unrelenting shot of a mundane street corner, thoughts open up to the purpose of the duration and of the world past the frame. Somehow in the stillness there is a reason behind it (Deleuze's Whole) and the job of the spectator is to uncover what that reason is for them. The extended duration also points to an entire world past the edges of the screen, which is the whole Deleuze alludes to. The openness of the world seen on film invites the spectator to think beyond the frame and consider where this image and shot resides. Because of this, long duration is most effective in a nonfiction context because it more closely aligns with how reality is viewed on an individual level in unbroken and uncut sequences. Fiction films like *Force Majeure* (2014) and *First Reformed* (2017) use extended duration to positive effect because they are stories that rely on the nonfictional quality of the setting and story. The stillness of the images provides an additional layer of reality for the narrative. Similarly, this motionlessness transforms the image, "changing from outer motion to inner motion" (Kracauer 264). The time and attention given to the shot comes because of its immobility, and the long duration of a static shot invites the audience to consider not just the exterior reality of the scene, but the emotional qualities of the objects, places, and people they are sitting with. In *London*, the beauty of the film arises in how—through its stillness—the spectator comes to regard the images being shown.

## THE FLUID CAMERA

The viewer comes to the fluid camera in the diametrically opposite way they approach the static image. By way of perception there is a constancy of motion by and within the frame, so regardless of what is being shown, something is perceived to be happening. The fixed frame has an inherent autonomy, whereas the fluid frame is dependent on external forces and subjectivities to move it through the space (Russell 152). As the camera moves, the plane of focus within the frame is shifting, fundamentally



**Fig. 4** | The transitional image from National Geographic. *The World According to Jeff Goldblum*, 2019.

## **The viewer comes to the fluid camera in the diametrically opposite way they approach the static image.**

changing the nature of the image frame by frame (Schrader). Subliminally, the viewer recognizes the hand of the operator within the image and recognizes it as a subjective image. As the camera is in motion—be it a pan, dolly, tilt, crane, zoom, track, or otherwise—the spectator marries their perspective to that on-screen. Deleuze’s first thesis of the movement-image relates that, “movement is distinct from the space covered” (Deleuze 2). He goes on to specify that the motion is the present, and the space covered the past (24). No matter what is presented, the viewer is perceiving it in the present. This kind of movement is vastly different than the professed motion of montage. The viewer stays within the same field of view, moving seamlessly from one any-instant-whatever to the next. This string of instants is uninterrupted by cuts and keeps the spectator firmly within the immediacy of the image. This is the literal feeling of motion, rather than implied motion and thus if the spectator accepts the frame as their own view, they get a greater sense of the place, which feeling only intensifies the longer the shot duration.

Regardless of the kind of motion—be it implied or actual—its effects on the frame are clear. An audience feels like they are going with the filmmaker somewhere, or that something will be revealed in-frame by the end of the motion. The oft-cited example of *Touch of Evil*’s over-three-minute-long opening shot illustrates the possibilities of the fluid shot. Motion and duration work together to build suspense and intrigue over the three minutes, ending in a spectacularly violent explosion.

Such fluid shots are not always so cathartic. *Touch of Evil* is an example that illustrates one kind of tension within a shot, but other works like Chantal Akerman’s *La Chambre* utilizes similar mechanics to create closeness and familiarity within a scene.

### Case Study: *La Chambre* (1972):

Chantal Akerman’s first film in New York, *La Chambre*, is an experiment focused on formalism rather than storytelling. At its core, the film is a sequence of encounters. The camera is set up at the centre of Akerman’s cramped, lived-in studio apartment and it pans around the room, completing three full circuits before changing direction near the end (Fig. 5.1). Akerman lays in bed in the far end of the room, which is awash in bright sunlight from the large windows behind the bed. The audience encounters Akerman seven times throughout the ten and a half minutes of the film, each time in a different way. The first encounter sees Akerman returning the direct gaze of the camera-spectator (Fig. 5.2). As the camera pans away, tension arises. The audience has been devoid of a subject or focal point thus far, and to see a person, especially one matching the gaze of the camera, compels the viewer to stay. The camera has different plans and continues its methodical turn. The relentlessly slow pan across the room “allows for the most intense scrutiny from the viewer, as each quotidian object is transformed into something nearly talismanic. Akerman, reclining with the regality of a grand odalisque, confidently stakes out her place, both as an artist and as a survivor of the chaotic city just outside this nook” (Anderson).

In this simple film, Akerman layers the complexities of voyeurism, desire, and mechanics. Whereas at the beginning of the film the viewer trusted the camera, the trust and adherence to the camera’s gaze fades once the audience realizes that everything that will be shown has already been shown. The promise of the reveal is an empty one and leaves the audience wanting for a revelation. This rejection or refusal by the audience to accept the frame of the camera opposes the purpose and supposed use of the movement, again creating visual and emotional tension. This layering of tensions due to the camera movement is what makes this film effective and evocative. If depicted in a series of static shots of the interior of Akerman’s apartment, this film would hold an entirely different meaning and purpose.

The movement in the film is the reason for its making. Literally, the film is centred around it, as is the meaning and interpretation of the image. With it, Akerman draws inspiration from the structuralist art movement and avant-garde creators she was engaging with at this moment in New York (Anderson). For the audience, there is no plot, narrative, or perceived thesis other than the motion. Akerman is asking



Fig. 5.1 | The beginnings of the film from Chantal Akerman's *La Chambre*, 1972.



Fig. 5.2 | The encounter from Chantal Akerman's *La Chambre*, 1972.

***Following these examples can yield transcendent results, and in a time when new technologies have gotten as close to perfecting the kino-eye past the point of human perception, its use and vitality remain connected to the fundamentals of the craft. "***

viewers to spend time in her personal space, to sit with the uncomfortable facts that come with being confronted with intimacy and claustrophobia. The scene takes on a visceral energy as the camera continues its trip around the space. These realizations come as the film concludes, so from the outset of the motion at 00:05, the viewer must put their trust in the camera as guide through this filmic experience (Akerman). *La Chambre* effectively utilizes motion to create

a situation of emotional tension, ultimately presenting the filmic medium in its strengths, “whose inherent motion alone renders possible such excursions into the whirlpool of the motionless” (Kracauer 264). Treating the physical world in this way illuminates the unseen, inviting viewers into not only into Akerman’s congenial New York apartment but also into the subconscious and collective experiences of humanity.

### THE HANDHELD CAMERA

The unstabilized image began as a product of technological and environmental constraints but quickly made its way into film language and meaning making. When discussing this kind of movement, I am referring to the internal motion of the frame when a camera is removed from a stabilizer or tripod and is held by the cameraperson without mechanical stabilization. It first was used as a visual strategy, often because either one cameraperson or a very small crew was all that was available. Nonfiction newsreels, footage in conflict zones, and personal films were often shot handheld, and the aesthetic quality of the shaking frame became an additional layer of actuality within the image, and presented subjects in a way that was viewed as true-to-life (Sejean). The advent of home movie-making in the early twentieth century was often exclusively handheld because of the technical barriers to amateur shooters, and the spur-of-the-moment quality of such films. Now, handheld techniques are found everywhere, and more and more can be found in blockbuster films because of the specific affective qualities of the movement. This analysis understands ‘handheld camera’ as the movement of the camera that does not shy away from the shaky or wobbly frame, and so uses these natural motions to imbue the image with meaning. Recently there has been a surge in Image Stabilization (IS) technologies as well as handheld gimbal stabilizers that are inexpensive to the point that consumer models are available for a couple hundred dollars. These camera movements, while technically handheld, are not the aesthetic under scrutiny at this point, and will be discussed later.

The handheld camera conveys a view of reality head-on. More so than the fluid camera, the handheld frame grants immediacy to the image. This way of image-creation brings out the ecological reality of a scene. Within this view, the meaning-making is inherent to a place (or image), and that meaning flows from the place-image to the spectator who takes in the information (Thompson 20). In this way, the handheld image presents a view from one distinct location on an object or in a scene, similar to the static camera. The two major differences between the static and handheld camera are the introduction of frame motion and the

layering of subjectivity that the handheld camera brings. Where the static camera can be perceived as an objective viewer, the slight motion of the frame indicates an intelligent operator behind the apparatus. On the surface, this can be attributed to technical constraints; a handheld camera implies someone is standing with the camera, holding it and directing its gaze, whereas even though the static camera is also being aimed and operated, the stillness within the image suggests the singularity of the camera's intent as solely mechanical. This idea of an active camera was first explored by Dziga Vertov in his theories and writing on the Kino-Eye. Take the example of a filmed scene of two people in a fist fight: In this filmed scenario there are three individuals to account for—the two people involved in the fight, and the embodied camera (Michelson 57). When an audience is watching, only the two seen fighters are accounted for in the viewing, but for Vertov, the camera's subjectivity was just as—if not more—important. With this and every filmic encounter there is always at least one additional unseen actor in the camera. The handheld frame presents this view in a way that brings the camera's involvement to the consciousness of the viewer. When confronted with a handheld image, however, there isn't an immediate identification of the spectator to the view given because the image is already embodied by the camera/camera operator. This places the viewer in a spectator position rather than as an agent within the milieu, so as a viewer recognizes the participation of the camera in the world or scene shown, they remove themselves from the position of actor and remain as audience rather than operator. This placement is vital in the handheld camera's success; in order to show a scene as close to 'reality' as possible, there must be some critical distance between the audience and point of view. According to Vertov, "We affirm the kino-eye, discovering within the chaos of movement the result of the kino-eye's own movement; we affirm the kino-eye with its own dimensions of time and space, growing in strength and potential to the point of self-affirmation" (16). This positionality allows the audience to go along with the camera/camera operator as a guide rather than a combining their spectatorship with the image being created. This separation grants greater creative flexibility for the image maker and points to a greater reality beyond the frame, as Marie Menken does in her film, *Glimpse of the Garden*.

Case Study: *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957):

Throughout Menken's work, the act of filming was "an extension of painting" (Haller). This sensibility spills from her film oeuvre and is encapsulated by how she treats her subjects through her camera. A great influence on avant-garde filmmakers after her, Menken's *Glimpse of the Garden*

presents a cacophony of images that string together in a dynamic display of motion—reminiscent of Vertov's dynamic kino-eye. Menken's camera moves expressively from one plant to another, highlighting different parts of each and providing a parade of encounters with the beautiful lives of these plants. The piece gives a clear sense of place within the garden Menken is capturing, as well as the diverse beauty of its residents. Often her camera is still, capturing various plants in tight close-ups showing off the variety in colour, texture, size, and shape. Within these still shots the wavering hand of the artist can be felt; the image gently vibrating with energy and intelligence. There are only two instances throughout the five-minute piece that achieve complete stillness (Fig. 6), and when these moments happen, the spell is broken for an instant, breaking the trance of kineticism the viewer finds themselves in.

Since almost the entire film is in motion, Deleuze's third theory of the movement-image comes into play: "movement expresses something more profound, which is the change in duration or in the whole" (Deleuze 8). Each image in the film points to this greater sense of consciousness which lies in recognizing the hand of the artist. The whole in this case is the garden, in all its bloom and glory. The movement within the image suggests the reality of the whole garden outside the scope of the shown frame in any given moment. In a very real sense, the motion of the frame points directly to the existence of a camera operator, who is standing immediately behind the camera, operating it and giving it directions on how to present the whole (of the garden). Understanding handheld shots in this way happen instantaneously and subliminally for an audience. These realizations add layers of additional intrigue and energy onto the image, allowing the spectator to consider the image through the eyes of the artist and to take in the scene in a way that can be perceived as more truthful or honest to the experience of the artist and camera capturing the images and physically being in that space. It's vital to understand how this and other motion impacts the reception of images because not considering these applications makes for images that are devoid of soul and become the opposite of what Deleuze describes as the rarefied image (Deleuze 12). Such images represent the highest tier of image-making and can be viewed as the most artistic and vital images in cinema. In direct contrast to the rarefied image are commodified images, those that are made for the sake of technological ingenuity and one-upmanship.

## CONTEMPORARY REDUX

Choices in camera movement—when most effectively utilized—come from an artist's understanding of the subject and their desire to portray it in a specific way. In



**Fig. 6** | A moment of stillness from Marie Menken's *Glimpse of the Garden*, 1957.

some ways these desires are mirrored in contemporary uses of camera movement in Hollywood blockbusters and on social media to make a point, but more often than not they are purely aesthetic decisions not based on critical thought or artistry. More sources are using these conventions of nonfiction storytelling to create an atmosphere of truth, or to use the conventions sarcastically. Scripted TV shows like *The Office*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Documentary Now!*, and *American Vandal* use predominantly handheld shots to convey a 'documentary feel.' In a similar way, YouTube vloggers, travel photographers, and Instagram influencers use novel camera movements for the sake of motion, or for the wow factor in their videos. Accounts like @devinsupertramp, @jas, @johnny\_fpv, and @brandon\_l\_li all make a living off of sensational video content and are looking for the most pleasing and unique ways of moving their cameras through space. One popular technique is the use of in-camera transitions. Camera operators roll and swing their cameras to create fast, jarring motions and cut them together to create a feeling that the camera is gliding through the space. Another technique is cutting

on action to achieve a seamless effect. Joining two whip pans feels like an effortless transition between locations. In these instances, the focus is on making a glossy, easy-to-digest image rather than to convey a meaning beyond what can be seen within the frame. Techniques like this started being utilized by vloggers on YouTube and have travelled into large budget filmmaking. These images work in similar fashion to the transition images in *The World According to Jeff Goldblum* mentioned previously. This kind of commercial image-making has arisen in part due to the increased availability of specialized equipment like gimbals, drones, and Steadicams, and these devices bring with them their own type of motion. Much like the historic handheld camera, these devices add a layer of smoothness to the shot that combines the concepts of both the handheld and fluid camera. While the aesthetic is similar to both, the theory and use is hardly as nuanced. As more kinds of motion become available to more people through technology, and as the connectivity culture of the twenty-first century becomes increasingly populated with content, these ways of thinking about images will become the norm, skipping

over the vital theories that made film the vital medium of modern and contemporary art.

In presenting this contrast between an artistic and a commercial theorization of an image, it is clear that comparing these contemporary internet images to those in the case studies laid out is in a way a futile exercise. The images from YouTube and Instagram content creators are not labelled as art or cinema, even though they enjoy the rich history and language of film. This contrast is important in that it highlights the changing focus of contemporary cinema. Aesthetic movement like the examples seen on YouTube are finding their way into fiction and nonfiction films. Use of stabilizers and drones are becoming more commonplace in feature length documentaries like *Free Solo* (2018), *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), and *The Social Dilemma* (2020). The issue arises because these examples and more illustrate the shortening of distance between the kinds of images available online and on sites like TikTok and YouTube and those seen in film. It's becoming obvious that these kinds of image-making techniques are driving the change in aesthetics across filmic media. While it is vital for image making to be accessible and democratic, there still

fluid, and handheld camera. Throughout this analysis, the focus has been on the general treatment of the cinematic image. When using camera movement, a creator must ask themselves if they are using the motion to say something more with their image, or if it is simply for visual pleasure. Deleuze presents a final instruction in this regard, alluding to the pinnacle of what the cinema can do:

Rarefied images are produced, either when the whole accent is placed on a single object (in Hitchcock, the glass of milk lit from the inside, in *Suspicion*, the glowing cigarette end in the black rectangle of the window in *Rear Window*) or when the set is emptied of certain sub-sets (Antonioni's deserted landscapes; Ozu's vacant interiors). The highest degree of rarefaction seems to be attained with the empty set, when the screen becomes completely black or completely white... But, from either side—whether rarefaction or saturation—the frame teaches us that the image is not just given to be seen. It is legible as well as visible. (Deleuze 12).

***The scene cuts abruptly to the throne room shown upside down, the camera rotating 180 degrees as the villain—the new king—approaches his throne. In this pivotal scene from Black Panther (2018), camera movement and the mise en scene explain everything the audience needs to know about the transfer of power, how it happened, how they should feel about it, and what will happen next.***

needs to be a critical understanding of images, especially in the image-saturated present. The movement towards this glossy aesthetic removes the artistic and multiple layers of meaning from image-creation, removing the possibility of the rarefied image or revelatory experiences with film. A cinema of pure aesthetics promises nothing beyond what is seen. To hold on to the art in cinema, there needs to be a realignment with the kinds of image-making practices presented by Deleuze and others.

## CONCLUSION

Camera movement works between poles of the ostentatious and the poignant. Examples of both have been presented, and discussed through the modes of the static,

If the movement-image is the basis of visual literacy, the rarefied image is its culminating example. These kinds of images carry with them the weight of history as well as the physical, social, and nonverbal messages contained therein. The task of creating the rarefied image is a challenge and a goal for all artists and image makers. While the examples Deleuze lays out are from narrative cinema, rarefied images can be seen in nonfiction as well if camera movement is used purposefully. When utilized creatively and decisively, different kinds of motion have the power of a rarefied image to reveal the unseen and connect the viewer with the greater Whole. "If we see very few things in an image, this is because we do not know how to read it properly" (12). The tactics of the fluid, static, and handheld camera vary in approach and outcome, yet each has

the capability of enlightenment. The examples laid out in the various case studies illustrate how the motion within the frame presents the images in unique and complex ways and provide a pattern for future image creation. Following these examples can yield transcendent results, and in a time when new technologies have gotten as close to perfecting the kino-eye past the point of human perception, its use and vitality remain connected to the fundamentals of the craft. ■

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# A Use as Well as a Delight:

## A Materialist Critique of Representations of Underage Sex in Film

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### ABSTRACT

The politicization of art has become acutely contested in the wake of the #MeToo movement, with calls abounding to “separate the artist from the art.” This impulse towards compartmentalization, though well-intentioned, nevertheless reflects a persistent strain of liberal modernism that allows creative work to perpetuate harmful narratives with no basis in reality, and allows audiences to ignore their own discursive permeability. In this paper, I explore this insistence on art’s distance from materiality, examining in particular one uniquely problematic narrative lineage as it plays out in two separate works of art: that of adult sex with minors as portrayed in Eric Rohmer’s film *Le genou de Claire* and Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me By Your Name*. Despite the differences in their production, and despite the latter film’s insistence on emotionality against its predecessor’s deliberate affective flatness, both works deploy aesthetic loveliness and exaggerated tone as a means of obscuring the dangers in their depictions of desire. Ultimately, the two works together create and uphold a self-contained, inaccurate semiotics of underage sex, a framing whose emphasis on affluent, Eurocentric whiteness influences political and cultural attitudes towards predatory sexual behaviour today seen most ominously in QAnon’s projected attempts to “save the children.”

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RECENTLY ON TWITTER, author Vanessa Angélica Villareal announced that she could not sleep. It was October 29, 2020, just five days before the “election of a lifetime,” as so many journalists and pundits were labeling it, and Villareal was responding to a tweet posing the following question: “How do you approach teaching problematic writers like Junot Diaz, DFW [David Foster Wallace], Nick Flynn, Sherman Alexie, and even lesser-known writers about whom you’ve heard upsetting accts [accounts] of abuse? Do you eliminate their work from syllabi altogether? Do you take Barthes’ death-of-the-author approach?” Villareal, in her insomnia, answers:

Let’s unpack one of the most misunderstood and misused concepts in literary theory: this is not what ‘death of the author’ means. In fact, this usage is the exact opposite of what Barthes intended to critique having lived through WWII: propaganda and capitalism... ‘Death of the author’ does not mean ‘read abusers bc authors don’t matter, look at how good the writing is.’ ‘Death of the author’ shows us how abusers, bigots, and demagogues control the narrative through authority and language, and gives us the critical agency to dismantle it. (Twitter)

The political or intentional nature of art seems to be more acutely contested than ever, post-#MeToo, post-election of a president-rapist, and yet so much of the cultural and historical production of the West has yet to be folded into the kind of critique that considers the material, rather than the mimetic, qualities of creative work. Indeed, it seems that our contemporary relationship to art is still mediated through a modernist understanding of its distance from us, and from reality; “a radical separation of art from the social (and individual) circumstances in which it is produced and enjoyed” (Mattick 1).

Numerous thinkers have pushed back against the tendency towards “radical separation,” and perhaps this continued materialist resistance evokes, in itself, the persistence of modernism in artistic reception. In the early 20th century, György Lukács posited form as the element distinguishing art as “a rounded totality of being” reacting to modernism as it happened around him; in the mid-century, Raymond Williams provided a criticism of the social immanence imposed by mimetic representation, while Peter Burger’s theory of the avant-garde identified the “autonomy” of art, its prevailing status as a zone detached from life; and in the 21st century, picking up the critical torch, Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “esthetic regime” censures the modernist lens that has endured even as more

radical and rooted forms have emerged in art<sup>1</sup> (Lukacs 7; Burger Theory; Rancière Politics). Despite these Marxist interventions, as well as the imagined ubiquity of post-modernism and poststructuralism, the liberal-modernist impulse to depoliticize art continues to drive its contemporary evaluation. As a result, art emerges as a separate realm, parallel to reality and free of its responsibilities, while any interpretative and political burden is displaced onto discerning subject-audiences; it the unchanging river, and we are the history-cursed who cannot step in it the same way twice.

The hermeneutical-political role of art consumers has become especially foregrounded in recent years as a result of the MeToo movement, with calls abounding to “separate the artist from the art” (Dederer). As the bad political actions of certain creators (like the ones cited in Villareal’s quote-tweet) increasingly encroach upon the consciousness of the art-going public, this collective response arises as a sort of defense of the ego, a defense of art’s “autonomy.” In part, this process of compartmentalization stems from good intentions—among them, a faith in art as a space of refuge and restoration—but intentions that nonetheless reinforce creative work as fundamentally aesthetic and ahistorical. This insistence on separating art from materiality, history, and humanity, furthermore, allows it to perpetuate narratives with no basis in reality—and it allows audiences to forgive these fictions while ignoring their own discursive permeability, their perversion for ideology.

It is in the case of works depicting a certain kind of “monstrosity” that this enduring modernist irresponsibility becomes especially visible, and especially fraught. The cinematic representation of sex between minors and adults has become a specific sub-current within art’s greater hermetic stream that is totally isolated from the real-life phenomena of pedophilia and child abuse that we now consider, in the domain of soi-disant real life, to be uniquely, “absolutely monstrous”<sup>2</sup> (Déchaux 545, my translation). From the bubbly screwball antics of *Her First Affaire* (1932), to the flailing comic ambiguity of Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962), all the way up to the labored erotic provocation of Lars von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* (2013), film has, almost since its conception, created a self-contained and inaccurate sign system of inter-age desire.<sup>3</sup>

In order to chart some specificities of this singularly harmful heritage, I will examine two films: Éric Rohmer’s *Le genou de Claire* (1970), and Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), based on the novel by André Aciman. Not only do both works contain stories of predatory desire as their central plot, but additionally, as noted by many film writers upon its release, the latter represents an explicit aesthetic homage to the former (Aftab). This constraint allows for a direct comparison of the way that

***The film’s prettiness certainly serves to implicate the viewer in the kind of predatory gaze that will become its narrative interest, depicting through beauty a type of desire that would otherwise be reviled.***

each film’s artistic formalism upholds an unrealistic and idealized representation of underage sex. Ultimately, despite the differences in each film’s production and reception, the sugar-cage aesthetics of both *Claire’s Knee* and *Call Me By Your Name* reinforce their harmful narratives of desire and enforce the enclosure of a total, separate, and unrealistic regime of art.

#### A CARESS HAS TO BE ACCEPTED

*Claire’s Knee* is an undeniably beautiful movie. Set in the romantic arcadia of Lac Annecy, thin, happy members of the French bourgeoisie move over green mountains and blue, blue waters, wearing clothing that seems specifically designed to complement these natural backdrops. It is also, of course, a movie about child rape. The film’s prettiness certainly serves to implicate the viewer in the kind of predatory gaze that will become its narrative interest, depicting through beauty a type of desire that would otherwise be reviled. Furthermore, additional formal choices suffuse the film with a subtler, more insidious affective complicity—that of boredom.

The film, which follows diplomat Jérôme (Jean-Claude Brialy) over the course of a summer holiday before his marriage, opens with a title card reading the date, a visual element that will recur throughout in order to foreground the quotidien in the viewer’s experience. Endless scenes of dialogue, largely improvised, defy any standard cinematic impulse towards structure or suspense. We are lulled into the rhythmic, Sunday-afternoon quality of life for the characters on-screen; and soon after, the film stages its first portrayal of malevolent desire. Jérôme has run into an old flame named Aurora (Aurora Cornu), who invites him to meet the family with whom she is lodging—a divorced mother in care of a teenaged daughter, Laura (Béatrice Romand), and a former stepdaughter, Claire (Laurence de Monaghan). Aurora, a novelist—played by a real-life novelist named Aurora, and indeed, these slippages between “fiction” and “reality” will become crucial—observes in the sixteen-year-old Laura some



**Fig. 1** | Still from Rohmer's *Le genou de Claire*, 0:01:38. Les films du Losange, 1970.

stirrings of a girlish infatuation with Jérôme. She encourages him to pursue the girl as fodder for her next book. He does, and in this first enactment of desire, his apathy is key. Not only is Jérôme's attempted seduction of the girl framed as a mere holiday amusement, something to do in between boat rides and cocktail hour, but also, all responsibility for his action is displaced onto "an exotic and exuberant demiurge who amuses herself by pulling the strings" (Baecque and Herpe 37).

This kind of moral projection occurs on the extradiegetic level as well, for in addition to writing and directing this triangulation that absolves his fictional alter ego of any burden of decisiveness, Éric Rohmer engaged, during filming, in exactly the kind of lustful pursuit of actor Béatrice Romand that Jérôme believes he is not engaging in with Laura. The director found the teenaged girl—whose real name was Souriau, changed to Rohmer-cognate "Romand" at his request—fascinating to the extent that he began to "identify with the character of Jérôme"<sup>4</sup> (Baecque and Herpe 38). He sought inspirational certainty in her during filming, even on one occasion touching her knee and asking, "What effect does that have on you?" (Ibid. 38).

Rohmer biographers Antoine de Baecque and Noël Herpe summarize this closeness between fiction and reality well, noting "the dream of an idyll with a girl, the danger of sin barely approached, the return to normal and especially to work—to the point that one wonders whether [the relationship with Béatrice] did more than nourish the filmmaker's imagination" (38). However, they refrain (in an article that despite its ominous title of "The Weeping Girl" limits itself to hagiography) from criticizing Rohmer for his pursuit of a young, vulnerable actor in his care. The authors even go so far as to frame Romand in the same erroneous, victim-blaming manner as *Claire's Knee* does Laura: "With the exclusiveness of her tender years, the teenager pulled every imaginable trick to ensure that she was [Rohmer's] preferred one" (38). The contrast between Rohmer's personal, active immorality and his artistic interest in passive amorality demonstrates well the distance between real, typical predation and its intentional misrepresentation in art; in real life, the man with the power confuses what he is seeing for what is happening.

If Rohmer's behaviour with Béatrice Romand does not suffice to exemplify this disparity, his similar mistreatment

of actor Laurence de Monaghan should. Whereas Rohmer's fixation with Romand played out mostly off-screen and continued for some time after the filming of *Le genou de Claire* had concluded—indeed, she would go on to act in several more of his movies—his relationship with the girl playing the eponymous knee-haver seems instead to be characterized by its insistence on dissolving the line between person and personage. Throughout filming, Rohmer allowed his young actors to improvise, apparently in the endeavor to “blur as much as possible the boundaries between reality and fiction” with Laurence de Monaghan in particular; according once again to Herpe and de Baecque, he wanted to give “her the illusion of being the author or coauthor of the film” (36). A picture emerges from this account of Rohmer as groomer, seeking to implicate de Monaghan in her treatment both on set and in character; and lest this interpretation seems limited to his biographers writing almost fifty years after the fact, de Monaghan herself has spoken on the record about Rohmer's intense, boundary-less directorial style: “He would try to make contact with me, without even telling me,” she says. “He would come to my house for an hour, two hours. He would stare at me. He tried to capture the deepest parts of you”<sup>5</sup> (de Monaghan, my translation).

Rohmer's preoccupation with de Monaghan more closely resembles that of Jérôme with Claire than does the director's other analog relationship in which Béatrice is to Laura as Éric is to Jérôme—and if this string of doubles disorients, perhaps the confusion serves to underline the incredible murkiness between fiction and reality characterizing the *Claire's Knee* production—for indeed, in the film, Jérôme does independently decide to pursue some kind of physical, if not sexual, encounter with de Monaghan's character. Suddenly struck by the sight of her knee, he muses to Aurora how all women have a body part that acts as an entrypoint into their selfhood entier. Although intrigued, he is significantly not obsessed with finding a way to touch this synecdoche incarnate. Once again, as in his flirtation with Laura, Jérôme frames his interest in Claire as intellectual rather than lustful. At the end of the film, he seizes an opportunity to sublimate his desire; he makes her cry, he touches her knee, and then his holiday is over.

At the time of the film's release, critics in both France and America lavished praise onto its literary dialogue and the fresh, authentic performances of its cast, with Pauline Kael, in what was actually one of the movie's less fulsome reviews, calling it “unusually civilized” (“Eric” 136). No note was made, by any published critic, of the alarming age differential between its male and female leads. Vincent Canby, writing for the *The New York Times*, went so far as to reveal some latent personal attraction in his review of “the enchanting Beatrice Romand, who, when she

first comes on the screen, looks like the sort of child who should be heard but not seen, and then, in a matter of several scenes, has turned into a most desirable, unpredictable woman” (“Claire's” 1). Both Canby and Kael speculate, furthermore, that Laura is 16 and Claire “about 18.” In reality, during filming in the summer of 1970, it was Béatrice Romand who was 18, despite her character's stated age of 16, and Laurence de Monaghan who was only 15 years old.

This critical disinterest in the lopsided power dynamics at play in Rohmer's work and in his film illustrates, perhaps above all else, the success of his aesthetic and affective design. Although the fictional Jérôme replicates almost identically Rohmer's own predatory behaviour, his transgressions, within the context of a film that is “shimmering,” “superbly photographed,” “as carefully composed as a painting by Vermeer,” are smoothed into a wash of emotional flatness and soothing visuality (Haskell, Canby, Dale). The abuse of Laura and Claire can be compartmentalized not only because it occurs in the separate, unreal space of art, but additionally, because its specific artistic container is constructed through the dual, symbiotic distractors of aesthetic spectacle and tonal apathy. As Sianne Ngai has demonstrated in her work with artistic tone, “since so much of ideological communication is tonal, it is in the arena of cultural politics that the concept matters most,” and indeed, beauty and boredom as deployed by Rohmer work to create a tonal experience so exaggerated in its monotony and in its monotonous loveliness that it could never resemble real life (46). In this way, *Claire's Knee* is a near-perfect object of study for an analysis of the persistent modernism in artistic reception, because it is the modernist artwork ne plus ultra. The material circumstances of its production are directly reflected in its presentation, and yet its intentional emphasis on affect and aesthetics work actively to distract from those political realities.

## FUTILE DEVICES

If the historical reception of *Le genou de Claire* expresses a certain critical insouciance with respect to underage sex in art, some discussion of sexual mores at the time of the film's release may prove useful, particularly as juxtaposed with an understanding of present-day attitudes regarding interage desire. Ultimately, even if the permissiveness displayed by film reviewers from the 1970s can be read or justified through the language of “historical context,” a similar permissiveness on the part of critics writing in the 21st century demands an alternate explanation.

The 1970s were an era anomalously permissive of adult sex with minors, and particularly so in France. In the aftermath of the revolutionary fervor of 1968, protesters'



**Fig. 2** | Still from Rohmer's *Le genou de Claire*, 1:34:20. Les films du Losange, 1970.

“radical challenge to boundaries of all kinds” was warped into the effort on the part of almost every major French intellectual to decriminalize pedophilia, a campaign that positioned itself as the final frontier of civil rights<sup>6</sup> (Turkle 11). Rohmer and his Jérôme were not the only adults of the day engaging in public predation—there was the infamous affair of Gabrielle Russier, a teacher in her thirties who initiated a sexual relationship with a boy of fifteen; there was Serge Gainsbourg, the nation’s most celebrated musician, erotically dedicating an album to an adolescent girl he almost ran over in the street; and in 1979, there was the “Lettre ouverte,” a petition to the French penal code commission claiming to advocate for “the right of the child and of the adolescent to engage in sexual relations with persons of their choice,”<sup>7</sup> signed by dozens of thinkers, from Gilles Deleuze, to Francis Ponge, to Simone de Beauvoir, to Michel Foucault (“Lettre,” my translation).

This extreme position derived in part from a particular misreading of Freudian child sexuality theory, with leading French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto (another signatory of the “Open Letter” petition) rejecting Freud’s notion of the reality principle that, he argued, acts as a dividing line

between child and adult desire. As part of this intervention, Dolto’s “tout est langage” theory of infant sexuality and consent posited that children have the capacity for lucidity even before they can learn to speak, endowing adult interpreters with grossly exaggerated interpretive power (Turkle “Tough”). Meanwhile, Michel Foucault, establishing himself as one of the more prominent and vocal disseminators of Dolto’s perversion of Freudianism, derided psychoanalysis for enforcing what he perceived to be the “pedagogization” or institutionalization of child sexuality for instance, in a 1978 interview with France Culture in which he ventriloquized: “This sexuality of the child is a territory with its own geography that the adult must not enter...The adult will therefore intervene as a guarantor of that specificity of child sexuality in order to protect it” (History 104; “Danger” 267). Besides offering a window into the Gallic afterlife of Freudian thought, this unique and troubling episode in French intellectual history resonates with the representation of minor sex found in *Le genou de Claire*. For while the desire Jérôme feels for Laura and Claire more closely resembles “ephebophilia”—the unofficial diagnostic designation for attraction towards

girls between 15 and 19—than the kind of strict pedophilia addressed by the signatories of the “Open Letter,” Rohmer’s emphasis on Laura’s capacity for articulate, rational consent certainly maps onto the inaccurate and dangerous model of child sexuality proposed by Dolto and Foucault (Blanchard). Furthermore, the film’s broader thematic equation of boredom and predatory lust anticipates the kind of intellectual abstraction represented by the French pro-pedophilia campaign: a kind of post-68 Foucault’s Pendulum exercise in theorizing freedom for freedom’s sake.

America, undergoing its own comedown from the civil rights movements of the late 1960s, was similarly in the throes of what Tom Wolfe labeled the “Me Decade;” the so-called sexual revolution—which often, in reality, merely replicated hegemonic patriarchy in the name of liberation, with older men achieving self-actualization through the bodies of vulnerable youths—was in its heyday the year *Claire’s Knee* premiered in the United States (Didion). The generalized climate of permissiveness enabled by “free love” would seem to contribute to the film’s acceptability in both

persistent myopia regarding predatory behaviour in *Claire’s Knee* demonstrates that even as cultural and sexual norms regarding underage sex have changed, audiences do not apply this new interpretive lens to an unchanged work of art. Something about *Le genou de Claire* aligns with public expectations of the depiction of underage sex in film.

This contemporary permissiveness can be explained, in part, through the fact of Rohmer’s inheritor: Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me By Your Name*. Guadagnino, in interviews from the *Call Me By Your Name* press junket, explicitly cited Éric Rohmer as a directorial influence, and the aesthetic similarities between the 2017 film and the summery, just-over-composed *mise-en-scène* of its inspirational fodder are abundant. (Both works contain scenes set at an outdoor dance club that might as well be identical.) Author of the film’s source material André Aciman, has also spilled prolific ink over his love for the French director, even exemplifying the type of hermeneutical viewership characteristic of a “separation” theory of art in a piece entitled “Eric Rohmer and Me:” “The personal lexicon we bring to a film...is our surest and most trusted reason for

### ***The abuse of Laura and Claire can be compartmentalized... because its specific artistic container is constructed through the dual, symbiotic distractors of aesthetic spectacle and tonal apathy.***

France and America; since while the abuse of children and adolescents at the hands of adults is not unique to any cultural moment, pedophilia and its variants had at least been theoretically disdained in every preceding decade since the inception of modernity (Ambroise-Rendu).

No such historical rationalization can be made for more contemporary critics writing about *Claire’s Knee*. Despite renewed attention to the kind of sexual power imbalance depicted in the film, reviews as recent as April 2020 laud *Claire’s Knee* for its color palette and escapist potential, while its seemingly controversial plotline goes unmentioned (Dale). (“The Weeping Girl” article that praises Rohmer’s directorial grooming as a “clever trap” dates from the spring of 2016—predating the height of the MeToo movement, but not predating the publicization of dialogues surrounding consent and abuse.) Perhaps those writing today cannot judge the Canbys and Kaels of the world too harshly; after all, current historiographical methodology recommends that perspectives of the past be judged through the context of their time, “symptoms of the culture in which they were produced” (Dean 21). But the

claiming it a masterpiece” (American Scholar). Indeed, Guadagnino’s movie from 2017 upholds the aesthetics and narrative elements of Rohmer’s film from 1970, retroactively supporting its representation of sex with minors and instructing contemporary audiences in the semiotics of this kind of story.

Guadagnino’s film does attempt to alter one crucial facet of its Rohmerian legacy in its intentional emphasis on emotion. Where Rohmer’s works maintain a certain flatness, the sort of apoliticizing boredom at work in *Le genou de Claire*, *Call Me By Your Name* is charged through with a powerful current of emotionality; Guadagnino’s film is not meant to be a story of intellectual experimentation, but one of love. This deviates from Rohmer’s filmic philosophy: “indeed, Rohmer and his friends openly despised films and directors aiming to provoke a definite emotional effect in the viewer: ‘Beware of all winks to the audience, of the sly quest for complicity, of all calls, even discreet, for pity’”—but ultimately upholds, or even expands upon, the same artistic anti-materiality perpetuated by the earlier work (Grosoli 189).



**Fig. 3** | Still from Rohmer's *Le genou de Claire*, 0:59:51. Les films du Losange, 1970.



**Fig. 4** | Still from Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*, 0:29:42. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.

**...Guadagnino's project has to reinvent itself in emotion in order to work—if the movie doesn't end in the elation and heartache of true love, it really is just a story of sexual harm.**

Significantly, in *Call Me by Your Name*, it is the youth, not the grown man, who performs the role of active desirer. Elio (Timothée Chalamet) does what Claire does not in pursuing his adult counterpart; through Elio's longing gaze we see the colourful rotation of Oliver's (Armie Hammer) swim trunks, and his earnest, American moves on the dance floor. This choice of perspective represents not only an inversion of the Rohmerian model, but also the Platonic one upon which Aciman's story is based, locating agency in the beautiful boy rather than his older companion. It

also represents the double-edged simultaneity of the film's aspirations and its failures (Gianelle). By presenting Elio as the pursuer, the film goes one step farther in its romanticization of pederasty than *Claire's Knee*, not only saying this is okay, but this is okay because he wanted it. This fits into the film's larger aim—a justification of the power imbalance between Elio and Oliver through an emphasis on their romantic connection.

Indeed, the film uses the culmination of Elio and Oliver's flirtation in passionate love to retroactively forgive any inappropriate missteps along the way. Lamenting the delayed discovery of Elio's feelings, Oliver jokes, "Once, when we were playing volleyball, I touched you ... Just as a way of showing ... I liked you. The way you reacted made me feel I'd almost molested you" (Ivory 67). Even the mistreatment of Elio's erstwhile girlfriend Marzia (Esther Garrel) is subsumed into the warm, feel-good glow of this romantic teleology, with Marzia forgiving Elio for sleeping with her and then abandoning her when she learns of his attachment to Oliver. In a sense, therefore, Guadagnino's project has to reinvent itself in emotion in order to work. If the movie does not end in the elation and heartache of true love, it really is just a story of sexual harm.

Privileging the romantic feelings of Elio and Oliver above all other narrative concerns serves as an attempt to stave off readings of sexual impropriety, while simultaneously illustrating the film's tendency to avoid political constraint of any kind. As if afraid to touch it, Guadagnino exiles critical interrogation; in the words of Guy Hocquenghem, one of the key signatories of the Open Letter, "The crime vanishes" ("Danger" 268). This lacuna applies not only to the film's depiction of the age differential between Elio (17) and Oliver (24), but also, somewhat conversely, to its unwillingness to identify its protagonists as queer. The movie is of course under no obligation to label the orientation of its central characters—it is possible, and often more generative, for art to explore the ambiguity and fluidity of human sexual life. However, the film adaptation of *Call Me By Your Name* makes deliberate choices to neutralize its queerness, even while being lauded as a "modern gay classic," choices that further serve its aesthetic purposes while neglecting its political ones (Lawson).

In one scene, an older gay couple—one half of which is played by André Aciman himself—come to visit the Perlman's, and Elio mocks them to his father with a subtle limp-wrist routine. Scenes of particular emotional weight are anachronistically scored by Sufjan Stevens, a musician whose own sexuality remains a notorious cipher. And then there are the flies. Some have interpreted the inclusion of flies in so many of the film's scenes as a harbinger of the AIDS epidemic to come, a red herring for viewers





**Fig. 5** | Still from Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*, 0:20:38. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.

predisposed to gay-movie-as-trauma-porn (Eidelstein, Kornhaber). But if the appearance of three or four flies is the only hint of a disease that in 1983, the year of the film's setting, was ravaging queer communities across America and beginning to spread through Europe, it is not responsible or accurate to give *Call Me By Your Name* credit for a mindful integration of AIDS anxiety. Again and again, the film distances itself from the reality of homosexual life, a trend that also influences its portrayal of a queer, inter-age couple.

Pederasty has long been associated with homosexuality, due in part to its representation in Plato's *Symposium*, and in part, unfortunately, to fearmongering campaigns of the religious right. (In fact, this association was purposefully cited by signatories of the French "Open Letter to the Penal Code" in order to bulwark their position on pedophilia as a sexual civil right.) But alongside its bogeyman legacy, there is also a real, well-documented tradition of sexual relationships between young queer men and older, experienced ones, in which exploitation and grooming are often framed as processes of initiation<sup>8</sup> (Sorrentino). Instead of engaging with this regrettable history, *Call Me By Your Name* smooths and assimilates its central queer relationship into a romance that is easily digestible and, crucially, universal. Guadagnino has admitted as much, saying, "It was important to me to create this powerful

universality" (Lee). Straight audiences should not necessarily be able to identify with a story of queer coming-of-age, and certainly, should not be able to identify with one of sexual abuse. Guadagnino's emphasis on universal emotional appeal uproots its representation of inter-age sex from any basis in reality and encourages an audience reaction rooted in affective identification rather than critical, material engagement.

This emphasis on affective recognition speaks itself explicitly in the very final moments of the film, with the tender, widely quoted speech of Elio's father. Mr. Perlman finally addresses the relationship his son has had with his twenty-four-year old graduate assistant, and says,

In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, to pray that their sons land on their feet. But I am not such a parent ... We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster, that we go bankrupt by the age of thirty and have less to offer each time we start with someone new. But to make yourself feel nothing so as not to feel anything - what a waste!" (Ivory 77).

There is no discussion of consent or exploitation, only a modernist insistence on feeling, no matter how or what, because individual emotion is established as the primary criterion of a successful human experience—an affective



**Fig. 6** | Still from Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*, 2:08:14. One of the film's many files can be seen here on Elio's right shoulder. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.

***Sex with minors is therefore coded as aspirational, an implicit message supported by both films' white, rich, Eurocentric beauty...***

shroud over the film's content that also extends to cover its audiences. For indeed, a kind of public emotionality made individual has become perhaps the film's most pervasive popular legacy. Articles abound with titles like "This Is Why 'Call Me By Your Name' Makes You Cry." "Call Me By Your Name—Beyond Words and Feelings." "Call Me By Your Name' Ruined My Life, And I Was All About It" (Saroli, Hou, Girdy). And although the laden nature of the relationship between Elio and Oliver has also received critical attention—"Call Me By Your Name: Not Pedophilia, Still Problematic"—discussion of the film's formal beauty and emotional universality has largely supplanted any on the way it romanticizes harmful truths about predation and abuse (Sorrentino). Ultimately, "by the time we have seen through

his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object" (Freud 250).

**MORAL OF THIS TALE**

Despite their contrasting intentions with respect to viewer affect, Guadagnino's and Rohmer's films do, then, achieve the same distancing effect. *Call Me By Your Name's* audiences, through an exaggerated tonal emphasis on emotion, are encouraged to feel and forgive, and audiences of *Claire's Knee*, through an exaggerated tonal emphasis on boredom, are discouraged from casting judgment onto the actions of its protagonists. (Indeed, "for Rohmer there could be hardly anything less cinematic than a film trying to express a predetermined meaning" [Grosoli 192].) Both films employ the mystifying effects of aesthetic beauty, and so exemplify the qualities of a self-contained, modernist regime that seeks transcendence through heightened aesthetic and affective choices; and finally, both films deliberately preclude, through this kind of artistic alchemy, insight into their methods and materiality.

The specific nature of the exalted, obfuscating portrait reinforced by Rohmer and Guadagnino demands scrutiny, especially because of its incredible contrast with the

realities of teen sexual abuse. The kind of inter-age desire represented in both movies exists within a “bubble of classicism;” a white, rich, Eurocentric world with obvious and self-conscious referents to the pederastic pedigree of antiquity (Huber). Sex with minors is therefore coded as aspirational, an implicit message supported by both films’ white, rich, Eurocentric beauty, or by passages like this one from André Aciman’s *Eight White Nights*:

I loved Rohmer, didn’t I? I did, I said, continuing to stare at my food. Had I been to see any of the movies this week? Yes. Which ones had I seen? Before I could answer with all of them, the Forsham husband said he’d once seen a Rohmer film but still couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about...I tried to change the subject. The Forsham woman thought there was something sick and twisted in wanting to touch a minor’s knee. Her husband couldn’t agree more: ‘He likes the knee more than he likes the woman it belongs to. Fetishistic!’ ‘My point exactly,’ echoed his wife, ‘fetishistic.’<sup>9</sup> (310)

The disdain the “Forsham woman” and her “Forsham husband” have for *Claire’s Knee* is depicted as a product of their decided in-sensibility; the bumpkins simply don’t get it. Shaping an idealized bubble, in which both adult predators and adolescent victims are white, beautiful, and often enthusiastically consenting, the films depart incredibly from the actual processes and demographics of minor abuse; in North America, the rates for abuse are almost twice as high for indigenous and Black children than for white, and five times higher for children from low-income households than those from higher socioeconomic strata (Statista, Lefebvre).

The unreality of this filmic sphere, furthermore, seems to suggest yet other irresponsibilities less grounded in the horrible practicalities of intersectional cycles of trauma but culturally relevant nonetheless. For instance, the critical and public acclaim, touched only briefly by accusations of criminality, for a movie that replicates or even escalates the aesthetic depiction of predatory sex first praised fifty years in its past, casts a shadow over any sunny, Pinkerian myth of contemporary progress. When *Call Me By Your Name* speaks back to *Claire’s Knee*, it is obvious that in lieu of evolution, cultural transformation is but continual “repetition of the same” (Greenwald Smith 551). The present-day panegyrics for a director whose treatment of young girls in his care differs hardly at all from that of men who writers in the same years have condemned perhaps challenges our historiographical anxiety around moral interpretation, our scapegoating of the “shapeless bugbear” that is presentism (Armitage 5). But despite the intriguing

paths offered by these theoretical inferences, realities continue to compel me more.

On December 4, 2016, a 28-year-old man burst into the Comet Ping Pong Pizza parlor and started firing an AR-15 rifle that ricocheted off the restaurant’s walls. His mission? To free the children trapped underneath the pizza parlor by a secret network of pedophiles running the world; in other words, to “do some good” (qtd. Goldman).

By now, this is a familiar story. Most of us, even those disinclined to trawl internet message boards or soundtrack their morning commute with QAnon Anonymous, are familiar with its general outline: following the Pizzagate conspiracy, a right-wing moral panic found its outlet in QAnon, “an even wilder conspiracy theory that postulates that [soon-to-be-ex] President Donald Trump is on the verge of arresting a throng of liberal elites for facilitating and participating in a sprawling child sex ring” (Breland). Conspiracy theories have entered the realm of mainstream analysis in the years following President Trump’s election, their role as a coal-mine canary signifying the anxieties of a self-perceived subaltern class much remarked upon;<sup>10</sup> and with this renewed study, it has been suggested that “The [theories] that stick are those that most effectively validate a group’s anxieties, with blame assigned to outsiders” (Breland). In the case of the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracy system, these “outsiders” are so uniquely external to society as to not even exist, and yet the fear of an elite child sex ring, despite its misdirection, has some grounding in reality. The systematic abuse within the Catholic Church, or in Jeffrey Epstein’s enormous sex trafficking enterprise, demonstrates that members of the upper echelons of society can, in the 21st century, commit pedophilic abuse and remain largely unscathed. There are then, it seems, two currents of attention to this kind of predation playing out simultaneously: one characterized by a liberal, modernist impulse to look away from the complicity of people like Bill Clinton and Malcolm Gladwell—to separate the crime from the criminal—and one in which the abstracted pedophile functions as an attack on the political left, a catch-all scapegoat for fears surrounding queer sexualities, feminism, and trans rights (Raymond). So although the baseless, extremist claims of QAnon cannot be considered on equivalent terms to the experience of movie audiences seeking to separate the art from the artist, it is perhaps true nonetheless that in life, sexual predators do resemble the ones in Rohmer’s and Guadagnino’s “bubble of classicism,” who audiences have been instructed to admire, while simultaneously, internet conspiracists on the far-right project pedophilia as “a kind of roaming danger, a sort of omnipresent phantom” (“Danger” 270). Not their words; Michel Foucault’s.

In interviews following the efforts of Foucault and his compatriots to decriminalize pedophilia in the late 1970s, a very Foucauldian concern emerges: the exile of sexuality from regular discourse. Speaking of French pudeur codes originating in the late 19th century, Foucault remarks that “this legislation was characterized by the odd fact that it was never capable of saying exactly what it was punishing. Harassments were punished, but were never defined. Outrageous acts were punished; nobody ever said what an outrage was” (“Danger” 266). His fear is that this lexical nebulosity would be and had been used to wrongly advocate for the mistreatment of vulnerable sexual groups; the fact that his solution, of course, was to advocate for the mistreatment of vulnerable sexual groups does not necessarily detract from the correctness of his discursive diagnosis. Sexual violence against minors was then and is still

“un-hearable, un-sayable, even un-thinkable,”<sup>11</sup> perhaps to the detriment of its abolitionists (Roux 244, my translation). For while Foucault’s impulse to fold pedophilia into the rhetorical bounds of law was wrong, contemporary cultural and artistic actors can perhaps learn something from this misguided desire to render it “sayable.” We can seek out art that abandons its idealized, self-perpetuating representations; we can understand creators as fallible and intrinsically linked to their work, as a first step in a process of accountability and rehabilitation; and, although in many cases the space of the individual mind is a barren one for fruitful political action, here, I think, we can understand ourselves, too, as rooted in a material system of production and ideology, rather than as the sealed-off plastics of an aesthetic domain. Fallible, mortal, and so able to change. ■

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## NOTES

1. In a similar vein to my project here, Matthew Lampert analyzes Rancière’s late efforts to “depoliticize” his theoretical work, to its detriment. See Lampert, Matthew. “Jacques Rancière and the Politics of Theory.” *Cultural Critique*, vol. 106, 2020, pp. 1-26.
2. « absolument monstrueuse. »
3. Gregg Araki’s *Mysterious Skin*, on the other hand, may actually be the most realistic and gripping depiction cinema has ever produced of this kind of sexual pathology and the traumas it induces in its victims (Antidote Films, 2004).
4. All quotations in this paragraph are located in Baecque and Herpe 38.
5. « Il essayait de prendre contact avec moi, sans tellement parler. Il venait à la maison, une heure, deux heures. Il me regardait. Il cherche à capter le plus profond de vous-même. »
6. To learn more about this troubling episode in French history, see: Verdrager, Pierre. *L’enfant interdit. Comment la pédophilie est devenue scandaleuse*. Armand Colin, 2013.
7. « du droit de l’enfant et de l’adolescent à entretenir des relations avec des personnes de son choix. »
8. One facet of this kind of initiation is the house system practiced in drag’s ball culture, as recently narrativized on the FX series *Pose*. Although houses have typically been framed as nurturing communities, refuges from the kind of harassment queer youth would face outside their provenance, there is still a documented legacy of exploitation within the house-ballroom scene (Telander).
9. For Aciman’s own confession of pedophilic impulses, see Hagen, Bridget. “Cancel Me By Your Name.” *Buzzsaw*, 20 Dec. 2019, [www.buzzsawmag.org/2019/12/20/cancel-me-by-your-name/](http://www.buzzsawmag.org/2019/12/20/cancel-me-by-your-name/).
10. See Grobe, Christopher. “The Artist is President.” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 46 No. 4, 2020, pp. 764-805.
11. « difficilement audible, dicible, voire même pensable. »

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# Inconsistent Cinema: Paul Thomas Anderson, *There Will Be Blood* and the Postmodern Filmmaker

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## ABSTRACT

Paul Thomas Anderson's early work up to and including *There Will Be Blood* (2007) are examples of incoherent, postmodern cinema. Anderson's formative years produced four critically acclaimed features, *Hard Eight* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Magnolia* (1999), and *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), all of which presented related themes and aesthetics. Though *There Will Be Blood* does depict a complex father-son relationship similar to that found in *Hard Eight*, *Boogie Nights*, and *Magnolia*, the film is stylistically a radical departure for Anderson. While certain experimentation occurred in *Punch-Drunk Love*, *There Will Be Blood* is the start of the next phase of Anderson's career, one which reflects a meditative sensibility. For instance, in place of kinetic cinematography, rapid cutting, and multiple narratives are longer takes, extended tracking shots, and a leisurely editing style. Finally, contextualizing Anderson's career within the era of "Indiewood," a fusion of studio and independent filmmaking, key visual techniques employed during his early work emphasize the shift in his aesthetics, highlighting a singular, postmodern voice in Hollywood cinema.

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## INTRODUCTION

FREDRIC JAMESON WROTE that postmodernism is a concept which "allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features" (2). Sezen Kayhan also describes a range of coexistent and subordinate features within postmodern cinema, such as "themes and techniques of historiographic metafiction, intertextuality, simulation, pastiche, play, black humor, irony and pluralism" (34). Contemporary filmmaking is rife with the elements Kayhan highlights, which, perhaps, ingrain a feeling of repetitiveness. Critics note that postmodern cinema places an emphasis on "style over substance, a consumption of images for their own sake, rather than for their usefulness or the values they symbolize, a preoccupation with playfulness and in-jokes at the expense of meaning" (Levy 57). However, there are filmmakers who have crafted distinctive careers utilizing intertextuality, irony, playfulness, and in-jokes to great effect, and Paul Thomas Anderson is one of the most accomplished directors working in contemporary Hollywood cinema to do so. The primary focus here is to identify the key elements of the aesthetic in a majority of Anderson's work that make him distinctive, particularly within the postmodern frameworks noted above. Catherine Constable states that postmodern filmmakers "do not form a coherent body of work" (2) and

this notion is applicable to Anderson's filmography. I will discuss recurring techniques that feature throughout his early films *Hard Eight* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997), and *Magnolia* (1999) to demonstrate a collective body of work that makes reference to the cinema of 1970s New Hollywood. Ostensibly, Anderson maintains the spirit of the 1970s filmmakers but rather than simply reiterate their work, he refashions similar visual, narrative, and character traits that reflect a contemporary, personal style. Examining the minor shift in aesthetics and experimentation in *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) precedes the contention that *There Will Be Blood* (2007) is the key work in his career thus far. The film has a substantial modification in style that sets a new foundation for Anderson's subsequent films, *The Master* (2012), *Inherent Vice* (2014), and *Phantom Thread* (2017), one that presents maturity in Anderson's approach to narrative, character, and visualization.

Born in 1970, the son of Ernie and Edwina, Anderson grew up in North Hollywood. A showbiz personality in Cleveland, Ernie created the persona "Ghoulardi," who wore a "fright wig and lab coat to introduce late-night schlock horror TV" (Waxman 84). Anderson was raised in a large family with eight other siblings, Paul being the third



## **Anderson replicates his deteriorating mental state by combining fast tracking shots, whip pans, crash zooms, and rapid editing.**

youngest of nine children (Hirshberg). Adoring his father, but distant from his apparently cold mother (Waxman 85), Anderson displayed an interest in filmmaking at a young age. He directed the *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) ---influenced short mockumentary *The Dirk Diggler Story* (1988), which was later expanded into *Boogie Nights* without the faux documentary aesthetic. Infamously, Anderson attended the prestigious New York University film school for only a few days before dropping out after receiving a C grade on a writing assignment in which he plagiarized David Mamet's screenplay for *Hoffa* (1992) (Sperb 20). Later, he worked on a variety of production jobs as a crew member, including the quiz show *The Quiz Kids Challenge* (1990) (Richardson), an experience that fed into the screenplay of *Magnolia*. Using the tuition fees refunded by New York University, as well as funds from his father and others (Richardson), Anderson invested the money into his short film *Cigarettes and Coffee* (1993). Starring Philip Baker Hall, who would become a frequent collaborator, the film displays early hallmarks of the director's narrative traits. *Cigarettes and Coffee* features an array of characters, multiple storylines, and an elder father-like figure (Hall) espousing wisdom to a young protegee (Kirk Baltz) as a twenty-dollar bill is passed from person to person. In a tight 23-minute running time, Anderson visualizes the narrative in tight close-ups and two shots with minimal camera movement and utilizes a swift editing style that punctuates the rapid exchanges between the characters. While undeniably flawed, the short film demonstrates Anderson's primary interest in character and performance.

### **NEW HOLLYWOOD, INDIEWOOD, AND ANDERSON**

The stylized dialogue of *Cigarettes and Coffee* reflected the cinema of the time. Anderson and his contemporaries, such as Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, and the vastly underrated Mary Harron, each owe a debt to New Hollywood, or the "Hollywood Renaissance," of 1960s/1970s. The Hollywood studio system of the 1960s was "a period of declining and fragmenting audiences, crisis and readjustment within the film industry" and the response from studio chiefs was to provide support to young filmmakers "in an effort to recapture cinema's lost

mass audience" (Symmons 2). New Hollywood "was the outcome of a conjunction of forces: social, industrial and stylistic" which provided a "measure of freedom" (King 48) within the studio system at that time. Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, and Jonathan Demme benefitted from this new regime, producing works as diverse as *Taxi Driver* (1976), *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), and *Melvin and Howard* (1980) respectively. Though *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) represented a drastic shift of onscreen violence and depiction complex anti-heroes, it was *Easy Rider* (1969) that truly cemented the era of New Hollywood. Its narrative of two drug-smuggling, hippy motorcyclists tapped into the counterculture of 1960s North America. What blossomed was a "cinema of loneliness," to borrow Robert Kolker's term, where "American filmmakers became thoughtful about their films" (10). The early days of New Hollywood were very much focused on character studies than narrative-driven cinema. The French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague), particularly the works of Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, were an influence on the filmmakers breaking through the studio system of the 1960s/1970s. The long takes of Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), for instance, inspired several scenes in *Taxi Driver* to delve deeper into the psyche of troubled anti-hero Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), demonstrating an intertextual, referential mode of filmmaking. Contrastingly during this period, the birth of the blockbuster began with the release of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). Given a sizeable investment from Warner Bros. for the time (and for a genre film), it grossed \$193m from a \$11m budget (*Box Office Mojo*). It was Steven Spielberg who cemented the blockbuster with *Jaws* (1975), and science-fiction became popular once more due to George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). Both these films "fueled Hollywood's commercial recovery in the later 1970s after three decades of steep decline" (Schatz 128). As audiences flocked to these escapist fantasies, the smaller, character-driven films were slowly fading out. *Heaven's Gate* (1980) was the film notoriously cited for ending the personal, character-focused cinema of this era, bankrupting United Artists, the studio that financed it, as its budget ballooned out of control (Abramovich 68). During the 1980s, Hollywood found success with sequels and more big-budget B-movie extravaganzas, while independent cinema was getting politicized in response to Reaganism. To a certain extent, Scorsese, Altman, and Demme struggled in the 1980s to maintain their character-driven cinema, but in the 1990s they found another wave of creativity that tapped into the public consciousness.

Anderson emerged during a period of similar revitalization in 1990s Hollywood cinema, an era known as "Indiewood," which Geoff King observes as where the independent sector and studios blended together (1). Many of

the major studios set up “independent” branches, such as Fox Searchlight Pictures (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) and Paramount Vantage (Paramount Studios), to distribute films that were “still be perceived as a specialized product catering [to] audiences not associated with Hollywood blockbuster and franchise films, without alienating audiences that do watch and enjoy these films” (Tzioumakis 49). Many characteristics of Indiewood cinema can be found in what Jeffrey Sconce considers to be “smart cinema,” where films

frequently trade in a number of shared elements, including 1) the cultivation of ‘blank’ style and incongruous narration; 2) a fascination with ‘synchronicity’ as a principle of narrative organization; 3) a related thematic interest in random fate. 4) a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. These elements do not necessarily appear in all of the films at the core of the irony/nihilism debates. (358)

Anderson certainly demonstrates a propensity towards depicting “random fate,” “middle-class families,” “dysfunction,” and “identity” (with many elements of “irony/nihilism” peppered within his characters). As noted above, Indiewood was, seemingly, the crossover of independent cinema and studio production. However, independent cinema has been described as “the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film” (Ortner 2), so this merging of the two “systems” would be an altogether different venture which, as indicated by Tzioumakis above, was not too avant-garde in the manner of certain New Hollywood productions (for example, Hopper’s second feature *The Last Movie* (1971)). While still undertaking certain risks with regard to characterization, subject matter, and visualization, Anderson found a place to develop his filmmaking in this environment, one which would not be too alienating for “blockbuster and franchise films” audiences but would serve his referential, intertextual style.

#### **RESTLESS AESTHETICS IN *HARD EIGHT*, *BOOGIE NIGHTS* AND *MAGNOLIA*: VISUAL/NARRATIVE AMBITION**

Brian Michael Goss notes that when examining a filmmaker such as Anderson, it is central to understand “what a director’s corpus of films say, how they say it, and what slippages and elisions are evident in doing so,” as well as “the thematic motifs that resonate within the time and place of the film’s production” (173). From the start of his career, Anderson explored themes that would resonate throughout his films, including complex father-son

relationships, abuse of power, betrayal, extreme masculinity, redemption, and forgiveness. Anderson’s debut, *Hard Eight*, depicts a complex relationship between a surrogate father-figure, Sydney (Philip Baker Hall) and John (John C. Reilly) - echoing a similar dynamic in *Cigarettes and Coffee* between Hall and Baltz - as they navigate the Reno gambling world. Influenced by the crime dramas of Jean-Pierre Melville, dialogue similar to neo-noir *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and stylized like a Scorsese picture, *Hard Eight* lay the groundwork for Anderson’s next three films. There are also notions that Anderson’s early films can be understood as “Tarantinoesque,” a “byword for both pop-culture reference and popular post-modern cinema” (Woods 5), with an emphasis on snappy meta dialogue that reflects the influence of Tarantino’s screenwriting. As with many feature-film debuts, *Hard Eight* reflects Anderson at his developmental stage. The film is less thematically and narratively dense than both *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*; however, it “has a quiet narrative drive and accumulative mood that lingers long after the film ends” (Sperb 65). The deepening relationship between Sydney and John is complicated by the introduction of Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow), a cocktail waitress and prostitute who John falls for. An additional challenge to their bond is John’s friend Jimmy (Samuel L. Jackson), who later becomes an antagonist of sorts toward Sydney. Anderson previsualizes this antagonism by framing, in wide shot, the dynamic between Sydney, John, and Jimmy (Fig. 1).

The narrative is slight, and dramatic action is confined to two scenes: 1) John requests Sydney’s help to get rid of one of Clementine’s *johns* when the man refuses to pay and has subsequently beaten her; 2) Jimmy reveals that he knows about Sydney’s murderous past and blackmails him in return for silence. Each of these scenes occur at later stages of the film. Anderson deliberately postpones dramatic action until the latter half of the narrative to engross the audience in Sydney, John, and Clementine’s world, a delay “that would not usually be expected in the mainstream” (King 78). While each of these dramatic scenarios are resolved, their primary function is not necessarily designed for advancing the plot, but rather for extending the character dimensions. Anderson’s manipulation of audience expectations is reinforced visually. The film features extensive tracking shots, a trait developed and utilized throughout Anderson’s career in different contexts, is an essential component of his aesthetic. The Steadicam, a rig that “isolates any shakiness caused by the movement of the operator, allowing for almost unlimited freedom of movement” (Mercado 160), is employed as Sydney traverses through a casino, juxtaposing his “dynamic movement against other gamblers seated like zombies at their slots and screens” (Lee). The shot here follows Sydney as he explores



**Fig. 1** | Jimmy on the left, Sydney centre, and John on the right. Sydney literally and figuratively obstructs Jimmy's friendship with John in this scene, 00:26:01. *Hard Eight* (Rysher Entertainment, 1996).

his natural environment, in deep reflection, becoming the action within the frame. Rather than conventional cutting together of coverage – wide-, mid-, and close-up shots – the Steadicam remains fixed on Sydney (Fig. 2). The film pauses in this scene to focus on the minutiae of the character's day-to-day routine, a scene that would be excised in mainstream cinema.

The central role of the Steadicam in Anderson's aesthetic is expanded in his next feature. *Boogie Nights* is the first of period-set films Anderson directs, with *There Will Be Blood* (late-19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century), *The Master* (1940s), *Phantom Thread* (1950s) and *Inherent Vice* (1970s). *Boogie Nights* demonstrates Anderson maturing as a filmmaker in all aspects. Both the aesthetics and narrative approach are more ambitious. The opening shot features a long, Steadicam shot through a nightclub. The shot was influenced by the famous single, long take through the Copacabana nightclub in *Goodfellas* (1990), a shot Kolker argues Scorsese utilizes to demonstrate his visual capabilities rather than as a narrative function (197). However, Anderson's approach was to fuse both his visual abilities with a narrative function. It further demonstrates Anderson's postmodern sensibilities via its intertextuality, not only as a visual reference to a previous film, but also as a form of interaction with the viewer, providing them with “an active role in interpreting the text” (Kayhan 36). In essence, the sequence represents an Easter Egg for the audience, whereby with prior knowledge of the shot in *Goodfellas*, one would know Anderson's influence and therefore be further engrossed in the world of *Boogie Nights* (and, perhaps, have a deeper connection with the filmmaker).

*Boogie Nights's* opening shot not only references Scorsese but also introduces the main characters in a

non-conventional style, or as Gavin Smith recognizes, “the erotic abandon of cinematic form, pure or impure as it gets” (170). If we compare the opening shot of *Boogie Nights* (Fig.3) to *There Will Be Blood* (Fig.8), we can see that the former's “erotic abandon” would be replaced with distilled, restrained visualization in the latter. Gone is the glamor of 1970s, blasting pop music on the soundtrack, and a roaming camera. *There Will Be Blood* begins on the hills in New Mexico, and rather than an array of people queueing to enter a nightclub, we descend into the earth to see only one man, Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis). The restlessness of *Boogie Nights* juxtaposed with the restraint of *There Will Be Blood* present a stark contrast. However, before discussing this divergence in visualization, we must continue examining the expansion of the filmmaker's style.

Anderson's growing technical competence is complimented by his capabilities as a screenwriter in utilizing a multistranded narrative with numerous characters and plotlines. Ostensibly, the film is a rise-and-fall narrative, much in the same vein as *Goodfellas*. Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) becomes a protégée of porn director Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) who introduces him to many stars, all of whom later become Dirk's surrogate family. Dirk's swift rise and rapid fall is very much in line with classical narrative structures, or that of the “formulaic biopic (rising, falling, and rising again) and giving it an ironic twist” (Sperb 70) in that the film is set in the 1970s San Fernando Valley world of pornography. There is a degree of nostalgia for this period and Anderson's steadfast referential visualization, arguably, can be categorized as what Jameson considers a “nostalgia film,” where the glossiness of *Boogie Nights's* images produces “more complex ‘postnostalgia’ statements



**Fig. 2** | Sydney takes in his environment as Anderson follows with a Steadicam, 00:29:23. *Hard Eight* (Ryser Entertainment, 1996).

and forms” (180). The romanticization of this era is short lived. As the film progresses, and as more characters are introduced, the visuals become much more erratic and complex. Dirk descends into drug abuse, and Anderson replicates his deteriorating mental state by combining fast tracking shots, whip pans, crash zooms, and rapid editing. The aesthetics make reference not just to Scorsese, but Max Ophüls, François Truffaut, and Demme, particularly the use of close-ups. The most intense sequence occurs when Dirk and his fellow drug abusers, Reed Rothchild (John C. Reilly) and Todd Parker (Thomas Jane), attempt to rip off local drug dealer Rahad Jackson (Alfred Molina). Anderson builds suspense by slowing down the camera movement and employing longer takes. There is a specific instance of a medium close-up on Dirk (Fig. 4) as he battles between being in the moment and drifting away within his drug-addled mind.

The characters (and audience) are put on edge as firecrackers are continuously ignited in the background by Jackson’s young friend. When the robbery is attempted, the plan goes awry, resulting in an over-the-top shoot-out sequence. The shift in tone during this sequence is similar to the narrative and genre twists of Demme’s *Something Wild* (1986), wherein the film begins as a light romantic comedy before descending into a tense thriller. Jameson comments that this shift in *Something Wild* underlines its “allegorical narrative in which the 1980s meet the 1950s” (181). Anderson, however, utilizes the tense sequence in *Boogie Nights* to reflect a sense of the 1970s meeting the 1980s. Diggler, a reflection of the 1970s decadent porn world, is washed up, broke, and a drug addict. Jackson is a symbol of the hedonism of 1980s Reaganism: a consumerist drug dealer adorning a silk dressing gown in a house cluttered

### ***There Will Be Blood is a mash-up of genres, blending period-set drama with western elements, and a new dimension: horror.***

with expensive-looking materials, including a large sound system blasting pop music, as he both amuses and terrifies the would-be robbers. The failure of the robbery depicts Diggler at his lowest point. This tension between past and present results in Diggler recommencing his porn career. The film’s conclusion reflects its allegory of family bonds, particularly the surrogate father-son relationship between Diggler and Horner. *Boogie Nights* is perhaps the most overt Indiewood film in Anderson’s filmography. Its combination of genres – comedy, drama, and crime – flitted with rapid “Tarantinoesque” dialogue and visual cues to New Hollywood filmmakers, present a postmodern spin on the rise-and-fall narrative.

By contrast, *Magnolia* combines the visual kineticism of *Boogie Nights* with a grander narrative scale, which is where we can locate the influence of Altman and the multistranded narrative films *Nashville* (1975) and *Short Cuts* (1993). The film demonstrates a stumbling towards maturity (Olsen 80), and Anderson himself indicates in the published screenplay of *Magnolia* that it represents an “interesting study in a writer writing from his gut” (vii). While *Boogie Nights* depicted several characters, its primary focus on Dirk made him the central protagonist. *Magnolia* hosts nine, all of which are, more or less, given equal screen time. The narrative offers a balance “between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies; between a diversity

of narrative components, on the one hand, and a number of linking devices and thematic continuities, on the other” (King 86). The film opens with a prologue that details extreme forms of coincidences, outlining the numerous intersections and relationships between the vast cast of characters depicted. David Bordwell comments that cinematic coincidences “are wholly acceptable in stories *about* coincidence” (99). The aesthetics re-appropriate *Boogie Nights*'s freneticism to focus more on the chaos of everyday life, relationships, and connections. This is demonstrated post-prologue as *Magnolia* introduces “nine main characters in a stunning seven-minute montage that features rapid cuts, non-diegetic inserts, and a kinetic use of lenses and the camera” (Goss 177). While the film is continuously fast-paced, it famously pauses halfway through its 3-hour running time as the characters sing along to Aimee Mann’s “Wise Up” (Fig. 5). We witness the characters “overlap each other in their shared singing relationship to the same song and take each other’s place, one after another, as transmitters of the music’s power to undo, to make happen” (Toles 17). Anderson shifts the fast camera-work to slow tracking shots that either pull-toward or pull-away from the characters as each one reaches a low point in their narratives.

This shift in pace from fast to slow allows the audience to take a breath along with the characters. Anderson recalls that

I was lost a bit, and on the headphones came Aimee singing “Wise Up.” I wrote as I listened – and the most natural course of action was that everyone should sing – sing how they feel. In the best old-fashioned Hollywood Musical Way, each character, and the writer, began singing how they felt. This is one of those things that just happens, and I was either too stupid or not scared enough to hit “delete” once done. Next thing you know, you’re filming it. (viii)

Including a musical element adds a further complication to the film’s already spliced genres, including drama, comedy, romance, and thriller to a certain extent, via Donnie Smith’s (William H. Macy) subplot of attempting to rob his employer. However, visually the sequence is neither out of place, nor feels detached from the narrative. Instead, it cements the various genres and themes explored throughout the multiple storylines. The camera moves even though the characters are static. Logic, in this scene, is abandoned for an emotional/atmospheric response as indicated by the director’s testimony to not excise the sequence from the script.

The film’s large cast, dizzying visual style, and narrative ambitions are perhaps the cementation of Anderson’s early



Fig. 3 | *Boogie Nights*'s tracking shot – referencing Scorsese, 00:01:33. New Line Cinema, 1997.



Fig. 4 | Medium Close-up on Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg), 02:13:39. *Boogie Nights* (New Line Cinema, 1997).



Fig. 5 | *Magnolia*'s “Wise Up” sequence, 02:19:28. New Line Cinema, 1999.

restless aesthetics. The father-son/daughter relationship explored in his previous two films is continued here. While this theme continues in *There Will Be Blood*, it reaches its apex in *Magnolia*. The film multiplies this theme through several relationships: Earl Partridge (Jason Robards), dying from cancer, is estranged from his misogynist, pick-up artist, motivational speaker son Frank T.J. Mackay (Tom Cruise); Child prodigy Stanley Spector (Jeremy Blackman) is bullied by his father (Michael Bowen) into participating in a quiz show; and finally, quiz show host Jimmy Gator (Philip Baker Hall) attempts to mend his relationship with his daughter, Claudia (Melora Walters), who has accused him of abuse since childhood. Notably, *Magnolia* reflects a personal loss in Anderson’s life. His father died of cancer in 1997, the experience of which adds a sense of realism to Partridge’s narrative. The film does not conclude all of the multiple storylines but instead employs numerous ellipses. Despite the lack of finality, *Magnolia* represents a conclusion to Anderson’s early visual restlessness and sprawling narratives. The filmmaker once stated, “I really

feel that *Magnolia* is, for better or worse, the best movie I'll ever make" (Mikulec), and it still remains Anderson's most personal film.

### **VISUALIZING CHAOTIC HARMONY: ROMANCE IN PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE**

The grand narrative scale and dense thematic nature of *Magnolia* was abandoned for a romantic comedy starring Adam Sandler. Anderson noted in an interview with *The Guardian* that post-*Magnolia*, his next feature would be 90-minutes and crafted to appeal to a wider audience (Patterson). While many perceived this to be a radical departure for Anderson (Avery 76) if not a substantial risk for his burgeoning career, the film revealed new complexities of both director and star. Sandler, known for comedies that received very little critical acclaim, refashions his angry man-child identity. Film critic Roger Ebert notes that, "Given a director and a screenplay that sees through the Sandler persona, that understands it as the disguise of a suffering outsider, Sandler reveals depths and tones we may have suspected but couldn't bring into focus" (Ebert). Anderson does not shy away from Sandler's previous incarnations of an insecure, quick-tempered, juvenile adult but instead reconstitutes these traits to explore a character whose "masculinity is constantly threatened by a domineering home life" (76). Indeed, Sandler's Barry Egan is in constant retreat from his 7 domineering sisters, who undermine his masculinity at every turn, referring to him as "gay boy" to stir up his adolescent rage and maintain their torment. Egan's relationship is, in part, based on Anderson's own (positive) upbringing with multiple siblings (another reflection of "writing from the gut"). However, this personal experience is subverted for dramatic purposes, depicting Egan's relationship with his sisters as more hostile to feed the character's neurosis and violent outbursts.

*Punch-Drunk Love's* simplicity is perhaps the greatest departure for Anderson at this period in his career. Moving from a multi-narrative, 3-hour-plus running time to a more simplistic 90-minute boy-meets-girl romantic comedy featuring a small ensemble of cast and characters liberates Anderson. There is a more abstract visual approach that somewhat reduces the kinetic camerawork to key moments in the film. *Punch-Drunk Love* opens with a handheld wide shot, framing Egan at his desk in an empty warehouse office (Fig. 6).

The shot is sustained for more than a minute, only moving when Egan rises from the desk to walk outside. This is the antithesis to the "show-off" nature of *Boogie Nights's* and *Magnolia's* openings that feature rapid cinematography and quick editing. Anderson is reducing the visuals to

their simplicity to focus on *one* character, framing Egan in a simplistic manner to highlight and visually subvert audience expectations of Sandler. Dressed in a blue suit and speaking in awkward dialogue on the phone reveals a less confident character from Sandler. The shot reveals a banal surface, where everything seems normal. Yet, within this wide shot are the shakes from the camera, suggesting that underneath this seemingly normal individual is a rupture building to explode; Sandler will unveil the short-temperedness we associate with the characters in his oeuvre but not in the manner we expect.

Egan is introduced to Lena Leonard (Emily Watson). Reluctant at first to engage in a romantic relationship, he gradually becomes infatuated by Leonard, her kind, open nature a contrast to his domineering sisters. The central conflict occurs when Egan calls a phone sex hotline and is blackmailed by its owner, Dean Trumbell (Philip Seymour Hoffman), into giving more money, an extension of thriller genre elements that Anderson has peppered in his previous works.

Anderson visualizes the deepening romance between Egan and Leonard by interspersing video art by Jeremy Blake between certain scenes throughout the film. The artworks resemble colour bars devised by The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) to test luminance and chroma levels on television sets. The blend of colours, stretched across the screen, appear to be a non-linear element but are vital to Anderson's tone, atmosphere, and aesthetics. While colour bars are traditionally static, Blake's works feature moving and morphing reds, blues, and blacks, each of which are colours associated with Egan (blue), Leonard (red), and Trumbell (black). The interstitial artworks, ultimately, reflect Egan's "struggle to find the vitality and beauty of life within his drab surroundings. *Punch-Drunk Love* pushes past any notion of realistic narrative representation and instead toward an affective sense of abstract visual expression" (Sperb 168). Throughout the film, Egan's tie changes from blue to yellow, to purple, and finally, to red. The cold to warm colour scheme reflects Egan and Leonard's relationship. Following Egan's first meeting with Leonard, Blake's artwork (Fig. 7) appears roughly ten minutes into the narrative, foreshadowing the change in Egan from solitary figure to one with a romantic partner. However, the blurs between the colours suggest that this transition will not be clear or straightforward.

Visual expression of Egan's rage occurs during his first date with Leonard. After Leonard enquires about a childhood story of Egan throwing a hammer through a window – due to being called "gay boy" – Egan enters the restaurant's bathroom. His rage literally takes over the scene, distorting the audio as he attempts to dismantle the restaurant bathroom. Shot in a continuous, uncut take, the rage



Fig. 6 | *Punch-Drunk Love* opening shot – shakes on the camera, 00:00:31. Sony Pictures, 2002.

### ***The mise-en-scène is a reflection of the pessimism within Plainview.***

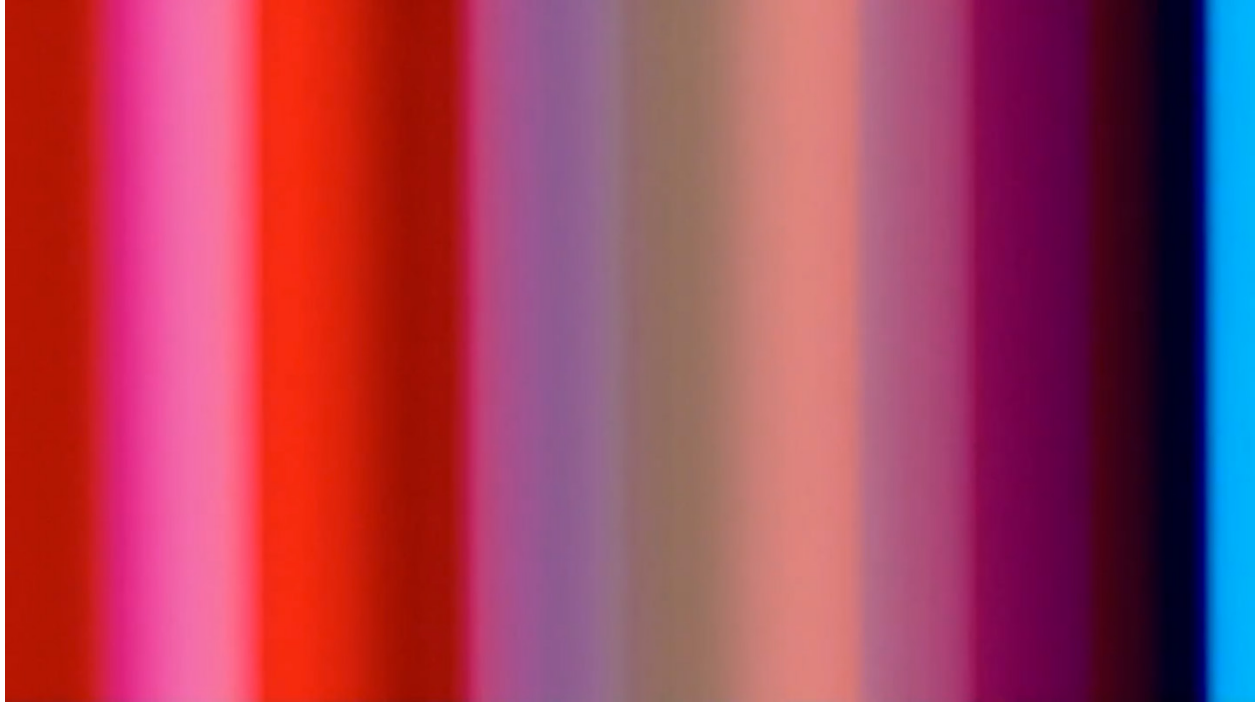
is played for both laughs and discomfort. The humor is punctuated with a quick cut of Egan returning to the table as if nothing had happened, resuming the date. Anderson's shift between rage and romance appeals to Sandler's fans. This explosive scene riffs on similar outbursts seen in *Happy Gilmore* (1996) and *The Wedding Singer* (1998), but the camera placed high above Sandler/Egan scrutinizes the violence, implying that the audience has encouraged this to occur only to be repelled by his inability to express himself in non-violent ways.

Throughout *Punch-Drunk Love*, Anderson maintains his references to New Hollywood filmmakers by incorporating Harry Nilsson's song "He Needs Me," composed for Altman's *Popeye* (1980). Originally sung in *Popeye* by Olive Oyl (Shelly Duvall) as she longs for the titular sailorman, Anderson applies the song to Egan's need to seek companionship with Leonard. The desperation of the character adds another facet to Egan, where both his fear of and longing for a relationship illustrates a figure "who apparently has difficulty standing on his or her own two feet, is construed as an impediment to one's own desire for freedom and emotional mobility" (Toles 62). The use of "He Needs Me,"

therefore, functions not only as an intertextual reference but also to service the characterization of the protagonist. While romantic comedies typically assure the audience of the cementation of the primary characters' relationship, or end "with the establishment of a normative domestic order, with the female lead returning to her place in the home" (Avery 77), Anderson instead concludes his film with a hint of ambiguity. In the final shot of Leonard, arms around Egan as he sits, the audience is left to interpret how they will function in a romantic relationship, which is made more cryptic by Leonard's announcement, "So here we go." As in *Magnolia*, this final moment is presented as an ellipsis rather than a definitive conclusion.

### **THERE WILL BE BLOOD AND A NEW ANDERSON**

Finally, I want to focus on *There Will Be Blood*, emphasizing its shift in tone, genre, and aesthetics from Anderson's previous efforts. Certain visual elements such as the use of long tracking shots and Steadicam are still present; however, the style here is drastically austere, meditative, and the telling is "leisurely and full of process: from the deliberately dark and fragmented prologue to the wildly excessive denouement" (Hoberman 163). Before examining visual departures, it is important to highlight the many collaborators within Anderson's filmography in terms of both cast and crew. Cinematographer Richard Elswit has been working with Anderson since *Hard Eight*; editor Dylan Tichenor joined the team on *Boogie Nights*; actors such as Reilly,



**Fig. 7** | Jeremy Blake's artwork. *Punch-Drunk Love*, 00:09:57. Sony Pictures, 2002.

Hoffman, and Hall have continuously appeared throughout Anderson's first three films – Hoffman recurring in *Punch-Drunk Love* and *The Master*; musicians Michael Penn and Jon Brion produced the musical scores in the preceding works. *There Will Be Blood* marks the first collaboration with Day-Lewis, later to star in what is reputed to be his last on-screen performance: *Phantom Thread*. While Anderson's regular actors do not appear in *There Will Be Blood*, much of the crew were retained, with Elswit as cinematographer and Tichenor as editor. Brion was replaced with *Radiohead* guitarist, Jonny Greenwood, who would become Anderson's regular composer. With only slight changes in crew, a complete departure in familiar casting is worthy of note. Day-Lewis's performance is a contrast to Reilly, Hall, Wahlberg, and the ensemble of *Magnolia*. There are certain similarities to Sandler's depiction of Egan, but this is merely in the character's repressed rage that surfaces throughout.

Based loosely on the 1926 novel *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair, *There Will Be Blood* follows Daniel Plainview as he transforms himself from silver prospector to oil tycoon at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The film is Anderson's first adaptation (later translating Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel *Inherent Vice* to the screen) which may constitute certain deviations from his previous films. *There Will Be Blood* excises much of the source material's narrative and overt political themes, such as union organization and socialism. According to Modell, Anderson retained its examination of capitalism,

### **Anderson cements the two ideological elements in this scene, capitalism and religion, as one seeps into the other.**

religion, and father-son relationship, adapting the first 150 pages of the book as a steppingstone rather than a full cinematic translation. The film was released during the Iraq war, which Anderson does not explicitly address, but its prescient themes of oil and religion, both depicted here as antagonisms toward one another rather than in alliance, render it his most politically minded film. As with Anderson's previous films, *There Will Be Blood* is a combination of genres, blending period-set drama with western elements and a new dimension: horror. Plainview's descent into paranoia and madness is harrowingly visualized. The film abandons the influences of Scorsese, Altman, and Demme, and instead pays homage to Stanley Kubrick, a figure who, while active during New Hollywood, was "on the margins of American filmmaking" (Kolker 106). Indeed, the film mirrors *The Shining* (1980) and several of Kubrick's other works. *There Will Be Blood* opens on a wide, establishing shot of hills in New Mexico, far from Anderson's usual San Fernando Valley locations. Greenwood's disorientating, terror-inducing score – influenced by Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki whose work featured heavily in





Fig. 8 | *There Will Be Blood* opening shot – New Mexico hills, 00:00:46. Paramount Vantage, 2007.

*The Shining* – sets the tone for the remainder of the film and expresses the “theme of contradiction in its display of a desert suffused simultaneously by ennui and the grandiosity of Manifest Destiny” (Cobb 165).

In many ways the opening shot mirrors *Punch-Drunk Love*; however, the camera is completely static. Instead, Anderson cuts to Plainview literally underneath the earth’s surface in a pit, chipping away until he obtains silver. The film associates “Plainview with the earth—he is a primal creature, and culture only enters upon the discovery of natural resources” (Worden 123). A rupture occurs as Plainview blows the pit in an effort to pillage more from the ground. However, it weakens the structure, and he plummets, breaking his leg. The character’s self-determination is exemplified when he pulls himself out of the pit and back into society. When having his silver assayed, Plainview has his shotgun by his side, demonstrating his distrust of those around him, a characteristic that becomes more overt as the narrative progresses.

The opening demonstrates that *There Will Be Blood*’s visual style is more tempered than Anderson’s preceding films. Gone are the erratic, kinetic tracking shots, fast editing, and pouncing soundtrack. In place are static shots with minimal editing. Anderson is observing and documenting Plainview’s prospecting practices in an unobtrusive manner. The visuals espouse a classicism. A key influence of the film is John Huston’s *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948), which Anderson reportedly watched repeatedly during production (Pilkington). The inspiration of both Kubrick and Huston “calm” Anderson’s aesthetics, and the grand, multistranded narratives no longer appear to be a storytelling function or method which the filmmaker adopts. Further emphasizing a departure from previous stylings is the lack of dialogue. The opening fourteen

minutes feature scarce, inaudible dialogue, a stark contrast to Anderson’s prior “Tarantinoesque” exchanges between characters. For instance, *Hard Eight* introduces John and Sydney, the latter more talkative than the former that establishes their dynamic immediately; *Boogie Nights* features overlapping, barely audible dialogue between various characters in the nightclub; *Magnolia* includes snippets of conversation aided with a voiceover; *Punch-Drunk Love* has Egan awkwardly talking on the phone, unveiling his lack of confidence. Speech is not required at this point in *There Will Be Blood*, nor does Plainview need to, as he later states in the film, explain himself. Communication becomes a central element of Plainview when building his oil empire. During an extraction of oil at one of Plainview’s self-made rigs, an accident kills one of his employees. The man leaves behind an orphaned son, and Plainview adopts the baby to project the image of his business as a family operation. We first hear Plainview speak, his “son” HW (Dillon Freasier) lurking behind him, as he attempts to sell his oil extracting services to a small community. Anderson remains in medium close-up on Plainview as he delivers his speech, only to change angle after Plainview is interrupted by the desperate community. Anderson slowly pulls into Plainview as he speaks, drawing the audience into his pitch. It is a subtle camera move that demonstrates a tempered approach in stark contrast to the fast-tracking shots in *Boogie* and *Magnolia*.

Plainview is sold a location by Paul Sunday (Paul Dano) that is flourishing with oil near his family’s ranch. Plainview and HW travel to Little Boston, where they are greeted and welcomed by the Sunday family. Plainview then meets Paul’s identical twin, Eli (Dano). The theme of religion seeps in at this point; Eli, a preacher for the local church, demands that Plainview pay an exorbitant



Fig. 9 | Visual Gothic in *There Will Be Blood*, 01:53:35. Paramount Vantage, 2007.

amount of money for the ranch to help fund his church. Plainview sniggers, stating “That’s a good one.” The animosity builds between the two, not least when the new oil rig is constructed and an explosion occurs, crippling several men, and deafening HW. The sequence is Anderson’s grandest set piece, where in narrative terms “events reach a dramatic or comedic high point” (Hellerman). The scene reintroduces the Steadicam; however, in this context it is used to capture to sense of confusion, following Plainview as he tries to control the fire as much as possible, and the “photography is so artfully rendered that there is a sense of immersion into the smoke and fire of the oil well eruptions” (Heyraud 180). In comparison to *Magnolia*’s set piece, the “Wise Up” sequence, *There Will Be Blood* is much more ferocious, moving Anderson into the realms of the classic epic but in a manner that is “both fearfully grandiose and wonderfully eccentric” (Hoberman 163). Yet, Anderson restrains the visualization after this sequence to bring the film’s focus back to the characters.

The *mise-en-scène* is a reflection of the pessimism within Plainview. Jack Fisk’s set design is lit by Elswit to reinforce the consistent sense of dread. One of the most powerful sequences is Plainview’s admission of his misanthropy, which is “reminiscent of the social Darwinistic theories prominent at the time that purported the benefits of the culling of the weak from society” (McQuillan and McQuillan 272). The minimalism in certain scenes amplifies the character. Illuminated by fire, he discusses his primary motivations: his internal competition, and wanting no one else to succeed. Unable and unwilling to cope with society, he longs to get away and be by himself. Anderson focuses on Plainview’s face in medium close-up. The internal rage and contempt within are not erupting in the manner that Egan demonstrated, but instead

**Postmodern aesthetics lead to the auteur theory being re-envisioned. A filmmaker that references others can adopt and drop techniques as their work progresses.**

are delivered calmly – and more chillingly – in a reserved manner. The camerawork throughout the film can be described as “unostentatious postcard views that punctuate and intensify the three set-piece scenes of confrontation and humiliation” (James 34). These three set-pieces are instigated when Eli blames the eruption on Plainview for not allowing him to bless the well. Plainview beats Eli in front of his oil rig workers, humiliating him for not healing HW’s deafness. In retaliation, Plainview is coerced into being baptized (Fig. 9), and Eli subsequently shames and smacks him for abandoning HW, having sent him away due to his condition.

The final set-piece occurs at the conclusion of the film. Several years later, having achieved his goal of getting away from civilization, Plainview lives as an alcoholic recluse in a vast mansion, not unlike Xanadu in Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941). In many regards, this is the final iteration of father-son relationship Anderson would depict, having abandoned the theme in subsequent films. Its shattering, melodramatic, and devastating iteration here is the most callous Anderson illustrates in any of his films. Having revealed the truth to HW about his lineage,



**Fig. 10** | *There Will Be Blood*'s final scene – where religion and capitalism collide, 02:30:58. Paramount Vantage, 2007.

then berating him as a “Bastard in a basket,” Plainview terminates their relationship. Eli visits to sell Plainview another oil prospect. Plainview feigns interest, and in exchange for the partnership coerces Eli to admit that he is a false prophet to demean him further. Plainview finally succumbs to his violent rage, chasing Eli around the bowling alley deep in the surface of the mansion, before bludgeoning him to death with a bowling pin (Fig. 10). Anderson cements the two ideological elements in this scene, capitalism and religion, as one seeps into the other as blood oozes out of Eli’s lifeless body, touching Plainview’s foot as he sits, out of breath. It is a stark concluding image that nonetheless references the opening image of Plainview alone, chipping away at the earth, before a rupture occurs. The final line of dialogue, “I’m finished,” leaves the character in ambiguity: Is he finished in these sense that he will be punished for the murder of Eli? Or just merely finished with this chapter in his life? In a post-modern manner, perhaps it is Anderson himself stating via Plainview we have reached the conclusion, and the possibility that the film may, in fact, finish his career – after all, *There Will Be Blood* is a profound departure from his previous work.

Anderson is one of a “new wave” of innovative, post-modern filmmakers that washed onto Hollywood’s shores in the 1990s: one of the so-called Indiewood generation. Reflecting upon Jameson’s frameworks of postmodernism, and the recurring characteristics of Kayhan postmodernist filmmaking, we can identify Anderson’s cinema as one that is in constant flux. Though not as avant-garde or risky as New Hollywood, Indiewood’s blend of independent and studio practices create an avenue for character-driven narratives to thrive. While there are intertextual references to not only his contemporaries but the New

Hollywood filmmakers, Anderson is able to adopt similar visual, narrative, and character traits and refashion them into a distinctive body of work that maintains the presence of New Hollywood and “sustains it in fresh ways” (Bordwell 26). *There Will Be Blood*’s abandonment of multistranded narratives, multiple characters, and kinetic visual style. Finally, Anderson’s personality is represented in the earlier work, from growing up in North Hollywood and experience of the San Fernando Valley (setting for *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*, to his vast amount of siblings (*Punch-Drunk Love*) that appears to be discarded in the more politically-oriented *There Will Be Blood*. *There Will Be Blood*’s multiple authors – Anderson, Sinclair, and Day-Lewis’s towering, electric performance cannot be overlooked regarding the film’s potency, perhaps constitute the departures in Anderson’s early aesthetics. As *The Master*, *Inherent Vice*, and *Phantom Thread* continue to demonstrate, Anderson cannot be pigeonholed into one particular style or genre. ■

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# Colour Psychology and the Mise-en-scène of War and Motherhood in Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab's *Gilaneh*

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## ABSTRACT

The mother figure has been represented in Iranian cinema through a patriarchal lens, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Although women had freedom in pre-revolutionary Iran, roles for women in film were still limited to stereotypical characters. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the mother's role in films began to be represented as that of a "patriotic" mother in the form of the rhetoric of martyrdom: the term "*Basij* mother" was coined within Iranian Sacred Defense Cinema. In 2005, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab co-directed *Gilaneh*, a film about the mother of a soldier who has been injured while fighting in the Iran–Iraq War. This paper examines the beautification, spiritualization, and idolization of the concepts of martyrdom and motherhood through the interaction of the elements of the mise-en-scène of *Gilaneh*, in particular the symbolic use of colour. This study explores the discourse of martyrdom, and the depictive nature of the "nation's wounds" by identifying the role of the mother, *Gilaneh*, and her relationship with her son, Ismaeel, amidst the narrative's representation of maternal agency and conventional signs and symbols, and the juxtaposed sequence that signifies the thematic culture of the social, economic, and political reform of the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq War through the representation of colours.

## INTRODUCTION

AKBAR MUHAMMADABADI DESCRIBES Sacred Defense Cinema as religious cinema that reflects on a person's struggle as one with the divine. Their martyrdom is not out of obligation to the state or for the family's honour, but for spiritual fulfilment. Thus, their ultimate goal is to gain eternal freedom, not through war but through the 'sacred defense of the enemies of God' (Muhammadadi 54). In Pedram Partovi's *Martyrdom and the "Good Life,"* he says that the Iranian Cinema of Sacred Defense affirms that through the protagonists' or the heroes' actions, the nation becomes sanctified rather than transcending the people.

Collective destiny is expressed through the narrative on the spectator, exhibiting martyrdom as the backbone of a nationalistic framework (Partovi 513–532). Sacred Defense Cinema (*sinamaye difa-I muqaddas*) thus captured the spiritual and transformative dimensions of the Iran–Iraq War (513–532). After the highly decorated Filmfarsi era was abolished as part of the Islamic Republic's cultural revolution, attention turned towards creating a "national cinema" that appropriately represented the "cultural politics" of the revolution as mentioned in Roxanne Varzi's *At the Martyrs' Museum* (86–98).

In postwar Iran, state intervention into both the representation of the war and its aftermath has led cultural producers to adopt very different strategies, largely relating to their own political commitments and subjective identification within the parameters of post-revolutionary ideology.

The portrayal of the martyred son's mother, otherwise referred to as a "*Basij* mother,"<sup>1</sup> represents the ideology of the ultimate sacrifice of the martyr's love for their country with the support of their mother. By choosing one's love for *vatan*,<sup>2</sup> martyrdom's rhetoric is placed deep within the discourses of religious conviction, which differentiates such soldiers from those who did not believe in the state's rhetoric and were forced to join or drafted into the war. The *Basij* mother is superior, in the eyes of the state, to the normal mother who also grieves for the loss of her martyred child; however, this would never be admitted since the intention of martyrdom is so deeply entrenched in the ideological structure of the Islamic Republic that the state will stand by the notion of every soldier having died believing in the state's rhetoric. In Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab's *Gilaneh*, the female protagonist, who is named

after the title of the film, does not represent a *Basij* mother but the silent others. Her son is paralyzed and entirely dependent on the love and care of a natural nurturer.

The legacy of the war and the unfathomable tragedies that occurred overshadowed the heroism of the mothers, who were also disregarded by the state. However, in this film, it is recognized through the depiction of Gilaneh (Fatemah Motamed-Aria), a caregiver and living martyr in post-war Iran. The co-directors use the film's characters and setting to carefully portray the silent majority of women and the scars left by the violence and the psychological toll of the Iran–Iraq War. The narrative depicts a refreshing yet tragic outline of war's aftermath, which was mostly avoided by other filmmakers of the late 80s to early 90s. *Basij* mothers have a special place in the state rhetoric because they uphold Islamic values and represent the perfect ideology of martyrdom. Gilaneh does not portray the *Basij* mother; rather, Gilaneh is a mother who neither participated in the state's rhetoric nor agreed to volunteer her son (Bahram Radam) for the *vatan*. The film depicts an interesting contextualization by using the metaphor of the protagonist's name, Gilaneh, and the region in the Persian Caspian, Gilan.<sup>3</sup> In scenes lacking visual meaning or themes, the protagonist's name, or merely her presence, can be connected to the juxtaposition of the filmic space and the representation of the Caspian, which is an area that “rehabilitates the nation's reputation and is also a physical space of rehabilitation from the horrors of the war” (86–98).

*Namus*, which translates to innocence, purity, and honour, can be referred to as the nation's honour. Citizens were called upon to protect the *namus* of their country. As the war erupted around the Caspian, the disintegration within Gilaneh, the mother, a representation of the motherland, also begins to collapse, but her character still remains strong, a true metaphor for the love of one's nation. However, the rhetoric of state refrained from using the term “motherland,” replacing it with the term *namus*. In this context, the co-directors depicted Gilaneh within a feminized space and, through female connotations, represented the masculine war. Furthermore, as the war rages on, female nurses and others cared for injured soldiers and rehabilitate them at various locations within the Caspian, another symbol characterizing the mother figure; these, along with Gilaneh, depict strong female characters. The state depicted post-war and post-revolution Iran as a country that was healing and was peaceful, beautiful, and poetic, amongst other positive traits and attributions. Women dressed according to the Islamic code and followed regulations, while men recovered from state conflicts (the war and the revolution). War propaganda flooded the media; the Islamic and revolutionary aspects of post-revolution

and post-war Iran became a dialect of tragedy and hardship. Filmmakers misrepresented or ignored realism and social commentary, instead focusing on the ideologies of martyrdom and the war, until the reformist period. However, the co-directors shift focus back towards the repercussions of the war almost a decade after the reformist period. Furthermore, viewers are invited to view and be reintroduced to the aesthetic of the Caspian, which had been a safe haven for the upper middle-class citizens of Tehran at the time of the war.

This paper takes the thematic culture of the social, economic and political discourse laid out in the two sections of the film: the before and after effect of the Iran–Iraq War through the representation of colours. In the film, neither Gilaneh nor Maygol (played by Bani-Etemad's daughter, Baran Kosari), Gilaneh's daughter, have any idea of the war's intensity until their trip to Tehran. They had been sheltered from images of war, or the director assumes that television did not exist in the village; no visual representation of the horrors of the war invade everyday Caspian life in its filmic depiction (86–98). Therefore, Bani-Etemad and Abdolvahab's representation of Gilaneh as the symbolic backbone of the *vatan* and as a strong female protagonist is itself a feminist statement.

On and off the screen, the narrative of war became an outlet for providing social commentary through propaganda, which involved a pre-constructed biased narrative that did not improve the agents and actions of the narrative regardless of the conflict that arose. Thus, the Iranian film industry became another oppressive tool used to maintain society and taint the citizens' spirit. The Iranian Sacred Defense Cinema genre was supported in 1983 by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, from controlling the medium's narratives to training filmmakers according to their ideologies; films produced under this Cinema focused on telling the same story, that of morally driven men who fought for their nation out of love for God. It was the memory of the massacre of Karbala and the battle between the Iraqi Ba'ath regime under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and the ideologies of the Islamic Republic which, at first, was termed as *jang-I tahmili*,<sup>4</sup> but was later reverted to the symbolic nature of Imam Hussein's martyrdom, became defined as *defā-ye Moghaddas*.<sup>5</sup>

According to Varzi's comparative analysis in *Warring Souls: Media, Martyrdom & Youth in Post Revolution Iran* (2006), the Islamic state shares similarities with Hegel's Christian state, as recognized through the concept of martyrdom within the context of the separation of church, family, and state. Similar to the context of the Islamic state's call for martyrs to choose their *vatan* over maternal love, the Christian state also gives an ultimatum of choosing either state or family. Therefore, this paper argues that the



symbolic use of colour, deconstructs the nation's wounds through the *mise-en-scène* and the use of colours as they represent of the role of the protagonist, Gilaneh, and her relationship with her son, Ismaeel, amidst the narrative's larger representation of maternal agency and conventional signs and symbols.

One of the most decorated and bloodiest wars under the Islamic government occurred between 1980 and 1988: the Iran–Iraq War. It became a war that afforded promotional value to the Iranian regime, conceptualizing and promoting martyrdom, which in Arabic/Persian is termed as *shahadat*. Shi'i Islam was at the forefront of propaganda during this war. The Islamic Republic of Iran used the notion of martyrdom under Shi'ism as a tool to mobilize young men to fight for their nation. Varzi asserts that this is indeed a concept which promised “eternal paradise and safe care of their families by the state” (87) if they were to die as martyrs on the battlefield. Although financial support for martyrs' families was promised, only a minority received any help from the government. The ultimate goal of such propaganda was to promote nationalistic views alongside patriotism, which Patrovi describes in *Martyrdom and the “Good Life” in the Iranian Cinema of Sacred Defense* as “valorizing war and death” (Partovi 514). Cultural degradation, a term used to describe the *Filmfarsi*<sup>6</sup> genre by the Islamic Republic, was a product of the Pahlavi monarchy. To completely separate themselves from a style of filmmaking that was “responsible for a debased and deluded mass taste” (514), Sacred Defense Cinema became an anti-Westernization movement that gave the government full control over any representations of the conflict surrounding Iran.

By stating how *Filmfarsi* was a threat to religious values and spiritual purity, the Islamic Republic considered such films “hollow diversions” as opposed to the ultimate truth, God's truth. Martyrdom, however, was a common narrative element in the *Filmfarsi* genre. As opposed to the not so in-your-face narratives of war and sacrifice in nationalistic ventures, self-sacrifice played a central role in different forms such as representations of self-sacrifice within the *Filmfarsi* until the extremist ideologies introduced the term *shahadat* after the 1979 Revolution. Sacred Defense Cinema can also be argued to not have strayed too far from its predecessor as the religious characteristic of martyrdom has been deeply rooted in the politics of Iranian cinema since before the revolution. The films made during this period, as Kamran Rastegar argues in *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East*, were created so that the “act of sacrifice that drives the melodramatic structure” somewhat creates a “cathartic resolution, giving a transcendent meaning to death among so many thousands of other deaths in that war” (Rastegar 125).

## **By juxtaposing the Karbala paradigm alongside the *mise-en-scène* of martyrdom in *Gilaneh*, the green dales symbolically reflect the Karbala tragedy.**

The historical value of martyrdom depends on the same concept of returning to God. Khomeini's war against Saddam and his troops relied heavily on terms such as *Kuffar* (an Arabic word meaning “nonbeliever” or “infidel”) and *Bughat* (a term which serves to characterise a category of persons as rebels). However, the root meaning helps to indicate why, in some contexts, the term is associated with ‘tyrannical’ behaviour. Amongst the volunteers, especially the *Basij*<sup>7</sup> militia, political discourse was overshadowed by the concept of *mumin*<sup>8</sup> against the *kuffar* and the promised eternal paradise, which stemmed from the blessing that is death. Thus, the “heroes” represented in Sacred Defense Cinema included *Basij* soldiers who adapted the model of Imam Hussein and martyrdom by choosing the love for one's brothers over maternal or worldly gain, as represented through sacrifice for their nation. The actions of the *Basij* in such cinema revolved around their acknowledgement of *Taqdir*.<sup>9</sup> Varzi states in her article, “Iran's Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War,” that the narratives of films that depicted wounded veterans who were “denied their martyrdom,” and focused on how the soldier had to adapt to this failure and prepare for “an altered destiny” (86–98).

### **THE SYMBOLIC AESTHETIC OF SACRIFICE THROUGH THE RITUAL OF COLOUR SYMBOLISM**

Among *Gilaneh*'s *mise-en-scène*, colour performs not only as an element in the sphere of cinematic technique, but it shows the decaying state of the Iran-Iraq War. It also acts as a synthetic form of art that highlights the socio-political significance of the film and the female protagonist. The spectator is invited to divulge in an atmosphere of cultural divination through symbolic semantic sights of colour-emotion, which also draws parallel to the *Taziyeh* and the Massacre of Karbala. Bani-Etemad and Abdolvahab use colour as its own separate language, its own narrative. The audience is invited to interpret and discuss the meaning behind the colour palette used in the elements of the *mise-en-scène*, just as an audience member in a live performance of *Taziyeh* or as an admirer of a painting in an exhibition at an art gallery. That is the beauty of this film. The stylistic variation of colour does not divert the narrative but

enhances it, creating an emotional response from the viewer who may not even be aware of this technique. The affect influences of colour perception in cine-stylistics of *Gilaneh* is to illustrate how the narrative progresses throughout the film, especially since it is divided into two segments, colour plays a pivotal role in establishing symbolic interpretation of the war's aftermath and the effect it has on the characters, in particular, Gilaneh.

The image of martyrdom as it is symbolized in some mise-en-scènes in *Gilaneh* can be easily identified through interpretations of the symbiotic aesthetics and images of *Taziyeh*.<sup>10</sup> *Taziyeh* is a form of religious drama of mourning that symbolizes the massacre of Karbala; it depicts the deaths of Imam Hussein and his family at the hands of the Yazid army. Performed during the holy month of Muharram under the government's watchful eye, *Taziyeh's* artistic and symbolic representation of martyrdom is an integral part of Shi'ism. In my article on "The Art of the Martyrs: The *Taziyeh* and Street Art in Contemporary Tehran," I describe the dramatic reenactment of this sacred religious performance which captures the ethos of the symbolic culture of the art of the *Taziyeh* in relation to the art of *Gilaneh*.

Throughout the performance, the audience witnesses male actors (playing women's roles), marching towards their tragic destiny, accepting death as the ultimate sacrifice; this is not merely a theatrical spectacle but an "act of religious faith" (Malekpour 39). The first act centres on the gloomy departure of Ali-Akbar, parting ways with his father, mother, and aunt. The second act focuses on his conflict with the Yazid army, resulting in his martyrdom. During this enactment, which takes place in a *Takiyeh* (theatre), the men and women are segregated and sit on different sides of the mosque, which was the circular space in which the *Taziyeh* is performed. The stage arrangement is minimalistic, with two different sides of the arena allocated to the rival camps of Imam Hussein and the Yazid army. Everyone in the audience wears black, and black banners illustrated and painted with Quranic verses cover most of the interior architecture. A eulogist then emerges to sing religious songs praising Imam Hussein, preparing the audience for the array of emotions they are about to feel during the performance. A drummer, trumpeter, and flautist enter the circle and sit amongst the male audience. After the eulogies are sung during the course of about half an hour, the musicians begin to play, hence announcing the official start of the *Taziyeh*.

As I describe in my article, the first group of performers, the camp of Imam Hussein, and his loyal followers enter the yard dressed in three different colours: green (which represents freedom and revolution) white, and black. The performers then circle the stage three times before ultimately settling on the right-hand side of the stage. The

musicians continue to play, filling the atmosphere with an eerie ambiance. Imam Hussein's character sits on a chair while the rest of his family sit on a rug in front of him. He then proceeds to stand and sing religious songs about the Tragedy of Karbala and of Imam Hussein's martyrdom. Although this performance centres on Imam Hussein's eldest son, Ali-Akbar, the audience is constantly reminded of the immense sacrifice Imam Hussein made for the Shi'a belief system and for peace. Another symbolic reminder of his character, as previously mentioned, is that he is dressed in green, to also remind the audience of the Prophet and sacredness. His children, Ali-Akbar and Ali Asghar, are also dressed in green. As Imam Hussein finishes his eulogies, the Yazid army enters the yard. They too circle around three times before settling on their side. The Yazid army, covered in red clothing, which symbolizes blood and their pugnacious nature, sit down, while Ibn-e-Saad and Shimr sit in chairs. Now we enter a very crucial element of the *Taziyeh*: the attempt of the performers to politically inspire the audience. As Shimr, who is clothed in red and carrying weapons, approaches the middle of the *Takiyeh*, he presents himself to the audience. Then in a strange display, he starts to pay his utter respect to Imam Hussein, and begins to rebuke the Yazid army, who under his command did such harm to Imam Hussein and his family at the Massacre of Karbala (40).

The ritual symbolism of and associations between the Iran-Iraq War and the *Taziyeh* become apparent in the performances that occurred after the end of the conflict; hence, we, as the spectator witness the rites of passage into martyrdom as the symbolic culture of colour conceptualization and other elements. These memorable images are interspersed in the mise-en-scènes of *Gilaneh*. In one scene, we see Ismael, Gilaneh's son, riding on his horse to leave the village and fight in the war, while a painting depicting Imam Hussein and his horse shares similar cine-stylistic elements and colour palettes (Figs. 1 and 2). Both images show the blue sky covered with clouds, a worrying sign of natural shadow lightening which emerges like "the calm before the storm." This important reference to Imam Hussein and his horse reminds the audience of the pre-conceived meaning of martyrdom and how Ismael acknowledges his fate as he rides into battle on his horse. Varzi continues to discuss in *Iran's Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War* that following the establishment of the War Films Bureau by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, films began to be dominated by spiritual, rather than military, themes. In particular, cultural producers began appropriating the history of martyrology and the practice of mourning in Shi'ism, the ghosts of which, as Michelle Langford comments on in *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and*



**Fig. 1** | Ismaeel rides a horse in *Gilaneh*, a reference to Imam Hussein at Karbala, 03: 30. Fadak Film, 2005.

*Resistance*, are in Varzi's interpretation of "a space of haunting" which is yet another kind of wound (Langford 158). By juxtaposing the Karbala paradigm alongside the mise-en-scène of martyrdom in *Gilaneh*, the green dales symbolically reflect the Karbala tragedy (green is the traditional colour of Imam Hussein and the Shi'a ideology). The green also embodies the immense sacrifice Imam Hussein made for the Shi'a belief system and for peace. It represents freedom and revolution, which also forms the background context of *Gilaneh's* hopes and dreams. Scenes that occur against the backdrop of the green dales depict what man sacrifices for the sake of freedom. Another use of powerful language to invoke emotional and thematic responses to the struggles of a deeply rooted cultural aesthetic is the use of nationalistic music in the film. The chants and eulogies that play during *Taziyeh* performances are adopted in *Gilaneh* as a religious overture. In the opening and closing scenes, we hear an eulogistic song with the melody of the voice, representing the essence of the scene, as the only instrument. In both scenes, the camera focuses on *Gilaneh's* figure, alone yet hopeful: In the opening sequence, she awaits the safe return of her son from the war, and in the closing sequence, she waits in the hope that her son will marry the war widow who lives in another town. The audience is left with merely the aesthetic of hope, especially in the closing scene as *Gilaneh* waits for the arrival of the widow. It remains an aesthetic because

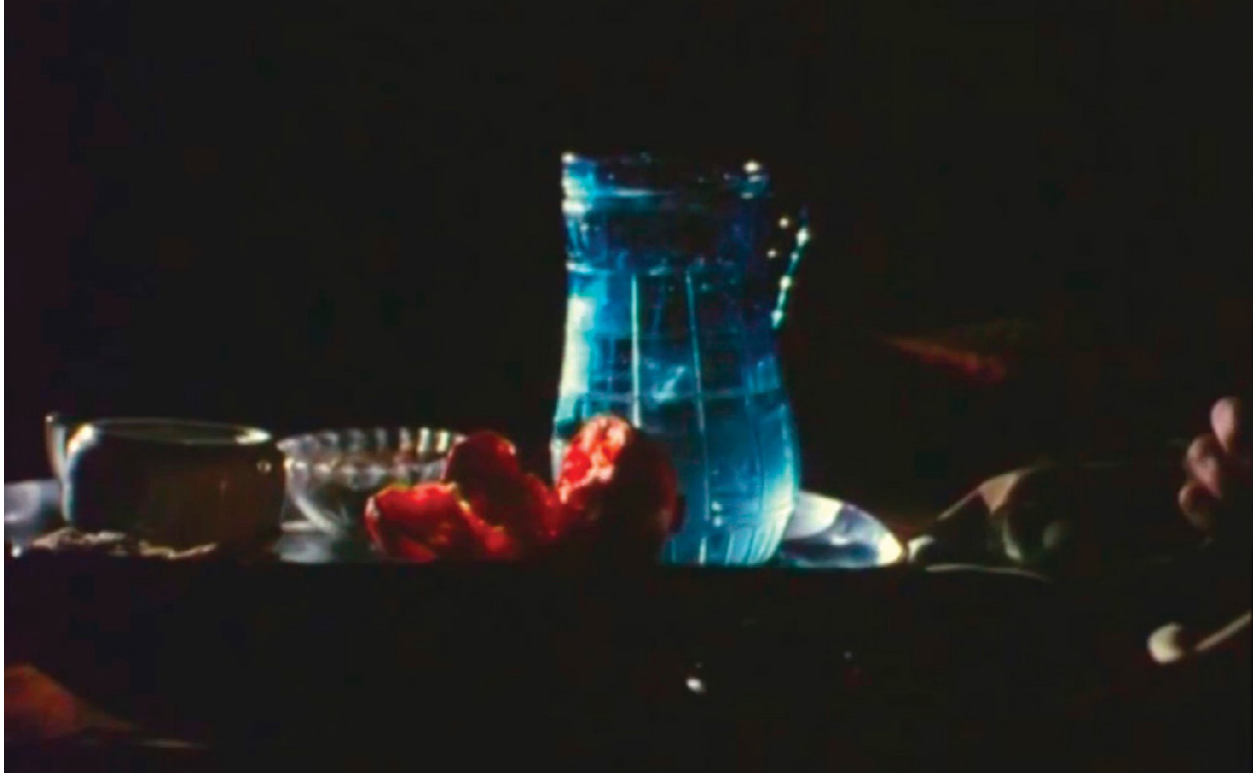
the viewers realise that there have been bombings near the town where the widow resides.

As a mourning ritual, the participation of the whole nation is involved, as the sounds of war, the screams of soldiers and the cries of their mothers and widows pollute the air as if the performers and audience were reliving the events of the battle today, and indeed might experience the drama as a ritual bringing history to bear in the politics of the present moment (Malekpour 39).

As mentioned earlier, Bani-Etemad and Abdolvahab's war film *Gilaneh* highlights the painful social conditions of the Iran–Iraq War and its aftermath. Divided into two segments, the final days of the war (1988) and the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, *Gilaneh* follows a mother's self-sacrificing love for her children, emphasizing the symbolism of motherhood for one's country or *vatan*. The signs and codes in the mise-en-scène of *Gilaneh* function on numerous levels to symbolically depict the depth of a mother's love and nurturing nature in the darkness and suffering of war. The first half of the film follows *Gilaneh's* journey with her pregnant daughter, Maygol, as they embark on their journey to the war-torn capital of Iran, Tehran, searching for Maygol's husband who has stayed back to defend their house. The film's opening sequence portrays *Gilaneh's* motherly nature as she tries to comfort Maygol, who is having a nightmare. In this scene, the mise-en-scène's



**Fig. 2** | A depiction of Imam Hussein riding into the Battle of Karbala, carrying a green flag, while wearing red pants. [يولعل لابلاط ديس](#) on Pinterest.



**Fig. 3** | Gilaneh's pomegranates represent fertility in Iranian culture and the foreshadowing of the aftermath of a bloody war, 02:00. Fadak Film, 2005.

lighting reflects the darkness of life (in this case, the trauma of war). By purposely focusing on Gilaneh's and her daughter's faces, the scene demonstrates that the light of a mother's love, even in the darkest of times, shines through. Another noteworthy element of this *mise-en-scène* is the placement of the jug of water and pomegranate next to Gilaneh. The pitcher of water, reflecting the blue colour, is full while the pomegranate, which symbolizes fertility in Iranian culture, is cut open (Fig. 3). However, as red also represents the colour of blood, this image is split between hope and tragedy, foreshadowing the bloodshed that is to flow during the war while Gilaneh holds on to hope.

This small yet impactful symbolism also signifies Maygol's pregnancy and is one of the many conventional signs of hope, as reflected through the blue colour shown in the opening sequence of the film. The film's emphasis on the visceral effects of war is highlighted by the stunning use of light and colour that symbolizes the psychological and physiological state of nature and nurture. As Ismaeel prepares to leave for war, the audience sees a house (which is to be converted into a restaurant) under construction. While Ismaeel is saying goodbye to his loved ones, this unfinished house reflects the current psychological state of Gilaneh, Seterah (Ismaeel's fiancé), Maygol, and the other villagers who are saying goodbye to their loved ones, knowing and accepting that they might be martyred. Unsure

about their stability or future, the bare nakedness of the background structure resembles the unreliability and uncertainty that follows the aftermath of war.

Langford says that the "skeletal framework" of the "physical and social sphere in which the characters live means that they cannot openly express themselves or resolve concerns through dance or decisive action" (Langford 181-187). In particular, for Ismaeel, who is going to war, the only way for a transformative effect of the *mise-en-scène* to express his love for his fiancé is by gifting her a beautiful scarf, which serves as a prop that voices his decisive emotions of love. As Gilaneh and Maygol begin their journey to Tehran, the landscapes they pass depict the changing nature of the war, going from lush green fields and mountains to a foggy, wet and dark road. Fog and smoke play an essential role in depicting the war's trauma and representing emptiness, sadness, and loneliness. As the roads to Tehran are overcome with fog, so are the scenes where bombs wreak complete havoc on citizens' houses and buildings. The closer Gilaneh and her daughter get to Tehran, the thicker the fog becomes, thus foreshadowing what is to come; the film creatively uses such effects to implement indexical, symbolic, and iconic signs in both its segments. In the final scene before the beginning of the second segment, Gilaneh and Maygol reach their destination in Tehran and learn that Maygol's husband has



Fig. 4 | The destruction due to war in *Gilaneh*, 01:37:00. Fadak Film, 2005.

been arrested, and all the furniture has been removed from their house. The removal of the furniture and the resulting emptiness of the house depicts the emotions of citizens robbed of their freedom and the emptiness of their lives. Before *Gilaneh* and *Maygol* can cope with this change, the sirens of an oncoming attack ring through the city and the missiles strike. *Gilaneh* and *Maygol* take cover and, in a very harrowing scene, the window blows open and smoke fills the background, whilst the colour desaturates into a sorrowful colour pallet of grey and dark, which is usually associated with the disassociation that has emerged in an immoral situation, questioning the morality of the Iraqi soldiers (Fig. 4).

In the next scene, men, women, and children are seen running into the smoke and vanishing. People's scattered emotions and cries, disappearing into the smoke's infinite void, symbolize the lives lost in the war. It is a poignant metaphor of what war is and how it does not discriminate, taking innocent lives with no retribution. The contemporary social conditions surrounding *Gilaneh*'s multiple roles as the maternal agent, the mother of the homeland or *vatan*, the war widow and the female protagonist help the viewer understand particular interactions of the elements within the sequences' mise-en-scène: the décor of destruction which once represented a home, the smoke from the explosions caused by the Iraqi missiles, the secondary characters

vanishing into the smouldering abyss of loss. These all connect the systematic interpretation of the connection between the style and meaning, thus depicting the film's symbolism of land, body and consciousness. Although this film neither implicates nor snubs the male martyr figure, *Gilaneh*'s feminine expression of *vatan* adds to the velocity of the allegorical and emotional concept of the female as human, mother and motherland.

The introduction of secondary characters who are part of a separate spectacle within the film can be seen in both the first and second segments. These characters' placement narrates a different yet similar story to that of *Gilaneh*'s since it also portrays a war narrative. *Gilaneh*'s role as a mother and an observer of the fragments of others' lives turns these moments into a cinema of sensory dimensions. Other characters' recollections contribute to the constant back shadowing/foreshadowing dynamic in the film's narrative. Experience and its connection to the effects of the Iran–Iraq War contain the seeds of *Gilaneh*'s life, her future, and her past, comprising intertextual and social dynamics highlighted in the mise-en-scène. When the bus carrying *Gilaneh* and *Maygol* stops at a rest stop, a wedding party is shown; they have fled their bombed village and are now continuing their celebrations. The bride is visibly upset that she is not celebrating her wedding night in her village, which is another nod to

*vatan*. However, this celebration amid a war is symbolic of hope and, once again, the light and design of the scene reflects the blue colour, expressing Gilaneh's hope for her son who is engaged to be married once he returns home from war. The fragmented and chaotic nature of this roadside wedding at once back shadows the literal and metaphorical incompleteness of the family home in the previous scene and foreshadows the fact that Ismaeel's wedding will never occur due to the horrific injuries he sustains because of the war.

Mid-way during the journey, one of the soldiers (Madjid Bahrami), who is on the bus with Gilaneh and her daughter, is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and has a breakdown. As he uses his body to demonstrate the toll of fighting a war, by losing control on the bus, and reflecting on the memories of the war, both physically and mentally, Gilaneh's role as a mother takes effect to calm the soldier down. Gilaneh's allegorical role as a nurturer and protector is emphasised as she calms the soldier's violent and unsettling outburst. She talks to the soldier as if she is talking to her son, and the audience experiences this scene as an effective, sensory and physical implication of the suffering these characters are enduring. The soldier's chaotic nature and paranoia, exemplified by the soldier's

Gilaneh, now older and weaker, rushes to his side and holds his body as it violently shakes. Using all her energy, she tries to keep him from injuring himself; this also symbolises her attempt to ease a broken soul.

By emphasizing the actors' performances and the physical and material effects of the war, the details of the story, such as the juxtaposed shots of contemporary Iran (including images of materialistic products such as Marlboro cigarettes, Westernized car models, such as the Jeep, cellular phones, the characterization of the middle-class and the use of contemporary music, all taking place within "economic" speculation) and the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq War, the second segment follows cinematic fragments of stylized elements alongside Gilaneh's emotional and physical state. The wounded nation appears to slowly rebuild itself, approximately twenty years later. After the destruction of war, the continuation of life is evident through scenes in which out-of-towners stop by Gilaneh's village and purchase items from her kiosk. However, her restaurant, which she was once building, is empty, just like her hopes for her son, who cannot walk, is also unmarried and still appears unperturbed. When Gilaneh is seen pushing Ismaeel's empty wheelchair up a hill, with only a coat hanging off it, against a background of the beautiful green

***It is important to outline the use of colour, particularly blue, in the mise-en-scène of Gilaneh as its repetition, especially in the first segment of the film, signifies a variety of emotional moods.***

performance, intervene with the war experience framework portrayed by the narrative of the film. The actor's performance relates to Gilaneh's son as the scene relies on cinematic realism to denote the effects of war on young men. The psychological scars are, to an extent, superior to physical ones.

Gilaneh's journey in the film's first segment is a metaphor for the enigmatic emotional and thematic consequences of being a mother figure to a scattered nation. Thus, the symbolic nation's wounds are being cared for by its mother, Gilaneh, who then takes care of her son's literal scars. The film constructs this notion in the first segment and reaches a climax at the beginning of the second segment. Like the film's opening scene, the film cuts back to Gilaneh's child; this time, her son who has been paralyzed during the war. The shot focuses on Ismaeel, who is in darkness, just as Maygol was in the opening scene. Thus, this scene draws parallels to Maygol's nightmare in the first scene, which foreshadowed what was to happen years later. Ismaeel falls violently to the floor and has a seizure.

dales, the scene portrays a hint of decay, represented by the empty wheelchair, and translates to what is now and what could have been. The materiality of the cinematic language lends emotional force as Gilaneh calls her son at the sound of a bell, reminding the audience of a mother's love for her child, both her own flesh and blood and, metaphorically, her *vatan*; she is ready to serve her child and only her child. As strangers come and go, unmoved by the consequences of the war that came before them and unfazed by the war around them (the US invasion of Iraq), the film represents class and privilege alongside materialism and the actions of careless youth. The link between the past and the present plays a major role in these mise-en-scènes as Ismaeel looks outside his window at the young men who have stopped at his mother's kiosk to purchase a pack of American Marlboro's, which are packaged in a red box, again, inserting the notion of the aftermath of a bloody war but no-one seems to care because it was in the past. Ismaeel's expressions portray that he views these young men as inexperienced kids who have not seen the



**Fig. 5** | The green dales and the blue colour, symbolising freedom and hope, 12:35. Fadak Film, 2005.



**Fig. 6** | Gilaneh and her daughter watching the wedding celebrations on their way to war-torn Tehran, 41:30. Fadak Film, 2005.

world as he has; however, jealousy also lingers over him like a dark cloud as they enjoy their youth without knowing the trials of war. It is truly a bittersweet moment as Ismaeel, who fought for his *vatan* to ensure that these young men who are enjoying their freedom outside his window would not face the destruction and brutality he has, had also once dreamed of freedom and love and who now has neither; only the remembrance of his younger days remains in his heart.

### BLUE: THE COLOUR OF HOPE

I argue that the use of colour in the film is the ultimate conventional sign of hope in *Gilaneh*. In particular, this is apparent when deconstructing the setting of conventional spaces and symbols within the film's costumes, props, and décor. The cultural association attributed to blue is used to elicit emotion (Fig. 5). This emotion is painted amid the cognitive theory that is evident in the foreground of

*Gilaneh*'s identification and display of human actions and emotions through the pre-existing conditions of the war and its grave aftermath. In the first part of the film, the function of the blue communicates reactions by demonstrating *hope*. The pictorial influence of the colour transmits the essence of resilience, which is important for hope as an emotion. The graphical repetitiveness of this distinct "colour score" is observed through frequent flairs in the props, costumes, and overall décor of the film. In this case, blue dominates as the artefact emotion. There are several arguments for the importance of blue and its role in characters' aims and goals. Considering the entire functionality of the mise-en-scène, the coherent relationship between the characters and the setting in which the film occurs creates an 'organic' function. The visual motif of the whole is much more important than that of individual elements.

The montage that follows *Gilaneh* and Maygol's journey to war-torn Tehran begins as a warm and saturated sequence; the colour schemes and the beautiful landscape not only illustrate the pleasurable weather and ambience but also integrate the synthesis of the colours with the characters' current state of mind. According to Lalita Pandit Hogan's "Color and Artefact Emotion in Alternative Cinema: A Comparative Analysis of *Gabbeh*, *Mirch Masala*, and *Meenaxi: A Tale of 3 Cities*," as *Gilaneh* and her daughter get closer to their destination, Tehran, the more the colours impact the "viewer's physical perception and cognitive processing of information" (Hogan 106). The quality of the mise-en-scène runs parallel to the transformative effect on *Gilaneh* and Maygol as their journey brings them closer to the cold, de-saturated and dejected outcome of the Iran–Iraq War. By orchestrating the colour scheme of the journey and reversing the culturally coded terms, the blue also loses its symbolism (Fig. 6). The symbolic of hope as a cinematic counterpart of the aesthetic of sorrow and loss is obitual, not only for the citizens of the nation but also for the culture-bound symbolism of peace and humanity.

The colour blue has a calming effect on our bodies, and it's associated with rest, tranquility, and devotion. We associate blue with introspection and wisdom, and designers use it to create calm, cool, peaceful spaces. Though it's the colour of protection and loyalty, we do have some negative associations with blue. It represents depression, the darkness of night, doubt, and emotional distance.

This cognitive processing changes, not dramatically, but to a noticeable extent in the second part of *Gilaneh*'s journey as the maternal agent. The film illuminates the colour red in the foreground in lieu of social anger, the so-called blood symbolism experienced during the US–Iraq War (Fig. 7). Red and fear are allies in this





Fig. 7 | Gilaneh is now only wearing the colour red, 01:02:00. Fadak Film, 2005.

emotional parade of artefacts; the coherent relationship between context and content is expressed through the *mise-en-scène* of the nation's wounds, since red denotes the physical and material consequences of war. It is important to outline the use of colour, particularly blue, in the *mise-en-scène* of *Gilaneh*, as its repetition, especially in the first segment of the film, signifies a variety of emotional moods.

## CONCLUSION

*Gilaneh* is a beautiful and symbolic portrayal of the scattered wounds left behind by two wars. By implementing Michelle Langford's notion of a "space of haunting," the *mise-en-scènes* throughout the film invite the audience to look at this space where the past will eventually always return to remind the present of humanity's actions. Gilaneh introduces not only the spatial representation of the rhetoric of martyrdom into its imagery but also injects the narrative with the wounds inflicted upon the embodiment of maternal agency, motherhood, and *vatan*. It generates an intellectual medium within War Cinema and the space of haunting through expressive nature. It also introduces

to the audience the importance of colour and its expressionist meaning. Gilaneh starts the film by wearing blue up until the second half of the film; blue in this sense is the colour which represents hope, freedom and prosperity. In the second half of the film however, she gradually ends up wearing red, the colour of sorrow, grief, and horror. Produced after the Sacred Defense Cinema era, *Gilaneh* is a perfect Iranian war film that reverses the role of the male and exemplifies Gilaneh as a strong female character who takes care of everything (from pre- to post-war) and symbolizes an entire nation who has been destroyed and rebuilt from its scattered wounds and scars. ■

***Gilaneh's journey in the film's first segment is a metaphor for the enigmatic emotional and thematic consequences of being a mother figure to a scattered nation.***

## NOTES

- 1 Roxanne Varzi coined the term Basij Mother in her journal article: *Iran's Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and Film in the Aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War* to fit the characteristics of a strong-willed woman who has mourned and lost, yet is still standing with her *vatan*.
- 2 In Persian, *Vatan* means homeland, motherland or mother country.
- 3 Gilan Province is one of the 31 provinces of Iran. It lies along the Caspian Sea, in Iran's Region 3, west of the province of Mazandaran, east of the province of Ardabil, and north of the provinces of Zanjan and Qazvin.
- 4 English Translation: Imposed War.
- 5 English translation: Sacred Defense.
- 6 Persian Film, also known as *Filmfarsi*, is a cinematic term used in Iranian cinema criticism. It was coined by Iranian film critic, Hushang Kavusi. The term is used to describe low-quality films mostly copied from the Bollywood cinema and with poor plots, mostly arranged with dance and singing. *Filmfarsi* were suppressed after the Iranian revolution by more strict laws on relations between men and women, as well as religious opposition to the content of the films. The suppression of the *Filmfarsi* genre encouraged the Iranian New Wave of modern films in Iranian cinema. <https://oxbridgeapplications.com/kyc/filmfarsi-irans-forgotten-cinematic-genre/>
- 7 The *Basij* (Persian for mobilization) is a large and omnipresent paramilitary organisation with multifaceted roles and which acts as the eyes and ears of the Islamic regime
- 8 *Mumin* or *Momin* (Arabic: مومِن, romanized: *mu'min*; feminine مومِنَة *mu'mina*) is an Arabic Islamic term, frequently referenced in the Quran, meaning 'believer'.
- 9 *Taqdir* refers to God's granting of agency, an aspect of *Aqidah*. The root meaning of the word *Taqdir* (root q-d-r) is measure, standard or pattern.
- 10 *Taziyeh* narrates the epic struggle and tragic martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his 72 companions by the army of the Caliph at the time, Yazid.

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# A House of Cinema Made with Bricks:

Director Pedro Costa discusses *Vitalina Varela*

BY PAUL RISKER | *Independent Film Scholar*



**Fig. 1** | Pedro Costa at the BFI London Film Festival 2019 (Jonathan Wong, Getty Images).

*Vitalina Varela* (2019) tells the story of the titular character Vitalina (played by co-author Vitalina Varela), whose husband leaves her in Cape Verde to find work in Portugal. He promised to send her money or bring her over to Lisbon, but he never does. Forty years later, she finally makes the journey to Lisbon, arriving three days after his funeral. Alone and isolated in his home, Vitalina confronts the ghosts of the past, learning about the life her husband lived in Portugal, while the world around her goes on living. She also meets Ventura, a priest from Cape Verde who performed her husband's funeral and carries guilt from a tragic past incident.

The characters share the names of the actors, creating a space for a collaboration between real life and fiction. Costa merges documentary and fiction with an ambiguity

that pushes cinema towards a transcendental place, that the commercial construct of art as business has impeded.

Director Pedro Costa's previous films include *Blood* (1989), *Casa de Lava* (1994), *Colossal Youth* (2006), and *Horse Money* (2014). His cinema has become a voice, a means of expression for those figures living in Lisbon's impoverished areas of the city, which he continues here in *Vitalina Varela*. Costa does not position himself as an outsider, but rather seeks a collaboration with these marginalised figures to go in search of a deeper understanding of who they are.

At the BFI London Film Festival in October 2019, Costa spoke with *MSJ* about what motivates him as a filmmaker, being unafraid of depicting loneliness and distress, and his fears of the audience's inflated desire for more image and sound.



**Fig. 2** | Co-author Vitalina Varela in a scene from the film.

**PR:** Why film as a means of creative expression? Was there an inspirational or defining moment for you personally?

**PC:** I've been with this community and I've made two or three films that people have asked me to do—friends that are very special. But my main work, it's not only the films, but what goes on between the films. Not that I do a lot of social work, I don't, but I try to be present; I try to be there.

Ventura's a friend and sometimes he needs stuff, or now for Vitalina, it's easier for her to get something when we are with her, because I include our crew—four of us, five of us—and we all become very close to them.

I now feel that I cannot abandon them, so that means it's not pushing me to stressfully make more films. There's something quite nice in the prospect of doing another film that's with other people from the neighbourhood. There's always the possibility of including new people and relatives, and so it's a community thing; it's a family thing. I think they hope and they wait for that, and there's a certain archive that's there already. So yeah, there's a lot of things we want to say and to express, and film is usually the best for us, but it's more than that.

The reasons or the desire to make films in the beginning was a bit different. It has shifted a little. The desire is still there, but there's a different value.

All of this sounds a little bit like I'm doing social work, but I want to insist that it's not that. I'm always saying that I'm not ashamed or afraid that my films could sometimes, which they're not, be accused of sociology, or of having a message, or being on one side. I don't mind that they have a message because there's lots of filmmakers that say, "No, no, no, films don't have messages." Of course they do, and in my case even more so.

**PR:** As a filmmaker you cannot control how people respond to a film, and even if made with no intention of conveying a message, someone will interpret meaning.

**PC:** At this point I let the films include a lot of things that I sometimes don't agree with, or I don't like very much. But since it comes from them and since it's organised in a way that I think it should have a form and content, I let those things in, and like you say, I don't control it that much. It could be everything from colours and music, to messages and opinions, anything. It doesn't mean we're doing a kind of TV film to be a montage or documentary. It's just having a little collaboration that could really be a collaboration.

**PR:** Silence is a dominant presence in the film, which forces the audience to engage with the film and to look closer, to read the intent behind the actions and movements of the characters.



**Fig. 3** | Pedro Costa directing Vitalina Varela and Ventura. Vitor Carvalho/Optec Films, 2020.

**Would you agree that the absence of words heightens the collaboration between the filmmaker and their audience?**

**PC:** The first thing I would say is words and silence are the two faces of the same coin. You can express with silence things that you can't express with words, but that's something people don't have to know, they just have to feel it. This community, and in general the margins, the other side of society, they've been losing since the dark ages. It's a side of society, a side of ourselves that's beaten up, exploited, tortured, forced to leave, forced to stay, and I feel in a sense they lose much more than we do every day, every second.

One of the things they've been losing is the direct capacity to make them understand through words something they almost do not trust. It's not that it is in this film, but somehow it is a little bit. They really don't trust, and they live in a country, my country, and they speak another language. Portuguese is a language they fear, and somewhere, somehow, they know they will be cheated by the policeman or an officer, and it's always about words.

I feel with every year that passes they become more closed and more silent, even more violent. The younger generation seem to me much more violent, maybe because they have this conscience now that there's no use in reclaiming things that they will never get.

It's a way of answering your question too, and of course there's a sentimentality in the film that demands silence because Vitalina lived in silence. She lived in this sort of prison inside of herself. Maybe it's not silence, but it's a sort of silent prayer and she's always praying for something to be with her, to save her. There's a lot of reasons in this film for keeping this balance and I like the sounds that come from the outside. The neighbour keeps living his life and you can hear that, and Vitalina can hear that. So sometimes you hear it at the same time and sometimes you are really with her in her room, hearing the same loneliness. Being so alone in the middle of so many people, that was the feeling we wanted to express.

**PR:** The film is based on Vitalina's experiences, but how much is factual versus a dramatic interpretation of reality?

**PC:** It's very factual. My role is to organise places, faces and people; words and silences. It's organising, but letting them come from reality. The work Vitalina and I do is very oral—it's a little bit hard and long, but it's memorising and changing, and trying to concentrate the story to the bone of things.

Everything she says, or most of what everybody says, most of what's seen, and all the information given is factual. It happened, and not only happened, but it will happen again. I wanted you to feel like you're watching a film that

has no end and that it will go on—another woman, plenty of women, not here, not only there in Iran or here in London, or in the suburbs. It happens and it's not seen. TV sees it in one way, and some films see it from another angle. But these solitudes exist and it's very important they're seen in films.

**PR:** When *Vitalina* is talking to us, it occurred to me that whether or not we believe in God or have some form of spiritual belief, as humans we have a habit of appealing to an external force. This is very human trait and one that you convey in the film.

**PC:** I hope so, and it's a little bit of what you say. It's not really God, and with *Vitalina*, you could say she's a believer, but there's not that much presence of those things. In her real life she goes to church, maybe every Sunday, I'm not sure. But she prays alone and the words do not match the Bible. It could be her own prayers and her own invented, recreated prayer.

I come from a tradition that I'm still attached to in film, lets say. We're not ashamed or afraid of showing lonely man and women in distress. [Carl Theodor] Dreyer, [Friedrich Wilhelm] Murnau, or even [Ingmar] Bergman did that all the time, and people recognised themselves in those lonely people. Now there's sometimes a lot of camouflage in film, more and more—the package is always too fancy. It's a question of not being afraid of showing our fragility, and I was lucky to have *Vitalina* and *Ventura*, who are not really afraid of exposing themselves, and that is priceless, and in fact it couldn't have been acted.

**PR:** In my opinion you cannot be afraid to stare into the abyss, to ask existential questions and confront dark philosophical ideas. It's the the only way you can discover yourself and your world, yet as humans, we tend to fear entering this dark abyss.

**PC:** A big part of not only this film but all the films I've been making is to recognize and accept that I will never know enough, or I will never know everything about *Vitalina*, about them and what they're going through. But we're trying with a machine that is a stupid thing—sometimes it's ridiculous to have this machine and microphone between us. But there's the unknown and mystery that informs the film. It's a big part of it, and it's probably that part when we face each other with this machine in the middle, that we try to go to places that we think we should go.

There's a mystery that wraps itself around everything and sometimes makes us a little afraid. I just hope that people can understand that this unknown, this very black ocean of uncertainty is something you have to dive into. It's there, you cannot avoid it, and so like people these films should not give an explanation to everything. You will never understand your mother, you will never understand your father completely, you don't have to. You are always searching for something.

**PR:** I would describe *Vitalina Varela* as a film you do not necessarily enjoy, but a film you appreciate for the experience that it offers. This of course means that you are narrowing your audience.

**PC:** Well, I hope that people have experienced it like you say, and for me it's exactly that. It's like having an experience with someone—a very intimate, and sensitive experience with an event. It's not tragic or traumatic, just an event. A ray of sunshine and some flowers can be an experience, and not just aesthetic event or analysis.

I like to call this film a documentary with a certain sensibility, and I hope people are still awake to this kind of experience. I'm not sure the feeling that people want more and not less is something that's very frightening to me. This inflation of the feeling that people want more sound or more image, and they could be very much more appreciative of having less. It's a little frightening and I cannot fight that. I can just work and hope someone can say something to another person and they have some kind of message. We're in exactly the same situation as *Ventura's* church in the film. There's no more mass, nobody comes, it's a little bit lost, but we all know that [laughs].

**PR:** Filmmaker Christoph Behl remarked to me, "You are evolving, and after the film, you are not the same person as you were before." Do you perceive there to be a transformative aspect to the creative process?

**PC:** In my case yeah, because you must understand that just being there for someone and crossing this ocean of experiences, and getting to the end of the work, it's very, I don't want to seem too pretentious or vague, but it has a humanist value. It's not about money, because we started with some money and then we lost it. There's a value to just doing this work, not more or not less than building a small house of bricks for someone, like in the film. It's a stupid metaphor, but I think there are people that still need a simple house of cinema made with bricks. Two windows and a door, and it'll be quite alright. ■



**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**



# KDocsFF Presents *My Name Was January:* Honouring January Marie Lapuz and all Trans, Non-Binary, and Two-Spirit people on the Transgender Day of Remembrance

BY TARA LYONS | *Kwantlen Polytechnic University*

JANUARY MARIE LAPUZ was murdered in her home in New Westminster, British Columbia on September 30, 2012. She was 26 years old. On November 20, 2020, to mark the Transgender Day of Remembrance, Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) held a screening of *My Name Was January*, a documentary celebrating the life of January, a beloved trans woman. Originally developed as an in-person Pride event, “KDocsFF Presents: *My Name Was January*” was recommissioned as a virtual event co-hosted by KDocsFF, the Kwantlen Faculty Association’s LGBTQ2S+ Committee, and the Kwantlen Student Association’s Queer Initiative due to COVID-19 restrictions. Over 100 participants, including students, faculty, and members of LGBTQ2S+ communities, virtually attended the event (Fig. 1).

*My Name Was January* was directed by Elina Gress and Lenée Son. Lenée Son is a Khmer Krom settler who grew up in Surrey on unceded Kwantlen, Katzie, Semiahmoo, and Kwikwetlem territories. She holds a Bachelor of Journalism with a minor in Sociology from KPU. Her work as a freelance multimedia journalist has appeared in publications such as *rabble.ca*, *Multimedia Photojournale*, *The Volcano*, *Westcoast Food*, and *Inside Vancouver*. Elina Gress is a freelance multimedia journalist, primarily photojournalist, with a Bachelor of Journalism from KPU. With a keen eye and mind full of creativity, she strives to tell stories that enlighten and encourage change. *My Name Was January* was produced by the Sher Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society (Sher Vancouver), specifically Alex Sangha, founder, and Ash Brar, president.

The virtual event began with a keynote address from Alex Sangha. In addition to Alex’s work as a film producer, he is a social worker who holds a Master in Public Administration and Public Policy degree from the London School of Economics and a Master of Social Work degree from Dalhousie University. During his keynote address, Alex highlighted how the documentary serves to celebrate January’s life and the lives of all trans women of colour. The objective of *My Name Was January* is to remember the impact January had on others’ lives and to uplift the narratives of trans women of colour. Despite a “shoestring budget of less than \$25,000,” Alex noted how the documentary has

garnered incredible success on the film festival circuit, with 63 official selections and 14 international awards.

After the keynote address and a screening of the documentary, there was a panel discussion featuring Lenée Son and Alex Sangha alongside Velvet Steele and Jack Kennedy. Velvet Steele defines herself as a woman with a transsexual medical history. She is an activist for trans and sex worker rights, a sensitivity facilitator, and a fetish service provider who educates folks on the world of sex toys. Jack Kennedy is a non-binary student activist and writer. Their main mediums of storytelling are mainly fiction and



Fig. 1 | The poster for KDocsFF Presents: *My Name Was January*.



**Fig. 2** | Velvet Steele speaking during the *My Name Was January* panel discussion, 2020.

screenplays. They are currently enrolled at KPU, working towards a Bachelor of Arts degree in Creative Writing with a minor in Anthropology. I was invited to moderate the panel discussion in my role as KPU faculty and as an ally to trans communities.

We started the panel discussion by sharing stories of January, similar to how friends and families in the documentary share their own memories of January. Alex and Velvet talked about how January could turn a gloomy day bright with her laughter and quick wit. They talked about her great love of people, her loyalty as a friend, and how wonderful it was to be in her light. January was central to Sher Vancouver and the community more broadly, known for her smile, great dance skills, and kindness. She is greatly missed.

The panel discussion focused on the Transgender Day of Remembrance and, in particular, how we can all work toward stopping the oppression and violence against trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people. The panel recognized the inordinate violence that trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit face in Canada and elsewhere (Lyons et al. 182; Wirtz et al. 234). A recent Canadian survey found trans and non-binary individuals were significantly more likely to report experiencing physical or sexual violence from the age of 15 (58.9%) than cisgender respondents (37.1%) (Jaffray 25). Further, the same survey found

trans and non-binary people experienced over double the rates of unwanted sexual harassment in public (57.6%) compared to cisgender people (22.7%) in the previous 12 months (Jaffray 26). These statistics reflect the experiences Velvet shared during the panel. She stated, “I never know what is going to happen when I walk out the door” and discussed her expectation of some kind of verbal, physical, or emotional assault on a day-to-day basis. Her hope is for trans people, herself included, to be able to live life without fear of being assaulted (Fig. 2). The panelists also highlighted the intersecting oppressive systems that result in higher rates of victimization and murder of trans people, particularly those who are Black, Indigenous, and women of colour (Lenning et al. 164). January’s murder is a devastating reminder of the violence trans women of colour face in their daily lives.

The panelists also connected the Transgender Day of Remembrance to the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (December 17). Transphobia, combined with poverty, racism, colonialism, and the criminalization of sex work, continues to harm trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people who work in the sex industry, particularly those who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour (Lyons et al. 185). Velvet and Alex spoke about how the laws prohibiting sex work in Canada continue to harm trans sex workers. In Canada, sex work



**Fig. 3** | Lenée Son speaking during the *My Name Was January* panel, 2020.

continues to be criminalized through the end-demand legislation *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA)* that criminalizes a variety of activities related to sex work, including buying sexual services. Research has demonstrated that *PCEPA* has continued to harm sex workers and violate their constitutional rights (Machat et al. 583; McBride 263). Velvet expressed that trans sex workers' experiences are unique and not validated or accepted in some communities. Therefore, it is vital that their voices are included in sex work advocacy. She emphasized that trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit sex workers need to be meaningfully included at all tables where decisions are made.

There was great interest from audience members concerning how they could be better allies to trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people and to sex workers. When panelists were asked for recommendations for how to confront transphobia, Lenée emphasized the importance of allies doing the work and not relying on the labour of trans, non-binary, and people of colour. There were suggestions to get involved by writing to Members of Parliament to support the decriminalization of sex work. Jack emphasized the cost and bureaucratic barriers to changing identification (e.g., names, gender markers). There are often opportunities for allies to work towards changing bureaucratic and institutional processes that harm and erase trans,

non-binary, and Two-Spirit people (Bauer et al. 354). Lenée urged us all to work towards undoing transphobia and transmisogyny, specifically to get uncomfortable and push past feelings of guilt to take action in order to protect, prioritize, and amplify trans voices, particularly the voices of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (Fig. 3). The panel discussion wrapped up with these calls to action, and attendees left with some suggestions of concrete ways to push back against transphobia in their communities. The event closed with a call to action from Lenée: "Today and every day, honour those lives who have been lost and taken from us. Honour by fighting for trans liberation and sex worker liberation." ■

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# An Octopus's Dream: Dissolving Boundaries in an Interspecies Friendship

BY LEE BEAVINGTON | *Kwantlen Polytechnic University*



**Fig. 1** | The kelp forest in Western Cape, South Africa, 0:00:33. Netflix, 2020.

THREE MONTHS INTO working on this film, co-director Pippa Ehrlich stopped eating calamari. *My Octopus Teacher* is a literal dive into the Other: another world, another species, another way of being. The film chronicles Craig Foster's free dives to *the same place* over the course of a year. Immersed in an underwater forest, he befriends a shape-shifter that captures his heart. As a biologist, educator, and philosopher, I will frame my review through these lenses. This film is a showcase of mesmerizing octopus behaviour, and the idea of nature as teacher. Through this relationship between man and mollusc emerges a gentle reverence for all things wild.

When we first enter the kelp forest (Fig. 1) in the Cape of Storms, we are treated to a fascinating montage of octopus footage, whose significance for this cephalopod heroine become wondrously and alarmingly apparent to us later in the film.

We are then pulled out of the ocean and into Foster's backstory and motivation, where fifty years of human life is squeezed, by the co-directors, into 11 minutes of film. He

grew up with the Atlantic Ocean crashing on his doorstep. Burnt out from his work on nature-themed documentaries, depressed and disconnected from his young son, he returned to his life's joy: the cold comfort of the sea, diving without a wetsuit or oxygen tank near his home in South Africa. One day, he stumbles upon a peculiar octopus wearing a complete armour of shells (Fig. 2). This moment plants the seed for this film.

The film's first line of dialogue references aliens. Such lifeforms in Hollywood are typically human-centric: think Star Trek's bipedal Klingons and Vulcans. The octopuses of Earth have three hearts, blue blood due to swapping copper for iron to transport oxygen, and even edit their own RNA to adapt to the environment (Liscovitch-Brauer 200). None of this is mentioned in the film, perhaps to distance itself from nature documentaries. This is a personal story.

There are two stars in this film: human and octopus. One has a name, a voiceover, and a film credit. The other can regrow a severed arm. Both humans and octopuses abandoned something (fur or an ancestral shell) in their



**Fig. 2** | Curious fish investigate a well-disguised octopus, 0:12:23. Netflix, 2020.

journey toward exceptional intelligence. Both are puzzle solvers. And both are fascinated by the other. Yet octopuses often repel us, and even their scientific name delegates them to a lower class: *Octopus vulgaris*.

I live on a Gulf Island near Vancouver, BC, home to the world's largest octopus species. One day, exploring an extreme low tide on a rocky shoreline, I was blessed to discover the pinkish blob of a baby octopus hidden under a globe-sized stone. Within a few years, this giant Pacific octopus can grow five times longer than me, and four times my weight. Should this octopus be fortunate enough to reach reproductive adulthood—on average, only two of her 50,000 siblings will manage this—she might mate and lay eggs. She will stay with the developing larva, never eating, and never leaving the den, until her final act in life: pushing down the walls of the den, half a year later, so her babies can swim free.

The giant Pacific octopus is lucky to live five years, while the common octopus hardly lives more than a year: a short enough time that Foster was granted the remarkable opportunity to commune with a common octopus, daily, in her natural habitat, for most of her life.

The otherworldly kelp forest serves as the film's setting. Brown kelp are seaweeds, capable of growing thirty meters in height. Instead of roots, a holdfast anchors them to the rocky seafloor. A huge stalk thrusts upward and ends in a starburst of large, leafy blades that ripple with the surf like a giant inverted squid. Marine algae are more efficient

than plants at photosynthesis and produce one-fifth of our atmospheric oxygen. Yet as Foster points out, most locals are completely unaware of this aquatic ecosystem.

Initially, this forest all looked the same to Foster. Then he peered closer at this 'underwater brain' and began to map out the countless threads of interconnection. Like my Ecology students, tasked this past summer with visiting the same land-based site over and over again, it took some time to notice the finer details, and come to appreciate the contemplative depth of knowing a distinct spot in nature.

At first, the octopus is shy around Craig. Then curiosity gets the best of her, and she pulls over his camera, and eventually reaches out an arm toward his hand (Fig. 3).

There is something profound in this contact, and the filmmakers wisely pause the voiceover as this moment unfurls. A trust has been built between a slimy invertebrate and a furry mammal separated by 500 million years of evolution, until Foster drops a camera lens. The octopus flees behind a blur of ink.

It took him a week to find her, after learning to follow underwater octopus tracks. Their reunion is nothing short of incredible.

Jennifer Mather, a leading octopus scientist-psychologist, says that "an octopus's life is all about the contradiction between curiosity and fear" (Ehrlich et al.). Foster is faced with a paradox. He does not want to 'cross the line' and interfere with this wild animal. He doesn't scare away the pajama sharks hunting the octopus, or take her in his arms,

though he does try to feed her at one particularly vulnerable moment. Yet his presence already changes the functioning of the ecosystem and its denizens. Western thought has long held an idealized view of wilderness: virgin, untouched, and untamed. Humans are not only a part of nature—given our bodies are composed of more nonhuman cells than human cells—there are very few habitats on earth not modified in some form by Indigenous peoples. Foster wants to stay objective, and yet he has made a friend of this octopus. He sheds tears for her. A friend is someone you respect, trust, and care for. Why, then, does he decide not to protect her?

Directors Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed filmed 14 hours of interview footage over three days (Ehrlich et al.), where Foster shares his inspiration for this project. He often speaks with sincerity and emotion. This would not be the same film if it were strictly impartial and devoid of sentiment. Science takes pride in being value-free, yet Foster's experience here is subjective, and this is where the film shines: steeped in feeling, sensitivity, and wonder. Although this may run counter to the presumed objective domain of the documentary, this emotional heart of the film is decidedly poignant.

Was their relationship what ecologists would call mutualistic? Foster clearly benefited on both a personal and a professional level. The octopus helps him rediscover his purpose and joy, he becomes a better father, and stars in a film. What, if anything, did the octopus gain? To survive, an octopus must imagine being in the mind of fish, crab, lobster, brittle star and human (Montgomery 21). Having a human around must certainly be stimulating for a creature as clever and complex as an octopus. Does she experience curiosity and joy? Perhaps not in the human sense, but most certainly in an octopus sense.

To be an octopus is to experience the world through touch. Whereas human eyes have three visual pigments, octopuses have one. This makes them colour-blind. Perhaps, instead, they see with their skin, as recent gene sequencing in cuttlefish suggests (Bonadè et al. 17). Three hundred million neurons are found in their arms, far exceeding those in their brain. With two thousand suckers, each controlled independently, and a skin filled with 25 million colour-changing chromatophores voluntarily coordinated via muscle and nerve, it's difficult to fathom such a multifaceted, tactile existence.

In one scene, the octopus curls up against Foster's heart (Fig. 4). He is cradled by 2,000 little fingers. A touching moment in a film where Foster is largely an observer rather than a participant, yet also a paradoxical one, where he states that the 'boundaries dissolve.' For much of the film Foster is a detached witness, yet here he embraces the Other. Why would the octopus engage a human in this



Fig. 3 | The first touch of an octopus, 0:18:48. Netflix, 2020.



Fig. 4 | Craig Foster bonds with the common octopus, 0:32:32. Netflix, 2020.

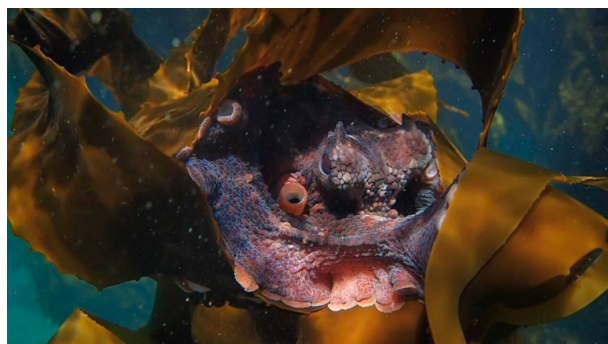


Fig. 5 | The octopus cocoons herself in kelp to evade a shark, 01:02:14. Netflix, 2020.

manner? The mechanical-minded scientist may deem this a survival strategy: the more you know about your environment and the species therein, the more likely you are to thrive and reproduce. The holistic-minded natural philosopher might say this is an empathic relationship shared between two individuals.

Another recent film to prominently feature other-than-humans, *Wolfwalkers* (Cartoon Saloon, 2020) puts you into the mind (or rather, scent) of the wolf, revealing a fascinating conjecture of how these nose-led animals experience the world. Were the same treatment given an octopus, imagine a sensory web with thousands of shifting threads conveyed through touch.



The octopus's world is both hunter and hunted. She uses Foster's presence at one point to help her catch a lobster, while she wraps herself in leathery kelp blades to avoid being eaten by a shark (Fig. 5). An octopus's ability to camouflage in a split second—matching the colour, brightness, pattern and even texture of the algae (Gallo)—not only serves her roles as predator and prey, but is a marvel of science nonfiction. This dynamic camouflage is a clear expression of nature's creativity.

Given the octopus's extraordinary intelligence, long-term memory, and high-level cognitive processing—not to mention the ability to engage in play (Fig. 6) as few animal species do, humans being another to make this exceptional shortlist—one might hope we would reevaluate our relationship with cephalopods. Indeed, the European Union has granted them the same protections as vertebrate species. Conversely, United States researchers bred thousands of them in test tubes in order to develop a new experimental lab species (Gaurino), giving them ecstasy in one study to prompt this solitary species into being more social (Edsinger and Dölen 3136) with no oversight from an ethics committee. We still have a long way to go.

This film has the power to touch people. For the biologist, the behaviours of the octopus—using an abalone shell as a shield, outwitting a shark, and even her movement: she jets, crawls, swims and walks like a rock with legs—are fascinating. As an outdoor educator, I often have students repeatedly visit the same site or 'sit spot.'

"Why are you going to the same place every day?" people asked Foster. Using place as pedagogy can cultivate fundamental scientific skills such as keen observation, critical thinking, and pattern recognition. Perhaps more importantly, this fosters a connection to the biotic community. In collaboration with Kwantlen Polytechnic University colleagues Amy Huestis and Carson Keever, I facilitated the "Ecology in 1m<sup>2</sup>" study (Beavington et al.), where students visited a local natural environment over several weeks, with inspiring results. Students spoke to the variety of knowledge gained from returning to a single place, learning healthier habits from less screen time, and even used the word 'transformative.'

Possibly the most astounding sequence in the film is the shark pursuit. The octopus employs camouflage, jet propulsion, a kelp blanket, land walking, and finally a self-made shield of shell and stone to attempt escape. Because Foster had to swim up for air, he missed filming the climactic scene (reminding me of the unfilmed showdown in the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men*) and how the octopus eluded the shark's vicious death roll. Yet the resultant aftermath, with the octopus's survival smarts on clear display, was equally riveting to witness.

After seeing this film, it's difficult to watch the episode of Netflix's *Somebody Feed Phil* where he buys and eats a squirming octopus. Instead, I'm more inclined to support Craig Foster's efforts with the Sea Change Project (seachangeproject.com), which he co-founded to protect the Great African Sea Forest (Fig. 7).

*My Octopus Teacher* is a study in craft and curiosity. The filmmakers recut the opening dozens of times to hone the narrative tone. The result is a visual feast with a heartfelt sense of wonder. Some films you appreciate for their dialogue, performances, or scores; others are appreciated for *how* they are made. The latter is where *My Octopus Teacher* truly triumphs. This film is a labour of love. From Craig Foster and his compelling personal journey, stellar sound editing, and the underwater cinematography that captivates, thanks in part to Roger Horrocks's (of *Blue Planet II* and the upcoming *Planet Earth III* fame) additional footage, though most was Foster's handheld camerawork. Twenty different cameras were ultimately used to capture aerial, underwater, and interview scenes. One can't help but wonder what was left on the cutting room floor. Did the octopus ever wrap her body around Foster's face? Did another octopus attempt to eat her (or she, him?).

This film offers us a portal into another world, and another way of being. At the end, Foster elucidates the vital impact of this experience on his life. What is the reciprocal of this statement? Perhaps a worldview that is less human-centred, a necessary shift from being an observer to being a fully-fledged participant. There is strong evidence that octopuses dream (Iglesias et al. 1). *My Octopus Teacher* invites us to dream of a future more gentle, reciprocal, and respectful of the Other. Craig and Tom Foster are the two sole cast members. There is no listing or credit for the octopus. She is never given a name, yet her story lingers like a friend with which you spent the most formative year of your life. ■



**Fig. 6** | The octopus plays with the fish, one of the few animal species to engage in playful behaviour , 01:09:43. Netflix, 2020.



**Fig. 7** | Sea forest divers for the Sea Change Project, 01:23:43. Netflix, 2020.

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**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

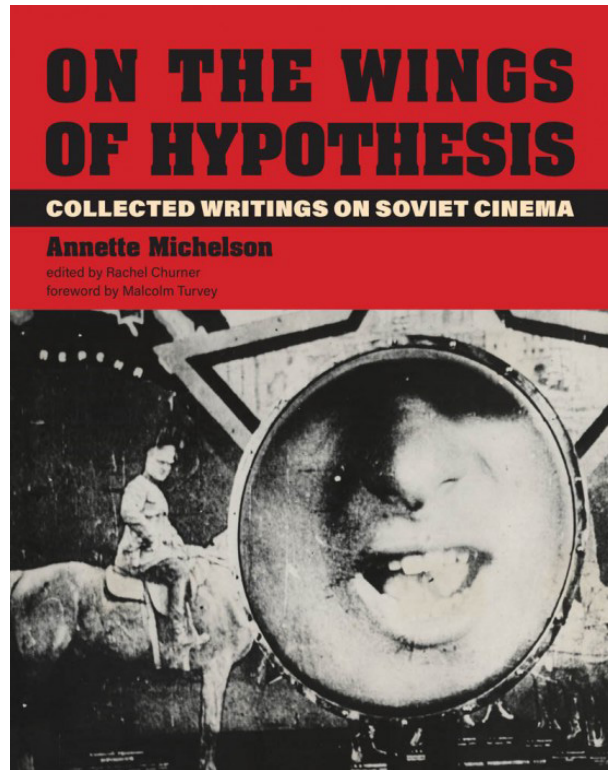
# Annette Michelson's *On the Wings of Hypothesis*

BY ELIJAH YOUNG | *Goldsmiths, University of London*

TO SUIT THE NEEDS, perhaps, of a cultural environment increasingly defined by intersection, a convergence of interests has come to inform and characterize much of contemporary art criticism. Curated here, Annette Michelson's writings on the Soviet school of montage filmmakers epitomizes that such an approach can work in defiance of over-saturation. Michelson's consilience electrifies, no doubt in part to the sheer range of subjects considered, from correlating Sergei Eisenstein to American avant-gardist Stan Brakhage to identifying the Byzantine hagiography encoded into Dziga Vertov's profile of V.I. Lenin. Prior to her passing in 2018, Michelson had begun to anthologize her critical articles with the collection *On the Eve of the Future* (2017), which documents her research on the experimental American cinema of the mid-twentieth century. Published posthumously, the second volume of that project, *On the Wings of Hypothesis*, concerns the theoretical approaches to montage established by two Soviet filmmakers—Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov—and their realization in cinematic practice. Overall, what is catalogued here is a view of art as a fundamental pursuit of ontological manipulation.

In his foreword to the book, Malcolm Turvey identifies this view as “singularly fertile” (xvi) for Michelson and her contemporaries. Certainly, across the breadth of her writing on popular and experimental film, the notion remains that acknowledging the dialectic between filmmaking and spectatorship can inspire development of both positions. The sense Michelson seeks to articulate is expressed as that of “artists whose notions of their art are [...] shaped by the ideological structure in which they are formed” (29). The first chapter, “On the Wings of Hypothesis: Montage and the Theory of the Interval (1992),” finds Eisenstein in accordance with this, citing his own view of montage as “the organization of the elements or its intervals into phrases,” or, laconically, “drawings in motion” (14). Montage in the Soviet Union, then, becomes the exemplary movement for Michelson's expression of ethics and politics through aesthetics and, as a result, evidence for a necessary symbiosis of theory and practice.

Following this introduction, the collection is split into two sections. The first comprises four essays, written between 1973 and 2001, concerning Sergei Eisenstein. To open the second chapter, “Camera Lucida / Camera Obscura (1973),” and to begin elaborating upon her discussion of dialectics, Michelson cites the poet T. S. Eliot's



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consideration that “no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (27). Eisenstein is, hereafter, presented as conscious of this supposition, willing to theorize his work based upon recognition of both his contemporaries and his antecedents. The image Michelson constructs is that of an artist in revolt against a bourgeois structure of film production, hailing from the West and upheld by directors such as D. W. Griffith, for which montage might be a panacea, “an agent of dialectical consciousness” (38). The clear influence of materialist philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx is recognized, and Michelson employs Marx's assertion that “man makes religion, religion does not make man” (69) as a quaint analogue for Eisenstein's own desire to construct a new cinematic form of representation, outside the established “knowns” of theatrical structure.

At no point does Michelson veer into the tangential with her array of analogical sources. Each example lends credence to her characterization of “intellectual montage,” Eisenstein’s grand mission which, once established, serves as the basis for a diptych of essays on his unrealized adaptational projects: “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* (1976)” and “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Ulysses* (1989).” Acting as character studies of a revolutionary theorist, these chapters are the heart of Michelson’s discussion of Eisenstein. In the former, Eisenstein’s relationship with Marxist social-economic theory is presented as the central theme of his silent works—*Strike!* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928). Conceiving of these films as a continuous project, Michelson suggests each to represent, in greater detail than its predecessor, “[t]he economic premises of a class struggle [...] in which the concrete, material premises and techniques of production and their consequences will be proposed through a structure of cinematic implications and inferences” (72). Here, Michelson finds Eisenstein at his most incentivized, the dialectics of montage employed both in didactic service and emulation of Marxist collectivism. The un-made *Capital* would have, Michelson speculates, epitomized Eisenstein’s idea that “experiment[s] external to the thesis [are] rendered impossible” (72) through montage—the service, if not the outright purpose, of the method would be to encourage audience recognition of dialectical materialism not unlike that which influenced the October Revolution.

If, to borrow from Freud, Eisenstein is seen to reiterate these motivations through the latent content of his films, their technicality, Michelson is careful not to pigeon-hole him as a propagandist. Describing the planned *Capital* and *Ulysses* adaptations as “utopian projects” (79), Michelson instead paints Eisenstein as desiring, most of all, a clear and concise “systemics for the articulation of a primary modernist text, [...] a film capable of reconstructing all phases and all specifics of the course of thought” (79). Communicating an analytic aim in support of furthering the Soviet project had been the focus of his earlier socialist works, but Michelson continues in her developmental consideration of the director, presenting this as part of a more general attempt to emulate the experience of consciousness. Michelson leans into correlations between Eisenstein and Brakhage, who undertook a similar task of “radical redefinition of filmic temporality [...] resisting observation and cognition” (82) in the 1960s and 70s. The task Michelson appears to set out for herself in recounting Eisenstein’s experiences attempting and failing to articulate his theories is to chart a transition from one “conjunction of Marxism with modernism through a critique of cinematic representation” (88), to a more radical tradition,

“an art that is a free stream of changing” (83). Michelson finds the Symbolist movement appropriate as both influence and analogue for Eisenstein’s desire and, in the chapter on *Ulysses*, she records the Symbolist poetic enterprise as involving an art which “creates its own reality” while, at the same time, “reveal[ing] the relatedness of phenomena to a higher entity,” and “order[ing] human experience of the real world [...] in the direction of an ideal” (99). Marx’s suggestion that “man makes religion” is realized in this transcendental treatment of art, Michelson’s analogues working as an interconnected view of modernist thought: “It is, however, the totalizing aspiration of the Symbolist program which Eisenstein retains when [...] he speaks of the manner in which the several arts strain towards a single aim [...] to reconstruct, to reflect reality, and above all the consciousness and feelings of Man” (103). Much like Eisenstein, Michelson’s investigation of montage—predicated, as it is, upon the assumption that filmmaking is a mode of ontological manipulation—functions as an attempt to articulate the dialectics of experience and representation.

In the second main part of the collection, her focus shifts to Dziga Vertov. The earliest dated essay of the collection, “From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1972),” opens this section, with Michelson presiding over the 1935 All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinematography (139). Eisenstein is contained here alongside his fellow revolutionaries: directors Vsevolod Pudovkin (*Mother* (1926)) and Alexander Dovzhenko (*Earth* (1930)), and Eduard Tisse, cinematographer for nearly every one of Eisenstein’s films. The scene is that of a school of artists bound together by the desire to intersect aesthetic experimentation with a style of dialectical politics—the establishment of intellectual montage. Where does Vertov fit into this panorama? In truth, Michelson puts it to us, he doesn’t. The conceptualization of filmmaking Vertov described as “the space upon which epistemological inquiry and the cinematic consciousness converge in dialectical mimesis” (141) is taken as exemplified in *Man with a Movie Camera*, though Michelson juxtaposes the work and its reputation with its immediate reception by Eisenstein: a compendium of “formalist jackstraws and unmotivated camera mischief” (144). Vertov is examined outside of the political parameters of intellectual montage, his notion of Kino-Eye instead suggesting the potential for ideational meaning to be represented through technique. Michelson aligns Vertov with another theorist whose influence cannot be overstated, André Bazin, whose own hypostasization of “[the] ontology of film into an ontology of existential freedom,” becomes an equivalent process for the Soviets” theorizing of montage as “inseparable from dialectical thinking as a whole” (147-148). Where Vertov deviates from reliance on this sort of

theorization, though, is in what Michelson identifies as his unwavering obsession with technicality.

The main function of the Kino-Eye—explicated in Vertov's lectures and essays and reproduced as part of Michelson's analysis—is acknowledged as the attempt to capture on film “that which has been [...] missed by sight, subject to oversight” (141). Separation of mechanical image reproduction from subjective perception of reality underpins Michelson's study of Vertov. The director's political exclusion from association with Eisenstein, et al. is countered by his expressed opinion that “[o]nly consciousness can form a man of firm opinion and solid conviction” (153), not dissimilar from the beliefs channeled into Eisenstein's utopian projects. As identifying and exhorting a dialectical mission became the focus of her chapters on Eisenstein, Michelson presents Vertov as composing a testimonial to concerns over representation of consciousness, in *Man with a Movie Camera*. Cinematic tenets of Vertov's work, such as his desire to maintain awareness of the screen as a surface within the film, lend to what Michelson considers his grand attempt at “subversion and restoration of filmic illusion [...] through processes of distortion and/or abstraction” (160-161). Again, a parallel between Vertov and Eisenstein appears in the emphasis on what Michelson terms “abandon[ing] the didactic for the maieutic” (164), disregarding show-and-tell for a mode which encourages spectatorial interpretation of its formal qualities.

In the following chapter, “Dr. Crase and Mr. Clair (1979),” Michelson elaborates on the importance of cinematic objects and apparatus to Vertov's accomplishment of this aim. Referring to his 1926 viewing of René Clair's *Paris qui dort*, Michelson records the director as captivated by the implementation of technique representative of Kino-Eye, in particular the dissipation of the ties between film and theatrical-narrative convention. Kino-Eye becomes, for Michelson, another intellectual attempt to chronicle the construction of socialism as an active attack on the bourgeois, subjectified in Vertov's documentaries *Kino-Glaz* (1924) and *Forward, Soviet!* (1926). It is the form of these works, their having been “conceived and executed as revolutionary assaults upon the old cinematic order” (172), which dictates Michelson's modernist analysis of Vertov. Citing the sociologist Georg Simmel's view that “metropolitan life in general is not conceivable without all of its activities and reciprocal relationships being organized and coordinated [...] into a firmly fixed framework of time” (186), Michelson's Vertov manifests as an artist in revolt against linear representations of time which subordinate subjective perception. The works produced which adhere to this “negative of time” instead present “an instrument for “the communist decoding of the world” [...] and its construction of socialism” (193). In the final essay, “The Kinetic Icon and

the Work of Mourning (1990),” Michelson expands upon this establishment of Vertov's political practice to explore the instrumentalization of cinema for encoding meaning. By engaging in the continual de- and re-construction of order and tradition, Vertov's subversion “is seen as containing the development of science itself” (204), as a means of discovery of new modes of representation.

Returning to the notion of film as an ontological experience, I present a statement paraphrased from this concluding essay: “the euphoria one feels at the editing table is that of a sharpening cognitive focus and of a ludic sovereignty, a fantasy of infantile omnipotence open to those who, since 1896, have played with the continuum of temporality and the logic of causality” (205). This, in essence, is Michelson's concern in this anthology. Analyzing the major works of two of the most influential artists of any medium, Michelson arrives at the point time and again that innovation is propelled by the possibility of there being representational “unknowns.” In the cases of Eisenstein and Vertov, the unknown is an alternative to stale, capitalistic modes which fail to provoke the intellectual potential of their audiences. In Michelson's sophisticated and incisive prose, this becomes definitive of a chronology, decades-long, of film criticism, clearly motivated by a desire to articulate and expound the erudition of its subjects through their position in the history of art. ■



**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**



# OPEN CALL FOR PAPERS

ISSUE 7.1 · SPRING 2022

For its upcoming issue, *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration (MSJ)* currently seeks submissions that encompass the latest research in film and media studies. Submission categories include feature articles (6,000-7,000 words); mise-en-scène featurttes (1,000-1,500 words); reviews of films, DVDs, Blu-rays or conferences (1,500-2,500 words); M.A. or Ph.D. abstracts (250-300 words);

interviews (4,000-5,000 words); undergraduate scholarship (2,000-2,500 words) or video essays (8-10 minute range). All submissions must include a selection of supporting images from the film(s) under analysis and be formatted according to **MLA guidelines, 9th edition**. Topic areas may include, but are not limited to, the following:

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7

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