

# MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The Journal of Film & Visual Narration

Vol. 06 No.02 | Winter 2021







"A Lovely Night" with Seb (Ryan Gosling) and Mia (Emma Stone) in Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*. Lionsgate, 2016.

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader:

*MSJ*'s winter edition invites you to explore **Narratives in Motion**.

Choreographed movement has always synergized mise-en-scène analysis. As one of the Seven Arts dovetailing into film, kinetics can literally move a character forward or regulate a scene's pace. Either way, embodied viewing immerses us in the character's universe. Take Ariana DeBose's Anita from *West Side Story* (2021), whose "America" number unpacks the American Dream for a new audience in Steven Spielberg's remake. Her electrifying presence is a master class in musical literature, the language of dance, and colour theory, as seen in our cover image. In contrast, *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) positions Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) and the passengers occupying that first-class carriage as a study in confinement and claustrophobia. Both films take the spotlight as mise-en-scène featurettes in Issue 6.2. Joining them is a third featurette focused on Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* (2016) and a feature article on movement in the films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, a collection which I recommend to guide you through our themed edition.

Elsewhere in Issue 6.2 is the latest example of undergraduate scholarship: a visual essay by Kwantlen Polytechnic University English major, Lauryn Beck. A self-taught visual artist, Lauryn has envisioned Stephen Campanelli's *Indian Horse* (2017) as a classic horror poster accompanied by a filmic reflection on Indigenous trauma caused by residential schools in Canada. We are proud to be giving her moving, multimedia work a platform in *MSJ*.

One announcement before you go: Our journal is now in the Portuguese Cinémathèque-Museum of Cinema. Having our open-access publication included in this historic library is an honour. If you are ever in Lisbon, please be sure to tour the Museum of Cinema and visit *MSJ* in the library's holdings.

Enjoy *MSJ*'s Narratives in Motion.



Greg Chan  
Editor-in-Chief

## CONTRIBUTORS

### NAZLI AKHTARI



Nazli Akhtari is an interdisciplinary artist and theorist working at the intersections of performance studies, diaspora and cultural studies, and feminist media studies. Her research and praxis broadly focus on questions of collective memory and affect in performance, archive, new media, and digital culture of Iranian and Middle Eastern diasporas. Nazli is currently a visiting Assistant Professor of English and Drama at the University of Toronto Mississauga where she teaches courses on modern and contemporary theatre and drama, performance text, and archive and performance in diaspora. Before joining UTM, she completed a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Toronto. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *Global Performance Studies*, *Performance Matters*, and *Imagined Theatres* and is forthcoming with *Camera Obscura: a Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*.

### LAURYN BECK



Lauryn Beck has always struggled with academics, so taking on an English major was a bit of an uphill battle. The heavy-reading classes were the hardest, so when more film studies courses started being offered at KPU, she jumped on them. Lauryn found that she was artistically inspired by the course materials, so she started creating illustrations based on what she was learning. Lauryn's professors encouraged her to use her illustrations to help develop and explain her theories in ways which a formal written paper could not. Taking film studies courses has enabled Lauryn to grow as a student and an artist.

**WILLIAM ENGSTRAND**

William Engstrand is a PhD candidate in English and Film at Morgan State University. He received his B.A. from Bennington College. He is currently exploring Kenneth Burke's dramatism method analysis as a flexible structure and starting point to analyze and create films. He will continue his study of the cinematic sublime to include the selected films of Abbas Kiarostami and Andrei Tarkovsky. He is currently working on a film, *Runs in the Family*, that explores filial relations through the act of running.

**SWARNAVEL ESWARAN**

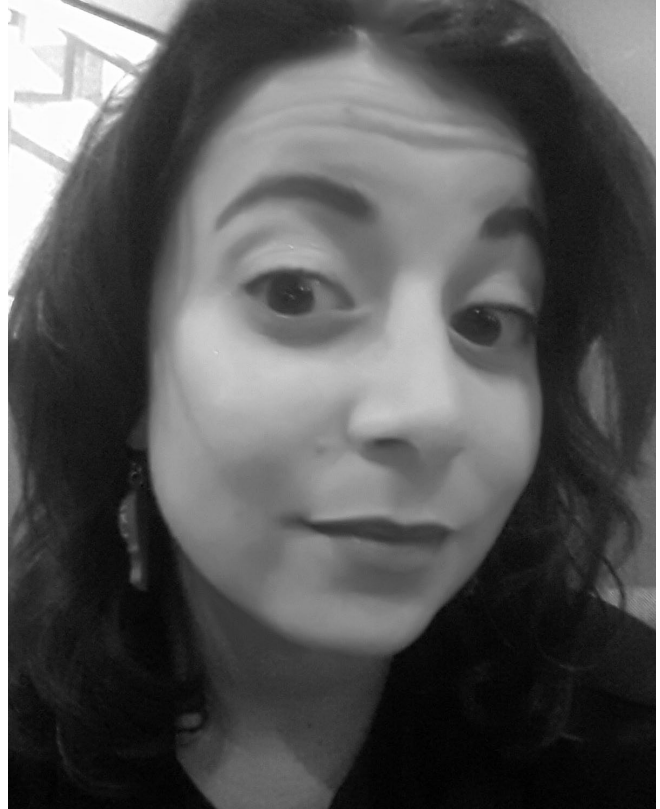
Swarnavel Eswaran is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and the School of Journalism at Michigan State University. His documentaries include *Nagapattinam: Waves from the Deep* (2018), *Hmong Memories at the Crossroad* (2016), *Migrations of Islam* (2014), and *Unfinished Journey: A City in Transition* (2012). His research focuses on Tamil/Indian cinema's history, aesthetics, and politics, and contemporary Indian Cinema after the digital turn, and the concomitant changes in the production, distribution, and reception of films. His books include *Tamil Cinema Reviews: 1931-1960* (Nizhal Publications, 2020) and *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema* (Sage Publications, 2015). His fiction feature *Kattumaram* (Catamaran, 2019), a collaboration with Tamil's Cinema's leading director Mysskin, is currently on the film festival circuit.

**SAHAR HAMZAH**



Dr. Sahar R. Hamzah is an Assistant Professor of film production at the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston in Houston, Texas. She is a Blackmagic Design Ambassador and Certified DaVinci Resolve Trainer. Dr. Hamzah received her Ph.D. in Media and Communication in 2017 from Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, Scotland, specializing in film adaptation. Her short screenplay, *The Trouble with Buttons*, won the 2020 Women in Film and Television – Houston Short Screenplay Competition. Her feature-length documentary *Digital Kenya*, created by herself and a colleague as part of a study-abroad program, was published in the *Journal of African Media Studies*, and screened at the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in Nairobi, Kenya, July 2021.

**SAMANTHA KOUNTZ**



Samantha Kountz is the Program Director for Keiser University’s College of Cinematic Arts in West Palm Beach, Florida. She received her Master’s degree at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England after receiving her BA at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida. Kountz recently presented for the “Theorizing Zombiism Conference” hosted by the Zombie Studies Network and has written for the *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, Foundation’s *International Review of Science Fiction*, and Kutztown University of Pennsylvania’s *Journal for Dracula Studies*. Kountz’s work often focuses on horror, science-fiction, gender, sexuality, and genre iconography.



**NICOLE MORELLO**

Nicole Morello is a recent graduate of Youngstown State University (YSU) in Youngstown, Ohio, with an M.A. in English. At YSU, her research tended to focus on the bridge between literature, history, and sometimes film. For example, one of Nicole's research topics concentrated on the interception of Katherine Anne Porter's short story, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and the underlying biblical and apocalyptic influences of Albrecht Dürer, a German artist and printmaker during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Additionally, she has explored the representation of dynastic principles set amongst a fascist background in Richard Loncraine's film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Nicole currently works as an independent scholar.

**MELISSA MYSER**

Melissa Myser is a filmmaker, writer, and educator based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She graduated *cum laude* in Film and Studio Art from the University of Colorado, Boulder and went on to earn an M.F.A. from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Focusing on the interaction between film and art both in teaching and in production, Myser currently teaches film and media arts at Princeton Day School in Princeton, New Jersey.

**IAN MURPHY**



Ian Murphy is an independent scholar. He has previously worked as an Associate Lecturer in English Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester, UK), where he was awarded his Ph.D. in 2020. His teaching interests consist of nineteenth and early twentieth-century French and English literature, more specifically Gothic texts, the literary depiction of visual images, and the Aestheticism and Decadence of the *fin de siècle*. His current research examines how androgynous figures function as precursors of death in nineteenth-century art and literature.

**TRACI PANKRATZ**



Traci Pankratz is a recent graduate from Indiana University South Bend with a master's degree in English. She has always loved literature and film and this opportunity allowed her to combine this passion into a research project she is very proud of. She also has a master's degree in Education with a focus on literacy. She earned her undergraduate degree in Special Education from Northern Illinois University. She currently teaches at the Elkhart Area Career Center in Elkhart, Indiana, where she teaches English to juniors and seniors, hoping to instill in them the same love of film and literature she has. This is Traci's first publication.



**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**

# Locating the Sublime Between Movement and Action

The Cinema of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

BY WILLIAM ENGSTRAND  
Morgan State University

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## ABSTRACT

This essay locates and examines the sublime moments in two films directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne— *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005) and *Le Gamin au Vélo* (*The Kid with the Bike*, 2011). The analysis will reveal a new type of cinematic sublime employing Kenneth Burke's dramatism and specifically the Act/Purpose ratio. In this new cinematic sublime, ordinary movements become acts of transition and change. Through movement and act the sublime emerges as an interaction of levels of existence, united and visible at the same time, giving a new perspective to an otherwise ordinary event. Something that was this, is suddenly that. A moment can only be sublime if we are aware of a boundary that, suddenly, fails to bind us.

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THIS PAPER LOCATES and examines the sublime moments in two films directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne— *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005) and *Le Gamin au Vélo* (*The Kid with the Bike*, 2011). The analysis will reveal a new type of cinematic sublime employing Kenneth Burke's dramatism and the Act/Purpose ratio. In this new cinematic sublime, ordinary movements become acts of transition and change. The cumulative effect is a hard-fought moral and spiritual expansion that exists in the present: the here and the now. Through movement and act, the sublime emerges as an interaction of levels of existence that are united and visible at the same time, giving a new perspective to an otherwise ordinary event that culminates in a "moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to the aim ... that the soul becomes" (Bloom 153). Still film frames will be presented like citations of lines from poetry or excerpts from written text. Sublime moments that emerge from these films highlight the deep vulnerability and resiliency of the human condition. Additionally, this essay references Francois Lyotard's interpretation of Immanuel Kant's idea of the dynamic sublime where "in the circumstance, there is 'something' that leaves thought dumbfounded even as it exalts thought" (68). Lyotard further describes this "something" as a "differend" which "cannot be resolved. But it can be felt as such, as a differend. This is the sublime feeling" (234). A differend is

a conflict between two or more parties or ideas that cannot be equitably resolved.

The idea and location of the sublime can be attributed to a group of varied and dynamic thinkers. Each of the following major critical works overlap in terms of content and method of analysis. The works themselves interlock in three distinct ways: (1) methods of analysis that trace, locate, and identify the sublime (Burke and Gilles Deleuze); (2) the ethics that motivate and emerge from the Dardenne's work (Emmanuel Levinas); (3) the actual sublime itself—how it appears, why it appears, and what it is (Lyotard).

Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) outlines a method of analysis he calls "dramatism" and was written specifically to address, "What is involved when we say what people are doing and why are they doing it?" (xv). The book explores the different ways of analyzing the motives that are present in poetry and fiction, political discourse, advertisements, news, legal judgments, religion, and so on. In investigating this question of what is involved in the motives of works, Burke introduces a method of analysis, dramatism, that consists of five terms: Act (what was done), Scene (when or where it was done), Agent (who did it), Agency (how they did it), and Purpose (why it was done). In finding out what means what and why, Burke suggests choosing two of the five terms contained in dramatism,

forming a ratio (such as Act/Purpose) as “principles of determination.” *The Philosophy of the Literary Form* (1941) concerns itself with the idea of the symbolic act, of “what equals what but also the matter of what to what” (38). Burke collects language, words, and symbols into “associational clusters” that represent and motivate acts: “The interrelationships themselves are his motives. For they are his situation; and situation is but another word for motives” (20).

Burke’s dramatic pentad was developed as a response to the encroaching industrialization and “empirical science” of 1940s. According to Burke “Our speculations, as we interpret them, should show that the subject of motivation is a philosophic one, not ultimately to be solved in terms of empirical science” (*Grammar* xxiii). The ideas and feelings of the sublime involve a human experience that cannot be measured or accurately quantified. For the purposes of this essay, Burke’s method is useful in identifying “associational clusters” (of what goes with what)—this dynamic interplay between movement and action is highlighted here by the use of film stills as a method to locate moments featuring the sublime.

The seminal books of French film philosopher Deleuze, *Cinema I* (1986) and *Cinema II* (1989), will be a reference for the structure of the selected films and the Dardennes’ cinematic techniques in creating these films. Specifically, Deleuze’s theories concerning action-image (*Cinema I*) and time-image (*Cinema II*) relate to the emergence of sublime moments in the Dardenne brothers’ work. Deleuze’s *Cinema I* was written to “isolate certain cinematic concepts” (concerning the “movement image”) that exist as specific types: the perception-image, the affectation-image, and the action-image. For Deleuze, concepts “are exactly like sounds, colours or images, they are intensities which either suit you or don’t, which work or don’t. Concepts are the images of thought.” (xi). Deleuze’s *Cinema II* reveals the concept of the time-image as “a little time in the pure state” that came about after WWII in a war-torn Europe full of “situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces we longer know how to describe” (xi).

Always collaborating, the Dardenne brothers began their careers as documentary filmmakers, making six documentaries between 1974–1983 that investigated, in Philip Mosley’s words, “relations between ideology, history and personal experience [and] emphasize[d] the stories of individuals rather than those of a group or class” (41). Levinas’s idea that “the necessary acknowledgment of our responsibility occurs in the face to face encounter with (or, more accurately, in Levinas’s language, exposure to) the other” (Mosley 17) was infused in the early documentaries. Dardenne consumed Levinas’s writings during his time as a student of philosophy at the University of Louvain prior to his film career. Levinas’s positions continue to resonate as the guiding motive for the Dardenne brothers in terms of the structure and content of their films.

Levinas’s *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998) will be incorporated to explain the Dardennes’ ethical motives in making these particular films, specifically the idea that individuals can

***The sublime moments in L’Enfant are, in themselves, a culmination of the acts of waiting that create a context—a theatre of action—for the sublime to emerge. The simple common act of waiting in L’Enfant eventually becomes a motive for change and transformation.***

understand, love, and empathize with another primarily through a willful face-to-face encounter with the “other” so that the “other” is no longer categorized as such. Levinas’s treatment of ethics in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998) implicitly and explicitly informs the Dardennes’ work. Levinas’s notion that “The face to face situation is thus an impossibility of denying, a negation of negation” (34–35) is a catalyst for the sublime moments that evolve and transform the trajectory of the brothers’ films and the relationships of their characters.

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991) is an interpretation and extension of Immanuel Kant’s “The Analytic of the Sublime” section of the *Critique of Judgment* (1987) that explores the different inner workings of the sublime. Lyotard’s examination of the dynamic sublime is especially useful in locating the sublime in the Dardennes’ works. Lyotard’s term “differend” is especially useful in pinpointing and revealing the sublime in that its definition is a clear description of the sublime’s emergence: “The differend is to be found at the heart of the sublime feeling: at the encounter of the two ‘absolutes’ equally ‘present’ to thought, the absolute whole when it conceives, the absolute measured when it presents.”

## L’ENFANT

*L’Enfant* reveals a new cinematic sublime through the Dardennes’ portrayals of waiting. The act of waiting changes the context, which changes the meaning of the act. The sublime here is characterized by a sudden, actual change or transformation that places the viewer and the characters in a different theatre of action. Something that was this, is suddenly that. Transition and coming to be, those processes of discovery, have potential power that is the sublime in *L’Enfant*. Through movement and act, the sublime emerges as an interaction of levels of existence, giving a new perspective to what was otherwise ordinary. This new perspective allows for the ordinary motion—waiting—to become a jumping-off point for transition and change. Waiting in *L’Enfant* changes from a passive movement that happens between expectations to an active reflection where, in Burke’s words, “Attitudes are the beginning of acts” (*Grammar* 236).

As with most of the Dardenne brothers’ work, *L’Enfant* explores the lives of characters living on the economic margins and navigating their existence with almost a minimal level of sustenance. The film takes place in the post-industrial town, Seraing, a few miles away from the Walloon city, Liège, a

“left-over space” that, for the Dardennes’ main characters, highlights the “crumpled corners of the city, the river bank or the left-over strips of the forest neighboring the roadway” (Dillet and Puri 370). *L’Enfant* features Bruno [Jérémie Renier], a young, free-wheeling, sometimes-homeless petty thief, and his girlfriend Sonia [Déborah Fraçois]. She has just returned from the hospital with her newborn son, Jimmy, to learn that Bruno has sublet their apartment for extra cash. When Sonia finally finds Bruno, he is in the middle of a petty theft setup and is disinterested and awkward even as he first meets his newborn son. Throughout the first third of the film, Bruno is all movement and hustle. Everything has a price with Bruno, who always makes himself available for the next hustle. As Jean-Pierre Dardenne explains, “He’s someone who doesn’t relate to other people—or when he does, it’s strictly on a utilitarian basis” (Sklar 20). In spite of Bruno’s ambivalence towards his child, the couple are playful and very much in love. Bruno is focused and engaged whether he frolics with Sonia, eats, or is in the middle of a hustle.

Later, impatient with waiting in line for Sonia to receive her social assistance check, Bruno decides to take newborn Jimmy for a stroll. While out, Bruno decides to take up an offer from one of his shady associates who is connected to a black-market baby enterprise; he sells his son for cash. Later, when a frantic Sonia asks Bruno where Jimmy is, Bruno responds casually, “I sold him.” Bruno tries to comfort a clearly distraught Sonia by the promising her, “We can always make another one.” Sonia then collapses and is subsequently hospitalized. It is the first in a series of shocks for Bruno during the course of the film that leads him to try to get his son back and make amends with Sonia.

Through Bruno’s constant motion and hustle, the Dardenne brothers have created a context where the act of waiting becomes altogether different, a place where, in Burke’s words, “a great variety of things otherwise discordant is promptly brought into unity to serve a common purpose” (*Grammar* 294). There are ten scenes in *L’Enfant* where Bruno is waiting. The repetition of waiting as a movement or action disrupts the repetition of Bruno’s motive of hustle, enabling him to gradually “tear down the walls of that sphere that encapsulates them to go outside” (Guanzini 29). This transition does not immediately happen since it seems to trickle in over a series of accumulative moments for Bruno. The first instance of waiting occurs in the aforementioned scene where Bruno is standing on line with Sonia to receive a social assistance check and grows restless in waiting. The impatience in that scene ironically creates the context for the remaining waiting scenes. The nine waiting scenes that follow all have the camera focused solely on Bruno in isolation with little to no dialogue. The scenes’ running times range from twenty-seconds to a full minute, allowing the viewer to watch and share the wait with Bruno in real time. In these moments, the viewer is given a proximity to Bruno’s circumstance and next plan of action.

The second waiting scene (Fig. 1) occurs on the tram transporting Bruno and Jimmy (the carriage is in the foreground) to the place where Jimmy will be sold. The tram is moving and Bruno is still, highlighting his seemingly casual indifference,

which juxtaposes what is actually beginning to happen. The Dardenne brothers seem to know that there is no identifiable reference point—for most people—about what the transaction of selling a baby looks like. It is part of the scene’s unfathomableness: it tries to identify an event never seen before. The other side of this unfathomableness is the actual act of selling Jimmy for money. The possibility still exists, at this point in the transaction, that Bruno can change his mind. It is one of the rare scenes, so far in the film, where we see Bruno not moving or actively hustling. This scene pauses that way of being.

The next pause/waiting scene (Fig. 2) happens while Bruno is pausing/waiting for the elevator to the adjoining rooms where the transaction will take place. Here, again, there is the possibility (a sustained hope) that this moment of pause for Bruno could also be a moment where his mind wanders and he changes his mind. The elevator never arrives. Bruno then decides to carry Jimmy up the stairs into one of the rooms. There is another moment here, going up the stairs, where the contact between father and son signifies an emphatic paternal gentleness that is willful and instinctual and at the same time sadly temporal and fleeting. In the next moment (Fig. 3), Bruno carefully lays Jimmy down on his jacket, leaves the room to go into a different room across the hall, and then waits for the transaction to proceed, effectively abandoning Jimmy. This last act of waiting during the transaction is extraordinary in that the camera stays fixed on Bruno for a minute (Figs. 4–6); it is motionless Bruno listens to the sounds of Jimmy being carried away—the footsteps going up then down the stairs and the baby cooing. The moment is Deleuzian: “It is like two presents which ceaselessly intersect, one of which is always arriving and the other established” (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 106). As if to emphasize the extraordinary duality of the moment, the Dardenne brothers shoot Bruno in a dim but clearly visible, half-dark, half-light frame. This image is a visual differend that, in Lyotard’s words, “mediatizes (dynamically speaking) the light and the dark. A clear space is drawn upon a dark contrast” (187). This scene also has a literary quality in that the viewer wonders about Bruno’s thoughts. The viewer is now quite literally trying to get inside Bruno’s head, like imagining and interpreting a narrative from a book. This very act by the viewer refers in part to the ethics of Levinas where “Thought begins with the possibility of conceiving of a freedom exterior to my own... [meaning that] the condition of thought is a moral consciousness” (17). Indeed, this act of imagining a freedom outside the viewer’s own is an empathetic response in imagining Bruno’s freedom from responsibility. At the same time the viewer can hope that this emphatic awareness can also take hold in Bruno’s consciousness to better inform his decisions, enabling him to think outside of his own needs and impulses. Burke remarks on a similar scene in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*: “The communication between the inner and outer is conveyed by the contrasting of two situations: his listening outside the door before the murder; and his listening outside the door to the sounds without, just after the murder” (*Grammar* 308). The motion that is heard outside Bruno’s room starkly contrasts



Fig. 1 | On the tram, 29:21, Les Film du Fleuve, 2005.



Fig. 4 | Waiting, 35:02, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 2 | By the elevator, 31:12, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 5 | And waiting, 35:30, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 3 | Jimmy abandoned, 34:06, LFF, 2005



Fig. 6 | More waiting, 36:02, LFF, 2005.

Bruno's motionless stance inside the room. We see that Bruno is a different man who, accordingly, will now experience the world differently. As Burke points out, "It is the Grammar of rebirth which involves a moment wherein some motivating principle is experienced that had not been experienced before" (*Grammar* 306). Rebirth here means a fundamental change of consciousness, and for Bruno, each existential strike, however small and incremental, will be painful.

The second half of *L'Enfant* follows Bruno trying to retrieve his son and making amends with Sonia. Each scene that isolates

Bruno in waiting holds a potential that Bruno will discover some motivating principle that will give him a sense of ethical clarity. As mentioned earlier, each scene of waiting is punctuated by a lack of dialogue, with ambient sounds taking the place of spoken words and their meanings. It is as if the viewer is also waiting, expecting some outward sign of Bruno changing in some way or internalizing a sense of right and wrong. Bruno gets his son back and returns him to Sonia. She still wants nothing to do with Bruno and rebuffs him at every turn. Bruno sees the result of his misdeed, but does not feel its magnitude as if getting Jimmy



Fig. 7 | Steve apprehended, 1:22:40, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 8 | Bruno's burden, 1:24:39, LFF, 2005.

back, in Bruno's mind, is equal to a this-for-that transaction; it is a transaction that, when completed, like the repetition of all the other transactions in Bruno's life, becomes a punctuation mark before he move on to the next transaction. In Jean-Pierre Dardenne's words, "Bruno resonates with today's world because of his lightness; he lives in such lightness, with formidable liberty, where nothing has any importance. Everything has the same importance, which is the same as none ... he lives in the moment with no perspective" (Badt 66). Sonia, though, will not forgive him. What the viewer hopes to detect in Bruno during these scenes is explained by Burke: ethical baselines. Burke says they can be "established by the individual and external things or other people; since the individual learns to anticipate their attitude towards him. He thus, to a degree, becomes aware of himself in terms of them (the other). And his attitudes, being shaped by their attitudes as reflected in him, modify his ways of action" (*Grammar* 237). Each scene of waiting that follows in the film reveals Bruno, in terms of movement and act, as the same Bruno who is on the hustle: Bruno waiting outside a school for a young boy to plan a theft while eating a sandwich, or Bruno waiting by the river, splashing the water with a stick before his next scheme. But much has changed for Bruno even though it is hard to tell by his behaviour in these scenes. The hustle now involves paying back the black market baby traffickers for the money they lost in returning Jimmy. Bruno has to be the same hustler to satisfy the traffickers' debt.

The Dardenne brothers have set up the waiting scenes in a measured, repetitive way—they are continual shots focused

primarily on Bruno. The repetition of the act of waiting is a way of keeping the viewer's mind open so as to become familiar with Bruno's circumstance, rather than to judge or empathize with it. As mentioned earlier, the repetition of waiting also disrupts the repetition of Bruno's utilitarian hustle in terms of movement and act. The connection between pause, wait, and reflection has not quite formed in Bruno's consciousness, at least not in any visible way. The waiting scenes also add weight and contrast to the scenes where Bruno is not waiting and is in motion. There are a series of scenes where Bruno is pushing the empty baby stroller around the streets of Seraing, like an albatross on wheels; it is a constant reminder of Jimmy's absence and Bruno's misjudgment and also as a physical impediment that slows him down and disrupts his daily routine. These moments lead to the film's last two waiting scenes, which contain sublime moments that seem inevitable and surprising in their clarity of transformation and transition. Burke would refer to such an event as "The mystic moment, the stage of revelation after which all is felt to be different" (*Grammar* 305).

In an effort to pay off his debt, Bruno sets out to snatch a random purse, aided by his young teenage accomplice, Steve. Soon after snatching the purse in broad daylight, Bruno and the boy are riding on a scooter, pursued by the police. Bruno and Steve ditch the scooter and hide in an icy river. The young boy, in the water for a few minutes, is close to freezing to death and nearly drowns. Bruno does his best to comfort Steve, carrying him to a dry place and trying to warm his extremities. While going back to get the scooter, Bruno watches the police



Fig. 9 | Waiting to see Steve, 1:25:40–1:26:08, LFF, 2005.



apprehend Steve and take him away (Fig. 7). For the next few minutes, the camera follows Bruno pushing the now inoperable scooter along the roadway sidewalks of Seraing (Fig. 8). The action refers to earlier scenes when Bruno pushes the empty baby carriage. This burdensome action is inexplicable until he reaches a police precinct. Bruno goes into the precinct and waits (Fig. 9). Again, the camera is only trained on Bruno. What had looked like blankness and ambivalence in Bruno's demeanor now looks like (or is coming to look like) focus and introspection. Bruno is then led to Steve, his young accomplice, and the arresting officer. Bruno confesses to the officer in front of Steve, "It was me." (Fig. 10). This three-word confession becomes sublime for it brings forth a new motivating principle, a selflessness, that Bruno has unexpectedly internalized. "It was me" can also refer to Bruno's acknowledgment of selling his newborn son days earlier. Paradoxically, saying the words, "It was me" can be translated in light of their transformative power and Bruno's experiences as, "This is me."

The last waiting scene occurs while Sonia visits Bruno in the common visiting room of the prison (Fig. 11). There is a look on Sonia's face that seems to understand that Bruno is, at this moment, a different man, that being in prison was Bruno's choice and a selfless act. Sonia asks Bruno if he would like some coffee, a simple, casual, and generous gesture (Fig. 12). Bruno responds yes. While Sonia is retrieving the coffee, the camera once again focuses on Bruno waiting (Fig. 13). Similar to the previous waiting scenes, Bruno's expression is inscrutable. Through witnessing Bruno's past movements and acts and their effects and repercussions, we can have a better idea of what he could be thinking. Sonia comes back with the coffee. Bruno asks how their son Jimmy is doing. Sonia replies "He's well." As Bruno is about to drink the coffee, it seems as though he feels the weight of his misdeeds, so he breaks down and weeps (Fig. 14). Bruno and Sonia's sparse dialogue contains a shared history and now a shared selflessness, for it seems that Sonia has accepted Bruno for who he is now and for who he once was. Burke speaks to this moment: "When a person is thinking hard and long about something, in purely internal dialogue, words addressed to him by another seem to happen twice, as though there were a first and second hearing. The words being heard first by an outer self who heard them as words, and then by an inner self who heard them as meaning" (*Grammar* 239). In hearing himself ask about Jimmy and then hearing Sonia's response, the words and their meanings have revealed to Bruno what he was and what he has now become. The waiting has now become an act (Fig. 15).

Through the Dardenne brothers' cinematic lens, the idea of the sublime is extended into the movement, act, and purpose of transition and transformation. The sublime moments in *L'Enfant* are, in themselves, the culmination of the acts of waiting that create a context—a theatre of action—for the sublime to emerge. The common act of waiting in *L'Enfant* eventually becomes a motive for change and transformation. In Bruno's case, we have witnessed an expansion of his perspective that is the cumulative



Fig. 10 | The confession, 1:28:12, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 11 | Prison visit, 1:28:12, LFF, 2005.

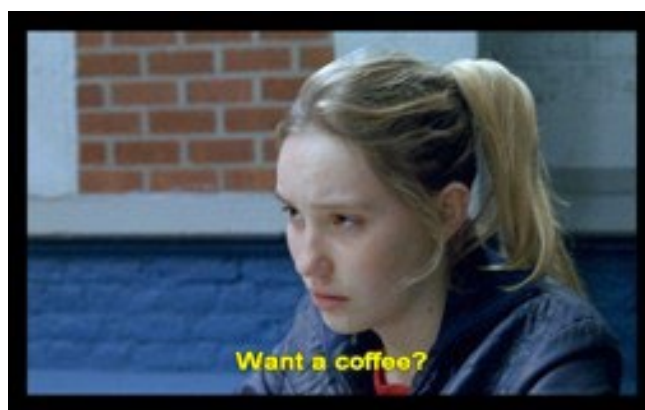


Fig. 12 | Sonia's gesture, 1:29:17, LFF, 2005.

***In hearing himself ask about Jimmy and then hearing Sonia's response, the words and their meanings have revealed to Bruno what he was and what he has now become. The waiting has now become an act .***



Fig. 13 | Waiting as introspection, 1:29:41–1:30:06, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 14 | Bruno hearing Sonia's response 1:30:40, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 15 | The waiting becomes an act, 1:31:18, LFF, 2005.

effect from the repetition of waiting. Upon reflection, we can see that the earlier waiting scenes were moments of pause that had more weight than Bruno was apt or able to show. This realization relates to Deleuze's idea that "The situation must permeate the character deeply and continuously, and on the other hand the character who is thus permeated must burst into action, at discontinuous intervals" (*Cinema I* 155). The power of the sublime in *L'Enfant* can be felt in its anticipatory build-up, in its actual present emergence, and finally in its aftermath of effect and reflection. The power is also felt in "the conditions of a legitimate forgiveness that are realized only in a society of beings totally present to one another, in an intimate society; a society of beings who have chosen one another" (Levinas 19).

### LE GAMIN AU VÉLO

In *Le Gamin au Vélo* the Dardennes frame the actions of cycling (accelerating) and climbing (ascending) through a revisiting of place. The streets, back alleys, and forest paths of Seraing are literal avenues of transport for mundane movements that morph into sublime actions. "The spaces that they occupy reflect their marginalized position in society but they also have an expressivity and autonomy that goes beyond this ... [E]xisting in the realm of the unseen and the unheard, it is only the gesture that can reveal deeper truths" (Dillet and Puri 371). The revisited settings are like shape-shifting containers for the movements that shape and change their meanings. Cyril's (Thomas Doret) pedaling is an action in Burke's sense of embodying a motive, and it is also highly physiological and mechanical. I will refer to

it as a "movement action" which anticipates, triggers, and extends the sublime moments in the film. Jean-Pierre Dardenne further remarks, "The organization of locations obliges the kid's character to keep going back to the same places, to keep making the same trips" (Bonnard 5). In making the same trips to the same places, we also see the same movements and actions repeated that seem to match the settings—a site-specific set of movement actions. Each action and relevant setting are repeated and revisited in a way to create a history of act and place that can be referenced later in the film. The slight variance of repeated movement actions and the variance of revisits to place, creates a familiar visual context, a theatre of movement and action, for a succession of the sublime moments to surface in last twenty minutes of the film. It can be argued that the last twenty minutes are one extended sublime moment. Three such moments will be discussed in this analysis.

*Le Gamin au Vélo* begins with the main character in the middle of a problem or crisis. Cyril is a restless and anxious eleven-year-old boy who has been placed in a children's group home by his single, ambivalent, drifting father, Guy (Jérémy Renier). We first see Cyril in the children's home on the phone trying to get a hold of his father whose number is out of order. After he has tried the number several times, the counselors try to take the phone away from Cyril, who bites them (a recurring action in the film), then runs out and away from the building before being caught and restrained right before he scales the surrounding fence. This sequence happens in the first three minutes. The next day Cyril sneaks out of school and goes to his

father's apartment to retrieve his bicycle, a gift from his father and finds that the apartment is abandoned. There is no sign of his father or the bicycle. His counselors try to catch up to him. While dodging and evading his counselors, Cyril gains entry into a medical waiting room in the same building. Cyril grabs hold of a woman sitting in the waiting room and falls into her lap. "That's ok, he can hold me, just not so tight," she says. The woman, Samantha (Cecile de France), a hairdresser, is struck by Cyril's desperation. The next day Samantha gets the bike back for Cyril. She had to buy it back because Cyril's father sold it to help make ends meet. Cyril does not believe that. When Samantha leaves the orphanage, Cyril follows her on his bike and asks her if she could adopt him on the weekends. Samantha says that she will think about it and eventually agrees, the first of many selfless acts she performs on behalf of Cyril's well-being during the course of the film.

"The utterance of the question begins in the silence of the quest," Burke contends. He is emphasizing the visceral purposes of the body as condition for subsequent symbolic purposes (*Grammar* 303). And, in fact, the first half of the *Le Gamin au Vélo* is structured by a series of painful questions that emerge for Cyril as he desperately, viscerally, seeks his father on his bicycle: Where is my father? Why has he abandoned me? What will happen when I find him? In this way, it seems that the utterance of Cyril's questions and his quest are happening simultaneously. Cyril's quest is silent in terms of his agility, resilience, and resourcefulness, qualities all connected to his mobility, a series of unspoken movement actions. On his bike, Cyril is constantly in motion, apparently free with a sense of control and independence. The last question that Cyril might ask himself is: what do I do after finding out the answer to the previous questions? This scenario for the viewer speaks to Burke's idea about "immensities" which can also be applied to *L'Enfant*, for "The sublime resides in moral and intellectual immensities" (*Grammar* 325). The moral immensities in most of the Dardennes' works are springboards or triggers for the intellectual immensities. The intellectual immensities are the how and why grapplings of facing the moral immensities. The sublime is the in-between unsteadily residing between the two.

During Cyril's quest we get our first glimpse of the repeated movement actions and the spaces that will be revisited through the course of the film. Samantha, who is now a part-time guardian, tries to help Cyril find his father. As she becomes more a part

of Cyril's life, her motives, like Cyril's, seem closely aligned with her movement actions. Of Samantha's motives Luc Dardenne remarks, "Kindness has a mysterious aspect ... kindness isn't rational" (Bonnard 4). In this regard, Samantha is selfless and her unexplained kindness is what Cyril needs but has a hard time appreciating or acknowledging during his obsession with reconnecting with his father. In a way, she serendipitously becomes an answer to Cyril's ever-shifting needs and priorities, embodying Levinas's mantra, "In the call, I am sent to the other person whom that appeal signifies" (132).

The answers to where, why, and what come to Cyril simultaneously in two scenes that happen in succession. The first scene occurs when, after finally contacting his father, Cyril and Samantha schedule a day and time to meet with him, only to be stood up. Seeing the effect of another disappointment for Cyril, Samantha consoles Cyril and decides to help him further. Later in the same day, they track down Guy while he worked at a restaurant prepping food. Here is where part of the setting triangle begins. Samantha and Cyril have to go through an alley to a side door in order to meet Guy. After repeated unanswered knocks on the door Cyril decides to scale the wall, with Samantha's help, to see his father (Fig. 16). When Guy sees his son he asks, "What are you doing here?" Cyril ignores this foreboding sign. Cyril goes into the restaurant, but Guy is awkward and uncomfortable. Guy tries to give excuses about his negligence, but Cyril forgives him, twice. Cyril asks, "When were you going to come for me?" Guy does not answer directly, but then says, "It's hard for me." Guy then says he cannot see Cyril until he earns enough money to rent an apartment. Guy is getting the restaurant ready to open and allows Cyril to help him stir the sauce; it is a brief, touching father-and-son exchange (Fig. 17). Cyril tries to extend the stay (he could stir the sauce all day) but Guy insists that he should go and that he will try to see him again. As they leave Guy tells Samantha, privately, that he cannot take care of Cyril and he cannot see him again. Samantha quickly learns that Cyril does not yet know this and walks Cyril back to his father to hear it from his own mouth. The father finally confesses to Cyril a plain and clear rejection, and shuts the door. Devastated, Cyril tries to hurt himself on the ride back—Samantha stops the car and holds him, at once soothing, consoling, and empathetic (Fig. 18). This scene has answered all of Cyril's questions concerning his father, ending with his father's rejection.



Fig. 16 | Cyril finding his dad (Guy), 28:26–28:38, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 17** | Cyril helping his dad prepare, 32:36–33:07, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 18** | Samantha consoling Cyril, 37:51, LFF, 2011.

Cyril's precarious social position—and his father's—are central to the film's structure and aesthetics. As his father casts Cyril off, so modern Europe casts off millions like Cyril's father. Cyril's movement/actions represent a formal technique for responding to Europe's cruelty. "Not only do these films open up spaces of resistance within what are otherwise the discarded remnants of modern cities, the cinematic space of the films itself becomes a space of alterity and resistance" (Dillet and Puri 378). The streets of Seraing become a medium through which Cyril's alterity can be expressed and agentic. We see him on his bike on the streets traveling between the triangle of places—the

restaurant, Samantha's apartment, and the woods—that Cyril revisits many times during his quest. The places increasingly gather meaning each time they are revisited. The next day Cyril is on his bicycle again, with scratches on his face from trying to hurt himself in Samantha's car the day before. Like Bruno, Cyril is inscrutable as we try to imagine what he might be thinking (Fig. 19). The places that Cyril revisits creates a context for his movement actions, implying possibilities of meaning, and giving us an idea of what Cyril could be thinking, however indeterminate it may be. Cyril then stops to watch a pick-up soccer game and is asked to play. Cyril agrees but goes to Samantha's first to

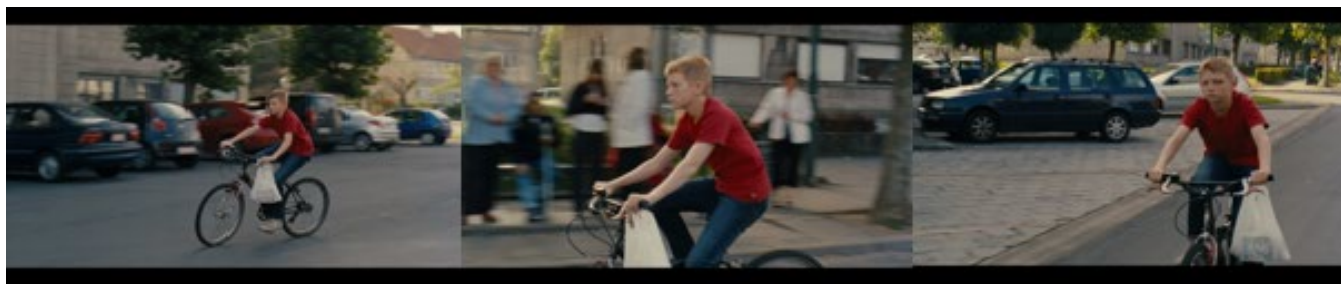


Fig. 19 | Cyril riding in the streets of Seraing, 38:00–38:20, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 20 | Bike confrontation, 42:07, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 21 | Getting the bike back, 42:21, LFF, 2011.

drop off some items he bought at the grocery store. When Cyril leaves, he notices a young boy (Romain Clavareau) riding off on his bike (again) and gives chase. The boy he chases pauses in spots, taunting Cyril to keep chasing. The pursuit ends in the woods next to a tree house with Cyril confronting the boy then wrestling him to the ground (Fig. 20). Suddenly, a group of boys spill out the tree house to cheer on and encourage the fight (Fig. 21), which is soon broken up by Wes the leader, who is noticeably older than the rest of his crew (Egon Di Mateo). It turns out that Wes orchestrated the whole adventure to lure Cyril into their gang and criminal mischief. Wes nicknames Cyril “Pitbull” for his biting prowess and insists that the others in his gang give him respect (Fig. 22). This interaction is followed by Wes inviting Cyril to his house to play video games. Cyril gradually ingratiates himself with the other boy. Samantha finds out about this connection and reprimands Cyril while warning Wes to stay away. Both gestures of concern prove ineffective as Wes and Cyril meet once again the following day. Wes plans, demonstrates, and choreographs a mugging and robbery of a local newsstand owner (Fabrizio Rongione) later that day after dark, setting up the first sublime moment of the film.

“The brothers Dardenne are absolutely captured by the question of what the body is capable of by the ensemble of the infinite possible interactions and connections among bodies,” says Isabella Guanzini, and I would add among places (19). The physicality of Cyril is central on a number of occasions. As mentioned earlier, Cyril’s agility is a resource, a corporeal where-withal that variously helps him seek, dodge, elude, find out,



Fig. 22 | Acceptance, 43:11, LFF, 2011.

return to, earn temporary relief. Samantha’s consoling comes to mind as well, especially in relation to interactions with other characters. These corporeal skills sustain Cyril through attacks and rejections. Aside from cycling and climbing, Cyril can also kick, bite, tackle, trip, juke and stab when he feels the instinctual need and is in a way feral in his strategies of self-preservation. Deleuze remarks, “What is called action, strictly speaking, is the delayed reaction of the center indetermination” (*Cinema I* 64). Indetermination for Cyril in this context is uncertainty and rejection, as well as the feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and panic that ensue. In Cyril’s case, the reaction is not delayed so much as it is an echo of indetermination. As mentioned earlier, Cyril’s movement actions are directly connected to his thoughts and



Fig. 23 | Over the wall, 1:06:16, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 24 | Outside looking in, 1:06:47, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 25 | Cyril's offer, 1:07:39, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 26 | Over the wall again, 1:07:52–1:07:58, LFF, 2011.

motives. Each time Cyril accelerates on his bicycle or climbs a tree or fence, his movement is directly connected to a desired outcome becoming an act. Cyril's motion speaks directly to what he is thinking and feeling and is on full display during the three sublime moments in the last scenes of the film. He tries to answer the last question of his quest: what do you do when your father rejects you again?

The setup for the first sublime moment occurs at night. Sensing that something is not right, Samantha plans a night at the movies for Cyril with one of his friends. Cyril wants no part of it, having already planned to do the nighttime robbery with Wes. When Cyril decides to leave, Samantha tries to stop him and a struggle ensues. Cyril bites then cuts Samantha on the arm with a pair of scissors and escapes on his bike into the night. Samantha is clearly shaken and starts to quietly weep. We then see Cyril attacking the newsstand owner and his son, Martin (Valentin Jacob), with a baseball bat, beating them unconscious and robbing them. Wes quickly picks Cyril up from the scene and drives off. In the car, Wes yells at Cyril and berates him for possibly being identified and threatens to kill Cyril if he speaks of his connection to the robbery. Wes gives the stolen money back to Cyril then drops him off alone on the desolate outskirts of Seraing. Cyril then makes his way to his father's restaurant where the first sublime moment begins to unfold. Cyril approaches the side alley to the restaurant and uses his bicycle to scale the wall as he did earlier in the film with Samantha's help (Fig. 23). Once over the wall, Cyril sees his father at work, very much like the earlier visit when Cyril helped stir the sauce (Fig. 24), only this time Cyril is outside looking in. When Guy comes out Cyril tells him that he has money for him (Fig. 25), presumably remembering that Guy told him he needed money in order to take Cyril back into his care. There is a pause and Guy is beckoned to go back into the restaurant to complete an order. When he returns to the back door, he tells Cyril he needs to go and that he does not want to be arrested. Guy then hoists Cyril onto the top the wall and tells him to jump, throwing the money over the wall as well (Fig. 26). When Cyril lands, Guy asks about his condition—an odd thing to ask after rejecting him—and then tells Cyril to never return. About the wall, Jean Pierre Dardenne adds, "Hence the wall. We make physical cinema: we love having our characters go through doors or walls" (Bonnard 6). For Cyril, the wall



Fig. 27 | Second rejection, 1:08:00–1:08:22, LFF, 2011.

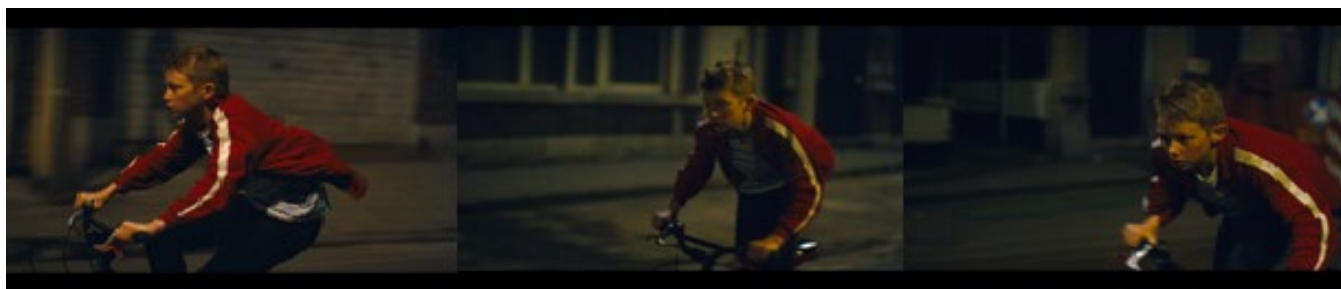


Fig. 28 | Freedom in abandonment, 1:08:27–1:09:41, LFF, 2011.

is a barrier that he has now scaled with the aid of Samantha, Guy, his bike, and finally on his own when he jumps. For Cyril, the landing is the beginning and an ending, and the next sublime moment, which immediately follows, feels like an extension of the first sublime moment wherein time and place exists between a beginning and an ending (Fig. 27).

Richard Rushton describes the next scene of Cyril on his bike: “So we see him riding his bike as he is riding to nowhere, fleeing ... and there is a sense of stepping back, of reaching a crossroads, of recoiling and reflecting, of becoming detached and seeing things in a new light ... [A]ll of these conflicting thoughts and feelings, a simultaneous embodiment and reflectiveness, immersion and specularity, are at play in this shot” (315). As Rushton understands it, this extended shot, almost a scene unto itself, is like most of the Dardenne images that come to accumulate and swirl within a sublime moment: like the scene of Bruno waiting for Jimmy to be taken away in the next room in *L’Enfant*, the literal series of moving images, in addition to their resonating implications, is a visual differend, a marker and a boundary. This series of images comes in one shot immediately after Cyril is rejected by his father for a second and seemingly final time. Because the shot occurs at night on a long dark stretch of street in Seraing with Cyril pedaling furiously on his bike, there is a strange in-and-out-of-light visualization that makes Cyril look like he is free falling or floating in outer space—it is a kind of horrifying freedom in abandonment (Fig. 28). This lighting effect is both a visual differend and the psychological one; it looks and feels unresolved. To Rushton’s point, this long shot shows Cyril still pedaling with a severe focus that implies a sense of control and doggedness. The fact that Cyril can still pedal and accelerate speaks to his resiliency. The pedaling for Cyril also seems to be a way of trying to think things through;



Fig. 29 | Samantha’s acceptance, 1:11:18, LFF, 2011.

like the other scenes containing pedaling, this scene has an unspoken component, like a hidden motive or purpose. Paul Schrader remarks, “Duration can peel back the social veneer of an activity. Duration can invoke the wholly other” (6).

Cyril’s final stopping place is outside Samantha’s hair salon where she has been waiting up for him. Samantha tells Cyril that the police were looking for him regarding the robbery. It is soon after this moment that Cyril apologizes for cutting Samantha’s arm and, without missing a beat, he tells her that he wants her to be his guardian. Standing face-to-face with Cyril, Samantha consents (Fig. 29). This image and gesture embody Levinas’s crucial observation: “Where the uprightiness of the face that asks for me finally reveals fully both its defenseless exposure and its very facing” (131).

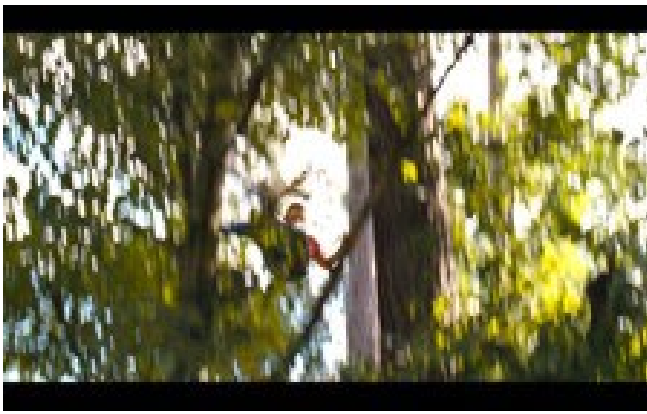
The next day is a bit of a reprieve for Cyril, though he nears the final sublime moment of the film. Samantha and Cyril go through a formal legal process with the newsstand owner, with



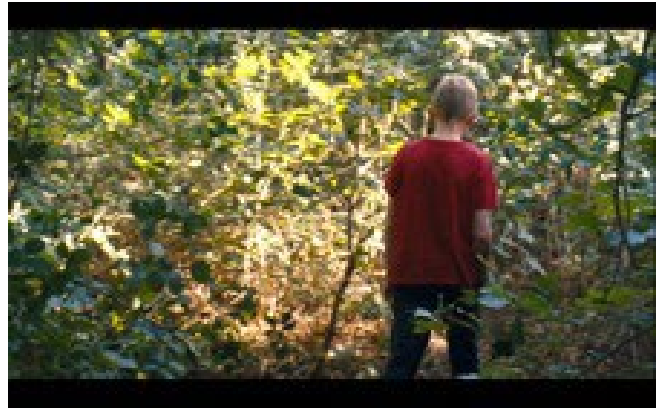
**Fig. 30** | The climb, 1:14:15, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 33** | Up, 1:22:15, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 31** | The fall, 1:19:22, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 34** | And out, 1:22:40, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 32** | Down, 1:19:52, LFF, 2011.

Samantha agreeing to pay for the damages caused by the robbery in return for Cyril's apology. Martin, who was also assaulted, is absent, since he refuses to accept Cyril's apology. We then see Samantha and Cyril riding their bikes along the Meuse riverbanks before stopping for a quick picnic. Samantha makes plans for an early evening barbecue. Later Samantha sends Cyril out to buy charcoal for the barbecue, setting the scene for the film's climax.

After picking up the charcoal, Cyril encounters the newsstand owner filling his car with gas. Martin exits the car, then runs

after Cyril and knocks him off his bike. Cyril fights him off and runs into the woods to the same place where he first encountered Wes. The agile Cyril evades Martin by quickly climbing a tree that is connected to the tree house (Fig. 30). Martin starts throwing rocks at Cyril, then hits him with a well-aimed throw, and Cyril falls (Fig. 31). The stunned Martin rushes to where Cyril is lying, motionless (Fig. 32). The father soon arrives and they both assume Cyril to be dead, going so far as to make up an alibi of how Cyril fell on his own, freeing them of any blame. A few moments later Cyril's phone rings; presumably, it is Samantha wondering where he is, and suddenly Cyril comes to and sits up (Fig. 33). This moment feels transcendent in the way that Cyril seems to come back from the dead. When the father and son get over their momentary shock, the father tells Cyril he suffered a great fall and asks him if they should call an ambulance. Cyril declines the offer with a simple "No" as if to imply "we're even" and then slowly ambles out of the woods (Fig. 34). The casual back-and-forth is quite breathtaking, and it is almost holy as if Cyril has been anointed after a miracle. The sublime moment occurs when Cyril picks up the charcoal and climbs onto his bike, heading back, apparently, to Samantha (Fig. 35). As Cyril rides away, noticeably shaky and wobbly, the Dardennes capture the moment in one shot lasting twenty-four seconds, having a profound effect, as Schrader observes: "Time allows the





Fig. 35 | Riding home, 1:23:13–1:23:37, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 36 | Riding and ascending, 1:23:33–1:23:37, LFF, 2011.

viewer to imbue the image with associations, even contradictory ones” (5). In this twenty-second shot, many contradictory associations come into play: we can marvel at what Cyril has just survived, we can worry if he will make it home, we can wonder if Samantha will ask Cyril about the cuts and scrapes and the

for possibility. The fact that a hope or a sense of a beginning can happen in the endings of *L’Enfant* and *Le Gamin au Vélo* is quite an achievement and sublime (and almost comical) in itself considering the particulars of how each film ends. In *L’Enfant*, Bruno and Sonia reconcile after Bruno is in jail for admitting to

***Cyril’s movement actions are directly connected to his thoughts and motives. Each time Cyril accelerates on his bicycle or climbs a tree or fence, his movement is directly connected to a desired outcome becoming an act.***

dirt on his shirt, and we would wonder how would he answer, and if would she believe him. All of these associations conjure the past, present, and future as it concerns Cyril as he slowly accelerates on his bike, ascending up a slight incline out of frame (Fig 36). Lyotard adds that the sublime “must be represented as affecting thought in a way that is double in fear and exaltation” (157). In the last moments of the film, both movement actions come together, acceleration (cycling) and ascension (climbing), thereby propelling Cyril out of our view towards an unknown hope, something that can only be imagined.

The Dardenne brothers are expert at telling stories whose narrative endings leave open possibilities for future change. “A faculty which is inherent in action like an ever present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (*Arendt* 246). Faculty can be another word

selling their infant son Jimmy. In *Le Gamin au Vélo*, we see Cyril wobbling away on his bicycle after being unconscious for several minutes from a nearly fatal fall from a tree. The hope found in these selected films is the residue of strife, anxiety, hardship, and catastrophe endured. Lyotard remarks, “Various sublime feelings, whatever their particularities may be, are all of a ‘strenuous’ courageous type” (152). Lyotard’s discourse can be applied to both of the films discussed in this essay, but they especially ring true for *Le Gamin au Vélo*. The strenuous courage in *Le Gamin au Vélo* arises out the dire intensity of Cyril’s circumstance: being abandoned by his father and then trying to recognize and accept what can occupy the father’s place. Cyril finding his father and attempting a reunification, and only to be rejected twice shows the limits of courage. It is a resource that emerges (or not) in times of adversity, and it is a quality that can only

be acknowledged and identified as such in its after effects. For Cyril, courage comes from and through his movement actions, guiding him through an existential, metaphysical labyrinth before he accepts Samantha's love.

## CONCLUSION

A moment can only be sublime if we are aware of a boundary that, suddenly, fails to bind us. Tarkovsky describes this condition in the context of film: "What you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction but a pointer to something stretching beyond the frame (to infinity)" (Tarkovsky 117). Locating the sublime moments in the Dardennes' works reveals the ideas and writings of Burke, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Levinas that stretch beyond the frame, making these films compelling, original, and worthy of analysis. As Deleuze points out, "A very slight difference in the action, or between two actions, leads to a very great distance between two situations" (*Cinema I* 162); I would add, a very slight difference in movement, or between two movements, leads to a distance between a bare movement and a moment that becomes an act containing purpose and motive. The reception of movement actions in the context of the Dardennes' films leads to a disruption of the repetition and seeming inevitability of their characters' circumstances. The sublime is the disruption. In the disruption there is a hang in the balance uncertainty, a suspension that is disorienting and expansive, a differend (in Lyotard's words) that does not really resolve as much as it darts, penetrates, shoots through, and lingers.

The marginalized and distressed characters of *L'Enfant* and *Le Gamin au Vélo* navigate the broken world of Seraing—a world characterized as a "left-over space" that "is not a neutral space, but the result of a social fabric" (Dillet and Puri 376)—that reflects their marginalized existence and contextualizes their different acts of waiting. Waiting in both films is a coping and navigational mechanism. In *L'Enfant*, waiting is a passive act that hovers between blankness, pause, and reflection. In *Le Gamin au Vélo*, the act of climbing and biking is an active form of waiting in its mutually restless and anticipatory hopefulness and anxiety.

Both films explore the effects and repercussions of abandonment concerning father-son relationships, scenarios that are sublime in themselves and, in the Dardennes' hands, inherently dynamic in their possibilities. In *L'Enfant*, a young petty thief sells his new born son, only to try to get him back again. In *Le Gamin au Vélo*, a young boy tries to locate his father who abandoned him at a nearby orphanage. Each scenario is possible, unbearable, and unpredictable. They are scenarios that mirror reality but are hard to fathom and recognize because they are not familiar. The Dardenne brothers do not present easily identifiable visual tropes to make the comprehension of these scenes immediate or straightforward. Instead, they unleash a profusion of associative clusters of movements and acts that keep the viewer as unbalanced and disoriented as the main characters they watch. In turn, this motif creates a degree of empathy

***In L'Enfant, Bruno and Sonia reconcile after Bruno is in jail for admitting to selling their infant son Jimmy. In Le Gamin au Vélo, we see Cyril wobbling away on his bicycle after being unconscious for several minutes from a nearly fatal fall from a tree. The hope found in these selected films is the residue of strife, anxiety, hardship, and catastrophe endured.***

and shared unfamiliarity that the viewers and characters experience simultaneously—a shared reflection. Moreover, these films complement each other in examining issues concerning complex ratios of, in Burke's sense, act, scene, and purpose, while avoiding judgment and empty moralizing. But like the characters and viewers of their films, the Dardennes try, as stated by Luc Dardenne, to go beyond their original intentions and motives. Sometimes, this motive takes the form of trying to read the characters, or trying to imagine what they may be thinking. Other times, the viewer could be trying to imagine what they might do in that particular situation. In Luc Dardenne's words "It is up to film to bring spectators in contact with the world around them ... I have a great faith in the amelioration of the human being" (Badt 71). ■

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# Professor Marston and the Wonder Women

## Adaptation Choices and Their Effects on Alternative Lifestyles and Acceptance

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### ABSTRACT

Jill Lepore tells the story of Wonder Woman creator William Moulton Marston in her book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. His story is an interesting tale about a “charismatic” man who adored women (Lepore 109). The film, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, directed by Angela Robinson, was released in 2017. In this article, I argue that in the film, *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, director Angela Robinson makes directorial choices that highlight positive aspects of alternative lifestyles, as well as showing support for the LGBTQ+ community. I discuss how her choices change the representation of the historical figures portrayed in Jill Lepore’s book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* to elicit empathy for the characters in the film and their lifestyle choices. She accomplishes this with specific elements of mise-en-scène such as lighting, framing, costuming, and acting styles.

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JILL LEPORE TELLS the story of Wonder Woman creator William Moulton Marston in her book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. Marston was a noted psychologist who taught at several universities before becoming Wonder Woman’s creator. Marston’s story is an interesting tale about a “charismatic” man who adored women (109). According to his DC comic editor, Sheldon Mayer, Marston “had a rather strange appreciation of women. One was never enough” (118). His love of women is evidenced by the relationships he had with three women: Sadie Elizabeth Holloway (5-6), Olive Byrne (57), and Marjorie Wilkes Huntley (109). Neighbours would have found these living arrangements “abnormal” (147). In fact, Les Daniels believes they “may have accounted for some of Moulton’s career changes” (31). Throughout his life, Marston had many schemes, most of which ended up failing. The lie detector was one of Marston’s proudest creations; it was even mentioned in his obituary (259). Wonder Woman was created to represent Marston’s idea of feminism for the world. In 2017, a film version of Marston’s story, directed by Angela Robinson, was released.

This paper argues that both the character of Wonder Woman and director Angela Robinson’s adaptation choices in her film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017) shed

light on the positive aspects of alternative lifestyles and support for the LGBTQ+ community, eliciting both sympathy and empathy from the audience. For example, how the film highlights the relationship between Holloway (Rebecca Hall) and Byrne (Bella Heathcote) challenges the concept of Holloway as a scorned or bitter wife, or Marston (Luke Evans) as a philandering husband. The fact that Byrne and Holloway continued to live together even after Marston died, and were, in fact, “inseparable,” promotes the acceptance of love between same sex couples (Lepore 273). According to Associate Professor of Communication Andrew R. Spieldenner in his article “Altered Egos: Gay Men Reading Across Gender in Wonder Woman,” the character of Wonder Woman is popular among gay men (235). He states, “Comic books are major sites for representing and transforming cultural images” (236). Spieldenner means that Wonder Woman’s status as a comic book hero can help transform the current culture of negative or hostile feelings towards members of the LGBTQ+ community because she represents acceptance of “the same sex society of her upbringing, the constant emphasis of tolerance and defending the victimized, her search for her own place in the world, and her penchant for transformation” (238). Building on this beloved



**Fig. 1** | Marston writing the first intertitle, *Professor Marston*, 09:35. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

icon and her creator, film adaptations like Robinson's will help open the door for future directors and adaptations to continue presenting positive representations of members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Wonder Woman was strong, independent, and fought for justice. She was also created to spread Marston's idea of feminism and emotional theories to the world. In *Wonder Woman Unbound: The Curious History of the World's Most Famous Heroine*, comic book historian Tim Hanley describes Marston's emotional theory, called Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Compliance (DISC) theory, as the idea that there are four types of emotions and that men are usually dominant while women are usually submissive (15). On the other hand, according to author Geoffrey C. Bunn in "The Lie Detector, 'Wonder Woman' and Liberty: The Life and Work of William Moulton Marston," Marston believed women and men could either be dominant or submissive, and gender does not determine which behaviour a person adopted (104).

Robinson strategically frames her film using intertitles to transition between different sections of the film that align with the components of Marston's DISC theory (Fig. 1). Intriguingly, the sections do not exactly follow the acronym's natural order. Instead, the sections are dominance, inducement, compliance, and then submission (or DICS). Robinson uses this order of transitions because each one introduces a section of the film that revolves around that specific component.

After a short introduction, the first transition screen shows a hand (Marston's) writing the word "dominance" on a chalkboard (9:29). In the film, Marston uses inducement to define dominance, stating that to "seduce somebody to your way of thinking, dominating them so completely that what you want is what they want and they love giving it to you and that ... is the key to life, to love, to happiness, to peace" (15:27). This section of the film focuses on establishing the relationship between Marston,

***It takes a lot of strength to admit being wrong as well as professing love for another person, especially if that relationship may be judged by outsiders.***

Holloway, and Byrne. The scenes that follow include several elements of dominance, including Holloway telling Byrne "not to fuck [her] husband" (08:43), the Marstons secretly watching Byrne spank a pledge at the "baby party" (19:41), and Marston telling Holloway that "the world can't stop [them]" from loving more than one person (37:19). These scenes highlight instances of dominance between the major characters, connecting the film to Marston's theory.

The section of the film that focuses on inducement begins with another hand (Marston's again) writing "inducement" on a chalkboard and focuses on Holloway and Marston persuading Byrne to join their relationship. Important scenes in this section related to inducement include Holloway telling Byrne she would be willing to have sex (38:26), using the lie detector to determine who loves whom amongst Holloway, Marston, and Byrne (44:07), and the sex scene between the three main characters (46:51). Each scene involves characters using inducement in some way to get what they want.

Compliance is the next section of the film and highlights the negative experiences of the three main characters. When the hand writes the word on the chalkboard, it writes harshly, as if in anger (56:23). This perceived anger is appropriate because this section deals with the reaction of others about their polyamorous relationship. Scenes include having to find new jobs because of being fired for their alternative relationship (55:08), the rope-binding scene at Charles Guyette's (J. J. Field) store (1:08:45), the angry confrontation with the neighbours (1:24:01), and forcing Byrne to leave (1:28:14). According to

Marston, the subjects he interviewed during his DISC research believed that “the word ‘compliance’ seems to suggest . . . that the subject is moving himself at the dictates of a superior force,” which could mean that they do not have a choice but to do something they do not want to do (Marston 108). Therefore, several of the scenes in this section show characters dealing with negative aspects of their relationships.

The last section is submission and it importantly signifies Holloway’s submission to a polyamorous lifestyle. In contrast to the harsh writing of compliance, the word “submission” is written softly and slowly, even sensually (1:40:58). The softness of the writing could also be related to the happiness that comes from submission, according to Marston’s logic. It is also the only time the word written on the chalkboard is underlined, underscoring the significance of submission for Marston and this love story. This intertitle appears right after Holloway promises to love Byrne for all of her days (1:40:34). Once Holloway submits to Byrne, at the encouragement of Marston himself, she has submitted to a loving authority. This possibility of a polyamorous relationship generating a happy, peaceful life is borne out by the longevity of the two women’s relationship.

While Wonder Woman was useful for spreading Marston’s ideals about feminism, she also became an icon for alternative lifestyles. For example, she has become a major icon within the gay community, demonstrating yet another way that Marston’s creation of Wonder Woman showed that alternative lifestyles should be embraced, rather than shunned or hidden. Spieldenner argues that comic book readers can identify with their heroes, even across the gender spectrum (235). Spieldenner also states, “Comic characters come to represent relations to other ideas” (238). This assertion means Wonder Woman could represent gay identification as well as other LGBTQ+ identifications.

Gay men identify specific characteristics with Wonder Woman. These main characteristics are “same-sex society, fighting intolerance, finding one’s place and thriving in transformation” (Spieldenner 235). Wonder Woman exemplifies each of these qualities throughout her comics. For Wonder Woman, Paradise Island is the same-sex society she was born into. This community is “compelling for homosexuals” (Spieldenner 239). Members of the gay community, or any alternative community, seek the safety of communities or neighbourhoods where others of their lifestyle live. In other words, they find their own Paradise Island. Throughout the comics, Wonder Woman is in a constant battle for tolerance and protecting victims. Although she has always battled against the Nazis, more recently her “defence of the victimized has expanded to include myriad issues,” such as “young girl self-esteem clubs, self-defence classes for women, and women’s shelters” (240). While these recent examples are for women, there is a strong possibility Wonder Woman will be reaching out to the LGBTQ+ community in the future. Phil Jimenez, the comics creator who has worked on Wonder Woman since 2000, is openly gay, and his experiences and ideals appear in the comics as Marston’s

had (Spieldenner 237). Another way that Wonder Woman advances the goals Spieldenner outlines is by trying to assimilate to the world outside of Amazon, navigating relationships, both friendly and romantic, and facing old enemies. Wonder Woman is always trying to find her place, which is similar to “‘coming out’ for gay men” (240-241). Finally, transformation is a major part of Wonder Woman’s life. Not only does she transform between the superhero, Wonder Woman, and her alter ego, Diana Prince, but several times she has been “total[ly] recreat[ed] in the comics” (241).

These transformations help “gay reader[s] . . . manag[e] a shifting identity” (241)<sup>1</sup>. The appeal of transformation involves the acceptance of being more than what society expects of a person.

In light of the defining characteristics of same-sex society (tolerance, defense, community, and transformation), members of the gay community also identify with Wonder Woman’s secret identity (236). Many gay men also hide their true identities when faced with cultural stigmas. This revelation can “alter relationships” (241). In independent cultural studies scholar Ellen Kirkpatrick’s article “TransFormers: ‘Identity’ Compromised,” she asserts Wonder Woman’s “transforming spin visualizes the identity moves performed by this character” (125). By transitioning between her alter ego Diana Prince and her Amazonian Princess through spinning, Wonder Woman changes her identity, which parallels the movement between genders or identities, an action that speaks to gay readers. The combination of these characteristics, Marston’s ideals of strong women, BDSM, and polyamory, makes Wonder Woman the perfect vehicle to encourage acceptance of alternative lifestyle choices. Robinson demonstrates this possibility for acceptance in her film.

While Lepore’s book tells the story of Marston and his life with the women he loved, it does not focus much on the relationships between the women; but in the film adaptation, writer and director Robinson highlights the relationship between the two women as a major theme, thereby altering Marston’s larger-than-life personality through the use of different elements of mise-en-scène and cinematography. The film tells the story of Marston, Holloway, Byrne, and the creation and controversy of Wonder Woman. Robinson became fascinated with the Marstons after reading a book by Daniels and spent eight years researching the family before writing the film. She shares her interest in the polyamory of the main characters, but she particularly found the relationship between the two women compelling. She states that she was “especially struck by the fact that Elizabeth and Olive lived together for 38 years after Marston died” (Reisman). Several reviewers of the movie also agree that Robinson positively portrays the Marstons’ lifestyle.

According to freelance writer, critic, and film historian Pamela Hutchinson, not only is *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* “a love story and a very touching one primarily and most passionately between the two women,” but it also serves as “a dignified plea for the acceptance of non-heterosexual love, [and] unorthodox households” (75). In her article “Kinks! Pleasures!



**Fig. 2** | Holloway in her typical clothing of pants and a button-down shirt, *Professor Marston*, 03:05. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

Female Power!” American film critic Manohla Dargis considers the movie “a reminder that once upon a time people had sexual appetites and relationships as complex as those of today (or of 18<sup>th</sup>-century France)” and that Robinson presents Marston’s complex story “with wit, sympathy and economy” (Dargis). This sympathy is evidenced by the fact that the film was nominated for several awards including the Dorian Award for Unsung Film of the Year from the Society of LGBTQ Entertainment Critics (GALEC) and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Award for Outstanding Film (Wide Release). Robinson tells Riesman she “[is] really happy that it’s being embraced by the poly community and that some people are telling [her] it’s the only positive depiction they’ve seen” (Riesman). The reason for this acceptance lies in the adaptation choices Robinson makes in the film.

Holloway and Byrne have different personalities in the book and movie. In Lepore’s book, Holloway is described as “bold” and “unflinching” (18), and someone who “always wanted everything” (21). Byrne was active in college; she participated in plays, campus clubs, sports and joined a sorority (107). Both women believed in “free love” (Lepore 105). Holloway was the breadwinner and Byrne the caretaker (145). Byrne wanted the truth of their lives to remain hidden and “kept secret” (147). In the movie, the personalities are clearly delineated, and sometimes reversed, through the use of elements of *mise-en-scène* including costuming and acting style, which helpfully reveal the personalities of the film’s female leads.

The actors who portray Holloway and Byrne use specific acting styles that highlight Holloway and Byrne’s unique personalities. The acting style of actor Hall represents the “bold” and “unflinching” Holloway (Lepore 18). Specifically, she displays these traits through strong, coarse dialogue, created by the screenwriter Angela Robinson. Within the first 12 minutes, Hall begins using this abrasive language in lines, such as

***At this moment, the audience can see the connection become more between Holloway and Byrne and less between all three.***

“cocksuckers,” “load of horseshit,” and even the word “fuck” (or its variation) a minimum of four times (03:58–11:58). Using such strong language creates a sense of masculinity in Holloway. On the other hand, the acting style of Heathcote, who plays Byrne, uses little coarse language. In fact, she is more soft-spoken. The first time she has a conversation with Holloway, her voice has an almost child-like, nervous quality to it (08:12). Other examples of Byrne being more soft-spoken than Holloway includes the moment she asks Marston how he felt watching her spank her sorority pledge (22:17) as well as during the picnic scene when she asks Holloway about meeting and falling in love with Marston (27:01). These examples reinforce Byrne’s strong sense of femininity, the opposite of Holloway’s masculinity.

Another element of *mise-en-scène*, costuming, provides further evidence of how the personalities of Holloway and Byrne deviate from descriptions found in the book. In the film, Byrne is shown wearing softer, flowing items of clothing, while Holloway is dressed in more structured attire. The first time the audience sees Holloway, she is wearing pants and a button-down shirt opened at the collar (03:05) (Fig. 2).

Even though she sometimes wears skirts, they are more streamlined and body conforming rather than free-flowing. The first time we see Byrne in the film, she is wearing a soft, button-down sweater with maroon buttons and skirt of light, unassuming colours (02:52) (Fig. 3).

She wears similar types and colours of clothing throughout the film. Although there are times Byrne wears shirts or dresses of bolder colours like green and blue, Holloway tends



Fig. 3 | Byrne's more feminine style of clothing, *Professor Marston*, 02:52. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

to wear them more often. Choosing to apply specific materials and tones adds a second layer to Holloway's masculinity and Byrne's femininity.

In the book, however, the pictures of Holloway and Byrne, with one exception, show the women in typical dresses of the time. There is not one moment that shows either one wearing pants. According to Lepore, although when Holloway was young, she "liked to pretend she was a boy" (13) and when she was older, she had a bob haircut, which was still considered radical at the time, she continued to wear outfits expected for the time (19). While Byrne also wears the common dress for the time period in the majority of the pictures throughout the book, there is one from her senior year at Tufts University that shows her androgynous features (109). That year she cut her hair short and dressed like a boy. This makeover does not happen at all in the film. Because the women convey looks that are both masculine and feminine, they are associated with a transitional process which connects them to secret identity characteristics that members of the gay community identify with Wonder Woman.

In Lepore's book, the snippets of information about Byrne exemplify her as a strong but secretive woman. At the beginning of Robinson's film, she does not appear to be a strong woman, but by the end of the film, she transforms into one. Unlike the book, the film shows that she is not the one who demands secrecy; instead, Holloway does that. Two scenes in the film highlight Byrne's transformation into a strong woman. The first is during the rope-binding class at Guyette's lingerie store (1:06:18). As Guyette explains and demonstrates the process of binding a woman with rope, Marston, Holloway, and Byrne watch. Holloway looks skeptical or even a bit disgusted. At the end of the demonstration, Guyette holds out the rope towards the trio and asks if they want to try. Byrne accepts. As Marston starts to tie Byrne's wrists together, Holloway tells her not to let

him do that. Byrne simply responds, "I don't mind" (1:08:43). Holloway leaves and Marston goes after her. While they are arguing, Byrne transforms into Wonder Woman, putting on a tiara and a bustier similar to the one Wonder Woman wears in the comics (1:11:23) (Fig. 4).

The costume's similarities to Wonder Woman's outfit shows Byrne's feminine strength and her ability to make decisions about her own sexual activities, thereby amplifying her autonomy.

While the scene in Guyette's lingerie shop shows Byrne's strength, it also demonstrates Holloway's strength. Even though Holloway leaves in disgust and argues with Marston about his proclivities outside of the room while Byrne makes her transition, she comes back. When Marston and Holloway walk back into the room, they see Byrne standing on the stage backlit so the front of her is in shadow. As Byrne steps forward out of the shadows into the light, Holloway walks toward her and then joins her on stage. After making sure that Byrne consents, Holloway ties her arms and wraps the rope around her chest. Once finished with the task, Holloway points the end of the rope in Marston's direction as she stands centre frame with Byrne to the right and Marston to the left (1:14:43). This scene represents the director's desire to demonstrate the strength of consent, or how a woman can make her own sexual choices without judgment. In the DVD's supplementary featurette, "A Dynamic Trio: The Minds Behind a Feminist Icon," Robinson indicates that she sees Byrne "as the strongest character in the movie" (05:20) and that she wanted to show how Byrne "really knew what she was doing and decided to do it" (06:29). Also, Byrne's stepping out of the shadow and into the light is symbolically similar to a gay person coming out, yet another example of the gay icon that Wonder Woman has become. Additionally, the scene where Holloway drops to her knees to ask Byrne's forgiveness and express her love for Byrne is one more example of Holloway's





**Fig. 4** | Byrne transforming into Wonder Woman, *Professor Marston*, 1:10:48. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

strength (1:38:17) (Fig. 5). It takes a lot of strength to admit being wrong as well as professing love for another person, especially if that relationship may be judged by outsiders.

The second scene that portrays Byrne's transformation comes near the end of the movie. After a neighbour walks in on Marston, Holloway, and Byrne practicing what they learned at Guyette's, Holloway orders Byrne to leave as she does not want the children to deal with bullying; Byrne moves out with her two sons (1:27:54). Upon being diagnosed with cancer, Marston requests that Byrne come to the hospital to help reconcile Holloway and Byrne by forcing Holloway to "beg for forgiveness" (1:37:37). Throughout this scene, Marston and Holloway face Byrne. Marston is slightly off-centre to the right, while Holloway is slightly off-centre to the left. When Holloway finally begs on her knees, Byrne simply replies, "No" (1:37:37). When Holloway says she cannot live without Byrne, Holloway is framed slightly centred left, and Byrne's left shoulder is blurred out in the right side of the frame; Marston is not in the shot at all. Several times during the exchange between Holloway and Byrne, Marston is blurry while the women are in focus. Once Holloway admits she cannot live without Byrne, Byrne negotiates for a new stove, babysitting time, and, her most important request, for Holloway "to love [her] till the end of [her] days" (1:40:28). As Byrne makes that request, she looks only at Holloway, appearing to not include Marston in that request. This moment not only supports Byrne's transition into a strong woman, but the long, uninterrupted gazes coupled with edging Marston out of the scene further reinforce the strong relationship between the two women.

The film establishes the budding romance between the two women early through an acting style involving long gazes. When Marston and Holloway take Byrne to a speakeasy to convince her to join their research team, it becomes apparent that there is a romantic attachment building between the two

### ***Robinson's adaptation choices represent her fascination with the women's relationship separate from Marston.***

women (13:07). The professor and his wife sit across from Byrne and, as the three discuss the challenges for women in education, and "penis envy," increasingly longer gazes are shared between Holloway and Byrne (13:30). In this scene, Marston is framed slightly behind Holloway, who is centred in the frame while leaning towards Byrne. Holloway's face is lit while Marston, to the right of the frame, is more in shadow. There is an intense moment of long gazes exchanged between Holloway and Byrne during the sorority initiation baby party (21:00). Unbeknownst to her sorority sisters, Byrne has hidden Marston and Holloway upstairs on a landing so they can observe for psychological purposes. Byrne must discipline her pledge by spanking her with a paddle, for the most part keeping her eyes shut. Upstairs, Marston and Holloway, previously amused, become enthralled by the activities. Holloway becomes aroused and Marston begins to touch her. As Holloway is looking down, Byrne suddenly opens her eyes and fixates on Holloway. The longer they stare at each other, the harder Byrne spansks her pledge, demonstrating that she is aroused as well. When Byrne is directed to stop, Holloway pushes Marston's hand away. At this moment, the audience can see the connection between Holloway and Byrne intensify. By contrast, in the book, Holloway does not attend the sorority party. Robinson's adaptation choices represent her fascination with the women's relationship as one that develops as separate from Marston.

Altering the personality of Marston in the film provides the opportunity for him to be more likeable, and less of a womanizer. In the book, Marston is described as "tall and devilishly



**Fig. 5** | Marston encouraging Holloway to beg Byrne's forgiveness, *Professor Marston*, 1:38:14. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

handsome” (5) and “awesomely cocky” (39). Hanley describes him as “a bit of a huckster” (11). He was opinionated and high-handed at times. He did not like the name Sadie or Elizabeth, so he called Holloway “Betty,” which she did not like, but allowed anyway (44). In the film, Marston calls Holloway “Elizabeth” instead of Betty (03:56). In the book, it is Marston who gives Holloway an ultimatum regarding Byrne: “Either Olive Byrne could live with them or he would leave her” (118). In the movie, Holloway gives permission to Marston to be with Byrne, but then temporarily reverses her decision citing professional jealousy as opposed to sexual jealousy (11:34). Lepore further describes his later years: “he was big and he was loud and he drank and he thundered when he was angry” (180). Evans does not portray Marston in this way, although there are moments in the film when Evans does use physicality to evoke Marston’s character. Evans walks with a conventionally strong and masculine gait as Marston. He stands tall and there is an occasional swagger as he moves around. Also, Marston’s personality is revealed when, in response to being told to “reduce the kink by fifty to sixty percent” he instead increases it (1:19:54) (Fig. 6).

When a comic book illustrator (Tom Kemp) says to him, “Doc, there’s like twice as much bondage stuff in here,” Marston arrogantly replies, “Three times. I tripled it” (1:19:58). Evans’s physical acting style highlights the larger-than-life personality of Marston while still demanding sympathy for him from his audience.

In addition to his physical acting style, Evans adjusts Marston’s tone of voice to make him appear more supportive and less aggressive. When Holloway rants about not getting a PhD from Harvard, Marston tries to placate her, but it only aggravates her more (03:59). She yells and uses foul language while he tries to calm her down with a gentle voice by saying, “[y]ou are very brilliant” and “smarter than me” (04:59). Even

when he confronts Holloway about telling Byrne “[o]h, and if you fuck my husband, I’ll kill you,” he raises his voice, but just slightly for emphasis (8:47). When he chases after Holloway during the binding scene at Guyette’s and when he argues with Holloway in the hospital at the end of the film, Evans yells in a hushed manner (1:35:51). The only time he truly raises his voice is at the end of the movie when he wants Holloway to admit her feelings for Byrne and he wants Byrne to come back to their family. He yells, “I am not speaking for you. I am speaking for myself!” when Holloway interrupts him after he politely asks her not to (1:35:55). Given that Marston was known for being selfish and “big” and “loud” and “thunder[ing] when he was angry,” this behaviour is out of sync with the historical Marston (Lepore 180). Evans’s acting style alters Marston’s personality enough that in her film review, Hutchinson describes him as “boyishly earnest in his enthusiasms” (75). The historical Marston would never be described in this manner as he was more forceful than earnest. Without this softening, sympathy for Marston can potentially diminish.

Evans’s acting style establishes Marston as a person with strong affection for both Holloway and Byrne. Several times in the movie, Marston’s character defers to Holloway both physically and emotionally. After noticing his interest in Byrne, Holloway gives him permission to be with Byrne. Evans effectively uses his tone of voice and body language to convey surprise, giving Marston’s character a softness regarding Holloway that is not always evident in the book. In the final hospital scene, Marston mediates the reconciliation between Holloway and Byrne. It is unlikely that the historical Marston would have committed the same action as he tended to think about his needs before others’ needs. In the documentary “Crucial Point of View: Directing Professor Marston and the Wonder Women,” Robinson states she “wanted to explor[e] aspects of Marston’s misogyny within the movie” (03:20). Evans’s portrayal of



**Fig. 6** | Marston increasing amount of kink in his comic, *Professor Marston*, 1:20:03. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

Marston, while showing some character flaws, lacks the misogyny evident in Lepore's book. Making Marston less selfish with regards to the women in his life removes the stigma surrounding his polyamory and places the focus on the relationship choices made by all three involved (instead of by a single person).

During the rope-binding class, Robinson makes an interesting adaptation choice that completely relegates Marston to the outside of Holloway and Byrne's relationship by having Holloway be the one that binds Byrne instead of Marston (1:06:18). The first person Marston has an affair with, Marjorie Wilkes Huntley, was into bondage, and she could have introduced him to that lifestyle (Lepore 56). While writing the Wonder Woman comics, Marston "describe[s] scenes of bondage in careful, intimate detail, with utmost precision" (234). Presumably, only someone familiar with bondage would be able to be so specific. Given Marston's personality and fixation with DISC theory, Marston would most likely have been the one to bind Byrne, not Holloway. Robinson's decision makes Holloway and Byrne the main couple in the scene, changing an established threesome to a couple.

The film's protagonists demonstrate different levels of participation in BDSM as it relates to Marston's DISC theory. The D in both acronyms stands for dominance (Hanley 15). While in real life, Marston would have seemingly been the dominant participant in this poly relationship, in the film Holloway is the dominant one. During the rope-binding lesson, Marston chases after Holloway when she runs out (1:09:06). However, according to American academic Lewis Call, sexual power is switchable, and therefore, a dominant could also be submissive (28). In the film, Marston is both dominant to Byrne and submissive to Holloway as evidenced by his interactions with Holloway when he defers to her time and again. For example, she is the one to give him permission to be with Byrne. Also, during the reconciliation scene near the end of the film, Marston

***Framing, another film technique, and the editing technique of shot/reverse shot strongly connect the three main characters in the film and their relationship with each other.***

looks at Holloway and says, "You cannot dominate all the time" (1:37:49). Meanwhile, Holloway is clearly dominant towards Byrne. When Holloway follows Byrne to the gym, she will not let Byrne kiss her until she decides (46:36), and it is Holloway who invites Marston to join her and Byrne in their first sexual encounter (47:59). Also, the scene depicting their first encounter ends with Marston lying on the stage with Byrne straddling him and Holloway standing with a guiding hand on Byrne (50:37) (Fig. 7).

Byrne is mostly submissive. During the rope-binding lesson, Byrne chooses to have the rope tied around her, prompting Guyette, the store owner, to comment on her being "the submissive" (1:09:06). However, it is interesting to note that she is the one who binds Marston's wrists that first time. This dynamic could have evolved because she is also dominant, or it could be because Marston, as the dominant, told her, the submissive, to bind his wrists.

Another significant element of mise-en-scène in the film can be found in the props like the rope. The use of the rope in the binding lesson and throughout the Wonder Woman comics is tied to the B in BDSM: bondage. It connects to Marston's DISC theory through acts of inducement and submission. Someone could induce a person to participate in bondage and a submissive can regularly submit to bondage. There are three instances where bondage takes place in the film. The first instance happens during the initial sexual encounter when Byrne wraps a scarf



Fig. 7 | Holloway, Byrne, and Marston's first sexual encounter, *Professor Marston*, 50:37. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

around Marston's hands (50:06), the second instance occurs during the binding lesson in Guyette's store (1:12:30), and the last one during the Marston's sexual roleplaying where Byrne ties together Marston and Holloway (1:22:03). In the comics, the rope—Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth—could also be used for inducement, especially the times it is used to compel someone to be honest. The lie detector could also be seen as an inducement device functioning in a similar manner to the rope. It gets tied around the person's chest and they answer questions that show whether or not they may be telling the truth. This connection is evidenced in the scene where the three main characters reveal their feelings for each other through the use of the lie detector.

In addition to acting style and props, the *mise-en-scène* element of lighting effectively adds tonal qualities to respective scenes. A group of scenes that emotionally connect Holloway, Marston, and Byrne are lit in a similar fashion and include the lie detector that Marston created (Fig. 8). The lighting techniques used during these scenes highlight the emotional tone. When the lie detector machine is not being used on Holloway, Byrne, or Marston during emotional moments, the lighting is normal. The first time the audience sees the lie detector sitting in the school lab, there is a bright, light colour to the scene using natural light shining through the office windows (07:54). It is the same when Marston, Holloway, and Byrne are putting the detector together and testing it (24:24). The first time they use it on each other, however, the lighting is darker, almost an orange or sepia colour from the lamp's artificial light (29:07).

This lighting decision creates a sense of intimacy because it softens the outlines of each person in the scene. The area behind the actors is shrouded in black. In this scene, Holloway asks Marston some questions, which he answers with truth and with lies. The machine does not work as they hope. It is Byrne who suggests the questions need to have weight, prompting Holloway

to ask Marston about who he loves, including herself and Byrne. During this scene, the audience discovers that Byrne is in love with Holloway. The second time that the lie detector is administered by Marston is to determine how Holloway feels towards Byrne (35:36), and the third time is when Byrne is interrogated about what she wants are lit in the same fashion (43:12). The effect of this lighting choice emphasizes the emotional connection between Marston, Holloway, and Byrne.

Another scene that uses lighting to demonstrate the emotional connections between the three main characters occurs towards the end of the film. Marston is lying in the hospital bed, centre frame (1:33:35). He looks up toward the hallway door and sees a blurry, backlit shadowy figure. As the shadow moves closer and loses its blurriness, the figure separates and becomes two, Byrne and Holloway. This event clearly exemplifies exactly what Holloway and Byrne mean to Marston. In the film, Marston describes Holloway and Byrne. Of Byrne he says, "she is beautiful, guileless, and pure of heart," while he describes Holloway as "brilliant, ferocious, hilarious, and a grade-A bitch" (36:15). For Marston, Holloway and Byrne together make "the perfect woman" (*Professor* 36:23). The use of lighting and cinematography in this scene underscores Marston's sentiment regarding the two women he loves.

The sepia tone of lighting appears not only in scenes between the main characters, but between members of the family. Marston's son Donn (Christopher Paul Richards as Chris Richards) gets into a fight at school because kids are "telling lies about" the threesome (1:23:45). This hostility prompts a confrontation between the Marstons and their neighbours. After this altercation, Marston talks with his son in the bedroom. The scene is backlit by a tableside lamp with Donn lying in bed more clearly lit than Marston, who sits in shadow over his son to discuss how intellect is more important than physical reaction (1:26:15). Robinson often uses this lighting technique



**Fig. 8** | Testing the improved lie detector the first time, *Professor Marston*, 29:25. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

in her work. She also used it in romantic and dramatic scenes when she directed an episode of the television series *The L Word* (2004–2009), as well as an episode of *True Blood* (2008–2014) that she wrote and directed.

Framing, another film technique, and the editing technique of shot/reverse shot strongly connect the three main characters in the film while signifying their relationship with each other. In *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, Professor Emeritus of English and Cinema Studies Timothy Corrigan explains that framing “forms the borders [of the image] and contains the [mise-en-scène]” (63). Framing also determines the location of a character within a shot. This technique includes close-ups and medium shots. Close-ups focus on a character’s head, while medium shots show most, but not all, of a character’s body (29). Editing connects shots to create scenes in a film (67). Shot/reverse shots alternate between actors as if in a conversation (68). The framing and editing in this particular film exemplify the carousel-like lifestyle of Marston, Holloway, and Byrne, and also emphasize the love between all three.

Placing the characters in different sections of the frame give the person in the centre a place of authority. Usually, one member of the threesome would be centred with the other two on either side, left or right of centre (Fig. 9). Sometimes, two characters would be centred opposite a single character, who is also centred. Many times, the characters form a triangle in the camera frame. The first time is when Holloway and Marston take Byrne to the speakeasy (11:55). Holloway and Marston face Byrne, who is centred. As conversation takes place, shot/reverse shot editing shows the back-and-forth dialogue between the Marstons and Byrne. Sometimes when Holloway and Marston are on screen facing Byrne, Marston is centred, but for most of this scene, when Holloway and Marston are framed, Holloway is centred.

### **The adaptation choices she makes remove the stigma of a polyamorous relationship and bondage from the main characters of the film.**

At the end of the film, Marston stands in the centre of the frame as he gives a press conference about Wonder Woman. Holloway and Byrne stand together at the back of the hall. When they are on screen, they are in the centre of the frame. Using shot/reverse shots between Marston on stage and the women in the back communicates Marston’s feelings toward the women. Collectively, they are his Wonder Woman. Placing the two women standing together in the centre of the frame makes them a single entity, equal to Marston. Using this cinematography technique also highlights the polyamorous relationship between the three main characters.

People are often judged for their sexual orientation and have been for a long time. In *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, Josette Frank (Connie Britton), the person interviewing Marston throughout the film, states that “lesbianism is an emotional illness” (34:34). Since 1936, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been aware of and advocating for the rights of people who choose “non-conformative” lifestyles including polyamory, like the Marstons (“LGBT Rights”). While Lepore discusses all of the women in Marston’s life because she was fascinated by them, Robinson focuses on the two women he loved the most, Holloway and Byrne, who continued to live together even after Marston died (Lepore 273). This choice showcases a type of relationship that many fans of Wonder Woman would identify with, therefore eliciting sympathy from the audience.

In the documentary “Crucial Point of View: Directing Professor Marston and the Wonder Women,” Robinson states



**Fig. 9** | Holloway apologizes for offending Byrne, *Professor Marston*, 11:55. Opposite Field Pictures, 2017.

that she wants the audience to be invested in the relationship between the three main characters (0:36). She discusses the relevance of the film and how “it discusses love and tolerance” (05:57). Robinson relies on specific acting styles of the actors who portray the three main characters, as well as elements of mise-en-scène and cinematography techniques to tell the story of Marston, Holloway, and Byrne. The adaptation choices

Robinson makes remove the stigmas surrounding polyamorous relationships and bondage. After all, as Angela Robinson says, “love is love” (05:41). Ultimately, Robinson’s adaptation promotes the acceptance of alternative lifestyle choices as much as it evokes sympathy and empathy for the struggles that those people experience. ■

## NOTES

1 See Spieldenner 241 for examples of Wonder Woman's transformations.

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# Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*

## Horror, History, and Culture

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### ABSTRACT

This essay engages with Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, an anthology of four short films about ghosts, to foreground its uniqueness in the horror genre at the intersection of Japanese history and culture. For instance, hair is not merely an abject figure but is symbolic of the avenging spirit of a wronged woman. Similarly, the ears signify the musician and his nuanced skills and finesse, but more importantly, Kobayashi's personal history during the Second World War. The final episode, often dismissed by critics, is an affective invocation of the specter to indict the erasure of homosexuality in the official history of the male-centric Samurai world and, thereby, wartime Japan. Additionally, the second story of the *Yoko-onna*—the snow woman—deconstructs the angry ghost by positing it as the mindless victim of the militarist system by disavowing any personal reason for her murderous action. Thus, *Kwaidan* compellingly addresses the specters that haunt the Japanese psyche.

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MASAKI KOBAYASHI'S *Kwaidan* (*Kaidan* 1964) is a celebrated film in the Japanese sub-genre of horror and has attained a cult status due to its matte shots and experimental score by Toru Takemitsu. Art historians and film studies scholars, particularly Kobayashi specialist Prof. Stephen Prince, have taken keen interest in the film and analyzed its socio-cultural backdrop in detail. I share the cinephilia for the Japanese cinema of the 1950s and the 1960s, particularly the cinema of Kurosawa and Kobayashi. In this article, I engage with his seminal research and scholarship on Kobayashi, mainly through his detailed reading of *Kwaidan* in his monograph on Kobayashi: *A Dream of Resistance: The Cinema of Kobayashi Masaki* (2017). My objective is to add an (East) Asian dimension to his extraordinary work as a homage to him.

My analysis of *Kwaidan*, which is an anthology of four short films about ghosts, fills in the gaps regarding the specificity of the film at the intersection of Japanese history and culture by using horror as a critical lens. While elements of shared beliefs and customs do play a key role in *Kwaidan*, I focus on history and culture. For instance, hair is significant not only as an abject figure, but also as symbolic of the avenging spirit of a distinct woman, a common trope in Eastern cultures. Similarly, the ears are significant to the musician: they have to do with art, as detailed by scholars, but more importantly,

with Kobayashi's personal history during the Second World War. The final episode, often considered inferior to the other episodes by critics, is the most affective invocation of the specter to indict the erasure of homosexuality in the official history of the male-centric Samurai world, and, thereby, wartime Japan. Additionally, the second story of the *Yoko-onna*—the snow woman—deconstructs the angry ghost by positing it as the mindless victim of the militarist system by disavowing any personal reason for her murderous action. Through such a reading I want to draw attention to the cultural specificity of *Kwaidan* as a horror film to address the specters which haunt the Japanese psyche. For Derrida,

Cinema is an art of phantoms (*phantomachia*), a battle of phantoms. I think that's what the cinema's about, when it's not boring. It's the art of letting ghosts come back ... I believe that modern developments in technology and telecommunication, instead of diminishing the realm of ghosts ... enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us ... I say, "Long live the ghosts." ("The Science of Ghosts")

Nonetheless, as Murray Leeder astutely points out, one must necessarily think of cultural specificity when it comes to the ghosts:



The editors of the collection *The Victorian Supernatural* (2004: 12) observe that ‘for Derrida, history is structurally and necessarily haunted, but where is the supernatural to be found in this kind of haunting? The problem is that the ghost is only one in a series of deconstructive tropes.’ They argue that Derrida’s conception of the ghost, though evocative, is necessarily an ahistorical one. It is not sensitive to how the supernatural means different things in different cultures and at different times, and is not well suited to considerations of people’s actual experience of the supernatural. (9)

Similarly, Freud’s concept of the uncanny comes in handy to explain the “unfamiliar” within the familiar spaces of home in these ghost stories, but these narratives in *Kwaidan* also markedly differ in their invocation of ghosts as figures seeking justice rather than as evil forces/spirits, which is primarily an Eastern understanding of the supernatural, as exemplified by the figure of the *Yurei*. While Eurocentric approaches point to the understanding of the unfamiliar as an interruption or an aberration, which could be explained through the unraveling of the subconscious, *Kwaidan* asks us to accept the coexistence of the unfamiliar with the familiar and anticipate their intrusion when the balance of justice regarding traditional values like fidelity and trust/honesty is tampered with. I argue for how *Kwaidan* recalls the Buddhist *Dharmachakra* or the Wheel of Justice by its invocation of ghosts in varying forms through its carefully chosen anthology of short films.

The disregard of a loving and caring wife, the inattention to the words of a wife who is seductive but part of the system, and the experimental possibility of music to evoke nostalgia and simultaneously mourn loss/destruction point to *Kwaidan*’s investment in evoking the sensuous through sight and sound. Nonetheless, the use of visuals and sound in *Kwaidan* is in the service of the plot. The images and sounds enhance the element of suspense and shock through the backdrop/milieu and foreground the turbulence in human nature, both physical and moral, unlike in much horror cinema, where the psychological subsumes the moral/ethical.

Furthermore, the teacup invokes a past and simultaneously threatens the present and leads us through the eruption of transgressive desire to the rupture of the apparent calmness and control of heteropatriarchy. This representation undermines the notion of the teacup leading to a meditative state, as entrenched in the popular imaginary regarding the Eastern ritual of tea drinking. Most important, Kobayashi’s ornate sets, stylized framing and mise-en-scène combined with Toru Takemitsu’s experimental music point to their predilection for art and sensuousity to create depth and layers, delineate the uncanniness of the specter, and play with the spectre’s ephemeral quality through presence and absence rather than one of unswerving fearsomeness and devastation/conquest. The latter is common in much of Western cinema where the ghost is posited as a binary opposite

to be yielded to or challenged. Thus, my point of entry into *Kwaidan* is in reading it as a specter of history, particularly of WWII, and my departure is in analyzing it as an exemplar of the horror genre predicated on the specificity of culture that privileges the mythos surrounding ghosts. I am not analyzing the aesthetics of cinematography and music in *Kwaidan*; it is beyond the scope of this essay and eminent scholars like Prince have done this in depth. Rather, my focus is on reading *Kwaidan* as a quintessentially Japanese horror film. To this end, I am invested in exploring the specificity and significance of Japanese culture and the context of Kobayashi’s background to foreground the darkness surrounding history as it continues to haunt, and the resonance of myths in contemporary life. I am also trying to make a case for Eastern aesthetics, which I believe can enable us to understand the complexity of *Kwaidan* beyond its surface.

### KWAIDAN: THE CONTEXT

*Kwaidan*, literally ‘ghost stories’ in Japanese, is an anthology of four short films, mainly based on Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904), which provides the material for the narratives of the second, *Yuki-onna*, and the fourth short film, *Hoichi the Earless*, in the anthology. Whereas the first one, *The Black Hair*, draws from Hearn’s “The Reconciliation” in his collection *Shadowings* (1900), the fourth and the last one, “In a Cup of Tea,” draws from his other collection of short stories, *Kotto: Being Japanese Curoos with Sundry Cobwebs* (1902). *Kwaidan* was received well upon its release, winning the special jury prize at the Cannes film festival in 1965 and getting nominated for the academy award under the Best Foreign Language Film category. Kobayashi has spoken about how he “condensed the Oriental and Japanese beauty [he] learned from Professor Aizu in this film” (Prince 199):

Kobayashi’s intensive formalism emphasizes the surface features of design, and this emphasis, along with the attention devoted in the art direction to period architecture and visual art, represents a return by Kobayashi to the art- historical passions that he developed with Aizu Yaichi. ... The intensity and precision of the film’s design ... is not present to this degree in any earlier work ... especially the passion, intensity, and ambition ... As Hearn [who taught at the university] had been an inspiration for Aizu, Aizu was, in turn, for Kobayashi, and in crediting Hearn as the source for the film’s adaptation, Kobayashi honours Aizu by pointing to his mentor’s mentor. (Prince 198-205)

Lafcadio Hearn, who was born in Greece and lived in many countries including France, the West Indies, and the United States, spent the last fifteen years of his life in Japan. When Hearn taught at Waseda University, Aizu took classes in Greek literature and was inspired by Hearn to search for his own Japanese roots in their similarly ancient culture. Hearn himself



**Fig. 1** | The wife at the loom in Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, 00:25:59. Bungei, 1964.

***Kwaidan* asks us to accept the coexistence of the unfamiliar with the familiar and anticipate their intrusion when the balance of justice regarding traditional values like fidelity and trust/honesty is tampered with.**

loved Japanese culture, converted to Buddhism, and took a new name, Koizumi Yakumo, by which he is credited in *Kwaidan*. Hearn was a prolific writer and published several anthologies of stories from Japanese myths and folklore. Nevertheless, he was not well versed in the Japanese language and it was his wife who helped translate the stories for him. Unfortunately, his wife Setsuko Koizumi, belonging to a local family of Samurai lineage, is not credited as a collaborator. According to Prince, Hearn's search for the Japanese "golden age of artistic and cultural accomplishment" (205) led to his falling in love with Meiji-era Japan. All the stories in Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* have their provenance in Hearn's meticulous retelling of the Japanese folk literature of the past. Hearn was in New Orleans for a decade, where he honed his skills as a writer contributing to newspapers and magazines, as exemplified by *Creole Sketches* and *Lafcadio Hearn's America: Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials*. Such anthologies exemplify Hearn's investment in oral histories and folk tales and his keen observation of quotidian life—qualities undergirding the aesthetics of Aizu and Kobayashi, as refracted through Japanese art and culture, particularly in *Kwaidan*. The music composer Takemitsu Taru's similar investment in the Japanese past and experimentation with music and sound effects and his passion for reinventing the sounds of traditional instruments like the Shakuhachi and Biwa added another layer to Kobayashi's adaptation. Since Takemitsu Taru's music has been discussed in detail by most scholars I am referencing in this article, I am going to focus on what has not been addressed in the context of Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*—its cultural root and specificity. Otherwise *Kwaidan's* cult status is premised rightly on Kobayashi's ambitions and technical flourish, which does not fully explain its uniqueness as a singular horror film from the celluloid cinema of Japan of the last century.

## THE BLACK HAIR

The title, "The Black Hair," would immediately bring to mind Julia Kristeva's seminal theorization of abjection and hair as one of the primary and inescapable "abjects." But in the East, long hair marks the beauty of women and the honour of both women and men, particularly of the samurais in Japanese culture. Consider, for instance, the *chonmage* or the topknot haircut of the samurai in Japanese films, like Kobayashi's *Harakiri* (Seppuku 1962). However, as a *yūrei* or a ghost, the hair may have another dimension—of vendetta. Nonetheless, the revenge-seeking women focus on seeking justice, so that rather than foregrounding their monstrosity, their representation serves as a reminder of the injustice done to them when they were in their helpless human form as women, as Ellen Enderle elucidates regarding the *yūrei* ("The Art and Cultural Significance").

If a person dies tragically, a murder or suicide, or if they are possessed by an intense emotion such as passionate love or intense hate, jealousy, or profound sorrow upon the moment of death, their spirit is bound to the world of the living as a *yūrei*. These ghosts are akin to heat seeking missiles: they single-mindedly go after that which caused their suffering in life until the conflict is resolved, occasionally by religious ritual, but almost always by personal revenge or satisfaction. Most *yūrei* are female seemingly because women were thought to be more passionate and emotional, and less likely to die a 'good death' and achieve enlightenment as they were thought "morally and spiritually corrupt" from a Buddhist perspective (qtd in Enderle, *Ibid*). In my survey of this particular type of ghost, I have noticed that *yūrei* are usually people who were powerless in life, such as common women and poor servants. However, in the spirit form they possess the full agency and power to avenge wrongs and seek justice that they could not in life (*Ibid*).

The first short film in the *Kwaidan* anthology, "The Black Hair," opens with a Samurai (Rentaro Mikuni) who has now come on tough times and is without work in old Kyoto. We see his loving and caring wife (Michiyo Aratama) working hard by weaving on the loom (Fig. 1) in their home and promising to work even harder to keep their family and dignity intact.

However, the samurai has other plans and wants to leave her in search of greener pastures. He viciously turns down her pleas to stay by asking her to remarry and finds a wealthy woman for himself to offer him status and a job with the Governor. His new wife (Misako Watanabe), however, contrasts with his earlier wife. She is selfish and callous, indifferent, and belittling. He nostalgically remembers his ex-wife who used to continuously

work on the spinning wheels behind the loom at home, so that both can live happily. The second wife is furious when she comes to know of his designs to marry her for her wealth and his unabated longing for his ex-wife. When he is pressurized by her attendants to reconcile with his second wife, he refuses to budge by confessing his intention to return and make amends with his former wife whom he had wrongly deserted for selfish reasons. A few years pass before he can relieve himself from his service to the Governor. Thereafter we see him returning to his former home, which seems to be in a timeworn and desolate state with unruly weeds all around. However, upon entering he is happy to find his wife behind the loom calmly spinning the wheel. She seems, unlike the untidy entrance, to have not aged at all. She welcomes him and is in her usual demeanor and seems to be nonchalant and forgiving about his betrayal. She is large hearted, as in the past, and overlooks his apology and promises to make amends. When they are close, she relishes the proximity (Fig. 3).

Overcome by her beauty and benevolence, he gently strokes her long black hair when she rests her face on his chest as they talk about their lives. Then she prepares the bed with the striking red kimono as the cover—the red colour is ubiquitous in Japanese culture, as exemplified by their national flag and the gates of many Buddhist shrines. In this case, it is indicative of the protection and prosperity that the wife longed for. The lights go off and the samurai seems to be still caught up in his dreamy good fortune of having reunited with an angelic wife without much effort when he wakes up with a smile. But he is confused when he sees the house inside is as forlorn and desolate as the entrance when he arrived. Bewildered, he turns towards his wife who is lying covered by the kimono except for her long hair (Fig. 4).

As he pulls the kimono, he is shocked to know that he has been sleeping all night with her corpse—a skeleton with its long hair intact (Fig. 5). He is scared, and he runs through the house which is in ruins and tries to take cover by the wall (Fig. 6).

Meanwhile, the long black hair detaches itself from the skeleton and chases him to wreak vengeance. As he rapidly ages and deteriorates (Fig. 7), mirroring the overgrown weeds and the cracked walls inside the house, the black hair relentlessly follows him and attacks (Fig. 8). He desperately looks for an outlet to escape, but it chases him and encircles him, and flings him to the floor. Here it is pertinent to note the way Kobayashi's rendering differs from Hearn's story. As Stephen Prince notes, Hearn's "tale ends by gently invoking a Buddhist sense of life's impermanence, mutability, and transience," but Kobayashi's differs in his conclusion by focusing on the vengeful nature of the wife's spirit: "Her long black hair that he so loved becomes a demon spirit, pursuing him, winding around his face and neck, driving him insane" (209).

Here it is important for us to reflect on the cultural specificity of the ghost with black hair. Its dominance as a trope in the ghost stories from the East signify the ubiquity of injustice to women in the patriarchal and conservative milieu.



Fig. 2 | She grooms her long black hair, 00:15:28. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 3 | The forgiving and gracious wife with her apologetic samurai-husband, 00:30:17. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 4 | The shocked husband, 00:36:17. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 5 | The long black hair over the red kimono, 00:36:46. Bungei, 1964



Fig. 6 | The scared husband, 00:35:42. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 7 | The rapidly ageing and disoriented husband, 00:37:08. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 8 | The threatening/haunting long hair, 00:36:01. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 9 | The avenging and strangulating hair outside the house, 00:39:46. Bungei, 1964.

Reflecting on the spirits of the soldiers, who served the cause of the imperial ideology and who were later deified as Yasukuni Gods, Antony Klaus points to how they were “full of hatred and vengeance” since “their will to live was crushed” (127). According to [Masaji] Shimagawa, they became “in the very moment of their deaths ... bitterly hating, vengeful gods—onryogami [...], a specimen of deities whose cult flourished especially in the Heian period of Japanese history” (Klaus: Ibid). Therefore, the horror that Kobayashi alludes to is the dire poverty and loneliness of the abandoned wife at the point of her death through her vengeful spirit, which erupts despite the narrative’s apparent deification of her persona by portraying her, like the soldiers in the temple and their veneration of the King/nation, as a dutiful and forgiving wife toward her greedy and self-centred husband. Kobayashi’s past as a soldier/a reluctant recruit, who hated Japan’s predilection for war and conquest and its militarism, is reflexive of the goryo and its individualistic nature. According to Klaus,

The individual hatred and bitterness, the individual fear, do determine the fate of the soul in the afterlife. But in the case of the Yasukuni Shrine it is a fact that all of the souls of the war dead are enshrined as deities without regard to their former lives and the individual circumstances of their deaths. (128)

Thus, one could argue how Kobayashi, whose authorship is centred on his critique of the Japanese militarist past in his earlier works like *The Human Condition* (1959-61) and *Harakiri* (1962), finds in the vengeful ghost another acerbic form to create a space for interrogating the past and critiquing the violent and inhumane history of isolation and abandonment and the subsuming of the individual as common deities. In this regard, let us look at the two different endings of “The Black Hair”:

In the shortened version of the film released in overseas markets, the episode ends with the samurai’s efforts to escape from the house. The final image is a freeze-frame of the samurai’s deranged, prematurely aged face as it is reflected in a bucket of water. Kobayashi’s longer cut extends the action a bit. The samurai breaks out of the house only to be attacked outside by the demonic hair, with a final freeze-frame halting his frenzied efforts to fight it off [(Fig. 9)]. The freeze-frame suspends the time and space of the episode forever within the realm of the demonic, granting neither the viewer nor the character escape or deliverance from the forces of the spirit world that have gained entry to our own. (Prince 211)

But this ending has to be seen in its cultural context. The point of conclusion in any ghost story is deliberate and not accidental as it marks the way the aporia of the ghosts with material presence is addressed/resolved by the narrative. While scholars like Prince have preferred the shortened version where

the samurai's reflection in a bucket of water closes the film (Fig. 10), in the longer version, the black hair continuously chases him and forces him to climb the wall and get out of the house through the decrepit window only to find that he has no reprieve from the ghost even outside the house when, finally, he is overpowered, surrounded, and rendered immobile/frozen by the dynamic kinesis of its vengefulness. Just as the ending of the longer version recalls the myth of onryogami's uncontrollable and untameable vengefulness for the injustices of the past, the shorter ending of the reflection in water of the “deranged, prematurely aged” (Prince 211), face has its cultural moorings in the mythos surrounding the *yurei*.

Whether on the theatrical stage or the cinematic screen, depictions of popular *kaidan* regularly revolve around familiar, iconic images and conventions. In these stories, *yurei*, female ghosts, are often motivated by anger, seeking vengeance for their untimely and undeserved deaths. Often these murder victims are buried in dark, damp graves such as swamps and wells. When they emerge, these *yurei* are consistently depicted with long, black hair starkly contrasted to a pale, often disfigured face set off by staring eyes. The trope of the abject hair continues in contemporary horror films like *Ringu* (1998), *The Ring* (2002), and *The Grudge* (2004) (Wee 45).

By freezing the frame earlier on the reflection in a bucket of water, its wide circular surface mirroring a well, Kobayashi suggests the way the ex-wife's life should have come to its despondent and disconsolate ending after the betrayal of the husband: she might have committed suicide, an end which alludes to her being a *yurei*. Such an ending, overlooked by scholars, when read in the cultural context offers yet another dimension to her spectrality. It adds intricacy to the specters that come to haunt patriarchy, particularly in the East, known for its romantic imaginings of women as silent and graceful sufferers of the oppression by egocentric and avaricious men. The sameness of their lives, as variations on the theme of suffering, mirror the similitudes of the ghosts. “In Japanese folklore, the *yūrei* is a ghost or spirit held in the physical world by the manner of the person's death, by their thoughts or passions at the time of death” (Lyzmadness). Although the *yurei* need not be female, like in the case of the onryogami, “when the 18<sup>th</sup> century artist, Maruyama Ōkyo, was asked to paint a ghost, he responded with an image of a pale, emaciated, white-robed woman with long, black hair—and so crystallized the visual concept of the *yūrei*” (Ibid). Without an understanding of the cultural specificity, the black hair, as it takes a life of its own toward the climax will lack gravitas, since the subtext regarding ghosts and the pivotal history and the politics of vendetta will be missed, even if the technical finesse of Kobayashi has much to offer to discuss the aesthetics of “The Black Hair.”



Fig. 10 | The ageing husband's reflection in the wide bucket of water, 00:38:45. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 11 | Minokichi and the Snow Woman, 00:55:42. Bungei, 1964.

***But in the East, long hair marks the beauty of women and the honour of both women and men, particularly of the samurais in Japanese culture. Consider, for instance, the chonmage or the topknot haircut of the samurai in Japanese films, like Kobayashi's Harakiri (Seppuku 1962).***

#### **YUKI-ONNA (THE WOMAN OF THE SNOW)**

The second in the anthology, “Yuki-onna (The Woman of The Snow),” revolves around the life and times of the woodcutter Minokuchi (Tatsuya Nakadai). On a snowy day in a forest, Minokichi, the intern, and his master, the old Mosaku, are hit hard by the blizzard, and they struggle to walk as they are wrapped and shrouded by the snow. Their search for a ferry is in vain, and the younger Minokichi has the energy to drag the exhausted Mosaku into the nearby solitary hut of a boatman—the one whose ferry they saw on the other side of the shore, on their way. The boatman's hut is sparse and rundown but it has a door to protect them as they collapse and retire for the day. However, when Minokichi wakes up at night, he sees the door that he had shut now open and the snowfall continuing with its flakes filling the hut. He is shocked to find a woman



**Fig. 12** | Minokichi in a blissful moment with sandals for his wife, 01:47:50. Bungei, 1964.



**Fig. 13** | The frosty and cold-blue Snow Woman, 01:15:27. Bungei, 1964.



**Fig. 14** | The Cosmic Eye, 00:44:45. Bungei, 1964.



**Fig. 15** | The Snow Woman floats towards the Eye and vanishes, 01:19:53. Bungei, 1964.

in white—Yuki-onna/Snow Woman (Keiko Kishi)—kneeling over Mosaku. After she kills the old man with her frostiness, she turns her attention toward the younger Minokuchi and is impressed by his elegance. She is moved and takes pity on him and decides to spare his life, conditionally. She has a dire warning for Minokichi: He should not mention to anyone what happened there on that snowy night (Fig. 11). Otherwise, she will return instantaneously to take his life away. Thereafter, she glides through the rattling doors in the snow and floats away and vanishes. The overwhelmed Minokichi is almost paralyzed, and his affectionate mother (Yuko Mochizuki) supports him. Gradually he regains his health and spirit and resumes his woodcutting job. While returning home one day, he meets a woman, Yuki, who says she is on her way to Edo to find a job as a domestic helper. Night falls, so Minokichi offers her shelter at his home. She endears herself to the enamored Minokichi and his mother, and, thereafter, marries Minokichi and eventually bears his three children. The local women are intrigued by her unfading beauty despite giving birth to three children; she does not seem to age. Meanwhile, Minokichi has honed his skills as a sandal maker. He makes sandals for his children and Yuki and seems content as he looks at them, while his wife is busy sewing and making matching kimonos. During a blissful moment, when he looks at Yuki, Minokichi is struck by her graceful demeanor and haunted by the thoughts from the past (Fig. 12). He recalls the bizarre encounter with the Snow Woman. He slowly organizes his memory:

“You looked just like her just now,” he explains. “That’s why I remembered.”  
 “But—it probably *was* just a dream”, he concludes, laughing softly to himself.  
 “No”, Yuki tells him quietly. “It was *not* a dream...” (Ibid.)

Thus, when he recalls the dreamy but fatal encounter with Yuki-onna, a similar storm seems to be raging outside and we see the light inside changing from tungsten warm to cold blue as the Snow Woman reveals herself (Fig. 13). She hesitates to kill him as promised and commands that he treat their children well before warning him she will return and kill him if he does not do so. She glides out of the house into the snowstorm and vanishes. Minokichi places the pair of sandals he had made for her outside and we see the snow gather on them as they disappear, indicating the Snow Woman’s acceptance of Minokichi’s gift (Fig. 17). The most important thing about this episode in the film is Kobayashi’s stylization. The matte shot features a sky rendered in glowing orange and red, drawing attention to the production design. Similarly, the painted eye(s) that appear on the sky backdrop as a single large one or multiple smaller ones not only intrude into the narrative universe through their artifice but also draw attention by their significant placement in the set design and composition. They punctuate the key moments in the narrative: for instance, during Minokichi’s affair with Yuki, and, finally, when Yuki vanishes into the snowstorm into

the large eye in the backdrop. Further, the eyes in the backdrop also symbolize the surveillance of Minokichi and Yuki. Only in the end do we come to know that Yuki is not the victim but part of the eye, signifying the force of surveillance, which is centrally composed on the painted sky in the background when the credit titles begin and is present continually throughout the narrative (Fig. 14).

Prince draws our attention to the red flag that marks the ferry-stand where, at the outset of the film, Minokichi initially looks for the ferry and is disappointed to see that the boatman has left it on the other side of the shore. From that red flag, mirroring the red sun in the official flag, Prince reads the eyes—a motif that continues in Kobayashi's authorship from his earlier film *The Thick-Walled Room* (1956)—on the painted backdrop as signifying political surveillance, and as a metaphor for the intruding presence and control of the official authority during the wartime and Japan's militarist past (212-13). He also astutely notes that

[Yuki's] exit identifies her with the all-seeing eye, and the kind of absolute, unthinking loyalty that she demands is consistent with the service that all Japanese were expected to devote to the Emperor, the core figure around whom the ideological indoctrination carried out by the militarists was conducted. ... But the idea of betrayal cuts in different directions. On the one hand, [there is the] betrayal in terms of failure to honour the obligations owed to higher authorities. [While on the other,] many came to feel that military and political leaders had betrayed the people and led them to ruin and devastation. This became an enduring narrative of the war. Who, then, betrayed whom? Did Minokichi betray Yuki or has her rigid adherence to a vow she compelled him to make amounted to a betrayal of him, their home, and their children? (Prince 214-15)

While Prince argues compellingly for the specters of history, I would like to extend the argument to include the equally important cultural dimension. The “cosmic” eye of the film informs us as to why Kobayashi does not give the backstory of the Snow Woman's vengeance against the old woodcutter Mosaku. The eye(s) are present in the film as observers, a very foundational concept in Buddhism wherein being a silent witness is of paramount significance (Harvey 8-38). But as observers, Kobayashi dramatizes eyes by placing them on a flat backdrop and painting them with noticeable colours that keep changing according to the scenes. Thus, I argue that Kobayashi is drawing a parallel between ghosts who traverse time, and according to Buddhism, the specter of rebirths across lifetimes predicated on karmic causality. Thus, the eye, the surveiller par excellence, is also the silent observer of ethics and actions. The disappearance of the sandals at the episode's end along with the vanished Yuki marks karmic causality as constantly present through its absence (Figs. 15 and 17). While in the case



Fig. 16 | The All-Surveilling Eye, 01:20:02. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 17 | The sandals left outside by Minokichi, for his wife, are covered by snow, 01:22:32. Bungei, 1964.

***Kobayashi is drawing a parallel between ghosts who traverse time, and according to Buddhism, the specter of rebirths across lifetimes predicated on karmic causality. Thus, the eye, the surveiller par excellence, is also the silent observer of ethics and actions.***

of Mosaku, we could only see the effect, his intern Minokichi is advised/alerted regarding the cause: if he is a good father to his kids, he will not be killed. The cosmic eye in the backdrop emblemizes karmic causality, predicated on the principle of reaping as you sow, or the Buddhist Dharma Chakra/Wheel of Dharma with its unflinching/unwavering rendering of justice (Ibid: 32-180). Without such a reading, Kobayashi's investment in pacifism is disconnected from his deeper engagement with Buddhism, and his painstaking work reduced to be a tour de force of production design and cinematography.

In all traditional Buddhist societies, as Bryan Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone observe, although Buddhist doctrine emphasizes a sharp break between the living and the dead, “the Buddhist dead are seldom really ‘dead’” (Cuevas and Stone 20). The realm of the dead is accessible to special individuals who



Fig. 18 | Hoichi plays the Biwa, 02:09:08. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 22 | The scared husband, 00:35:42. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 19 | The Child-Emperor with his Nurse, 02:13:02. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 23 | Hoichi is getting his face tattooed, 02: 21:33. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 20 | Hoichi appeasing the dead through his music, 02:14:47. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 24 | Text of the Heart Sutra on Hoichi's face, 02:24:03. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 21 | The ghosts from the iconic Battle of Dan-no-ura, 02:13:14. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 25 | Hoichi's growing popularity as a musician after he loses his ears, 02:36:08. Bungei, 1964.



“are able to mediate between the two realms, by either journeying to the realm of the dead or otherwise making contact with the deceased and relaying their messages to those left behind” (Ibid) (Esler 512-13).

Thus, the horror in *Kwaidan* is elicited not just because of the superficial shocks on the surface, but also due to the capacity of the woman of snow to travel between the realms and defamiliarize the familiar home of Minokichi by pointing to how the past, present, and future are porous and have implications for each other. The uncanny presence of Yuki-onna as the beautiful wife and mother creates a more profound horror through the existential anxiety/apprehension regarding the ephemerality of life through her rupturing of the stability of the present and the immutability of appearances. Her uncanniness also differs from the Freudian explication of the concept predicated on repetition and social taboo. In *Kwaidan*, Yuki-onna seems to be familiar and comfortable with quotidian life and activities and willing to move away from the repetitive chores, but not before reminding/warning Minokichi that she would return to seek justice in case a need arises.

### HOICHI THE EARLESS

From eyes, the focus shifts to the ears in the third episode, “Hoichi the Earless,” to foreground the centrality of listening in Buddhism. I therefore engage with Buddhist culture to explore its centrality to *Kwaidan* and its significance to this episode revolving around the life and times of a blind musician. The narrative of “Hoichi the Earless” revolves around “the story of a blind musician who gains fame for his recitations, which he accompanies with his playing of the biwa” (Fig. 18). Because of his disability, he ends up as a musician in a temple where he is in demand because of “his uncanny skills in reciting a battle.” The episode, however, begins with the “famous 12th century naval battle” between the Genji and the Heike Clans, the latter getting decimated and its surviving members committing suicide rather than surrendering, including its six-year-old child-emperor, Antoku (Lyzmadness, *Kwaidan*).

[*Kwaidan*’s] presentation of the battle is highly stylised, almost like a *Kabuki* performance, with formal, deliberate movements and a distinct lack of bloodshed; in this version, the child-emperor dies when his nurse jumps with him into the churning red waters around his ship. Nevertheless, the totality of the slaughter, and the magnitude of the defeat of the Heike, is conveyed to the viewer [through] intense colours and contrasts, and with scenes featuring actors intercut with shots of a scroll painting depicting the decisive battle, and which is far more gruesome than the live-action battle. “And that sea and that shore,” the narrator concludes, “have been haunted for 700 years...” (Ibid). (Fig. 20)

***Not only is it possible that Dankai might have left the ears of the blind musician open so that he can listen and keep reciting and playing his Biwa in tune with them, but also the spiritual significance of ears might have propelled him not to shield them.***

Nearby in the Amidaji temple, which has been entrusted with the task of consoling the dead souls of samurais in that gruesome battle, is where Hoichi (Katsuo Nakamura) is playing his Biwa along with the recitation. One night, when Hoichi is alone, he encounters a newcomer in armor—Noritsune Notonokami (Tetsuro Tanba), the courageous leader of the Heike forces who died seven centuries ago. He asks Hoichi to come to the coterie of noblemen and their attendants, encamped near the site of Genji Clan’s interment and the Battle of Dan-no-ura, and sing his popular “The Tale of the Heike.” The reluctant Hoichi is persuaded and led by the wrist through the nearby woods, fortress, and the gates to the audience. Meanwhile the priest notices Hoichi’s absence during the night and asks his attendants Yasaku and Matsuzo to keep watch. Repeatedly, the visitor comes and fetches Hoichi for the nocturnal recitations to the tune of his Biwa which leaves Hoichi tired and sleepy during the day. When pressed for reasons, Hoichi denies any wrongdoing and does not reveal his secret outings at night. Thereafter, on a rainy night when Yasaku finds Hoichi outside his chambers and trails him with Matsuzo on the chief priest’s orders, we are exposed to Hoichi’s audience for the first time: the child-emperor, Antoku, and his entourage of attendants, including the samurai. Soon after, when Yasaku and Matsuzo arrive, they find him playing to an empty, haunted, and derelict gravestone-filled area covered by fog (Figs. 20, 21, 22).

Thereafter, when Hoichi confesses his secret trips at night to play music, the priest senses the danger in his being under the spell of the spirits. To protect his life, the priest entrusts Dankai with painting Hoichi’s body with sacred symbols to ward off the spirits (Figs. 23, 24). According to the priest, the symbols will act as a shield and protect him if he sits quietly in a meditative state. Though Hoichi is still when the spirits arrive and is almost invisible, his ears are visible since Dankai forgot to paint them. This enables the spirits to attack an unwilling Hoichi violently by pulling his ears and tearing them apart gruesomely and bloodily. The priest realizes the mistake but feels relieved that the spirits, having gotten their bargain, might leave Hoichi alone. Thereafter, Hoichi is in demand as a musician as he decides to appease the unfulfilled and the grieving spirits through his music. In the end, to the narrator’s commentary, we see the increasing popularity of Hoichi and people coming with sizeable offerings/presents to the temple (Fig. 25). “[T]he symbols painted on Hoichi’s body are the text of

the Heart Sutra, part of the much-larger *Prajnaparamita* (“Perfection of Wisdom”) Sutra, which deals with the vital Buddhist concept of *emptiness*.” The spirits were, thus, fended off by pointing to the “unreality of the world” they were part of (Ibid). Nonetheless, Prince is not convinced and criticizes the omission:

Why doesn't the priest or his assistant see what the camera reveals so clearly? Because the scene is visualized in such detail, this narrative question stands out in a way that it does not from the prose of Hearn's story. It's a narrative problem for which there is no good answer and that the viewer must accept so the story can move forward. It is not plausible that no one noticed the ears. (219)

However, if one looks at the cultural specificity of Buddhism, the centrality of chanting, listening, sutras, and ears becomes clear. Not only is it possible that Dankai might have left the ears of the blind musician open so that he can listen and keep reciting and playing his Biwa in tune with them, but also the spiritual significance of ears might have propelled him not to shield them. While “Buddhist chanting practices [dating back to the] Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), ... could also [argued to be] a type of music, an educational tool, a means for manipulating the supernatural, and a cure and cause of illness” (Seymour v.), listening is even more important as it can lead you to wisdom:

[The Buddha] emphasized the importance of listening in his earliest teachings and methods. He did not write a single word of his sermons during his lifetime (ca. 563–483 BCE). He spoke them. ... For hundreds of years ... Buddha's teachings [were] transmitted orally in memorized musical chants. ... The Mahayana sutras stress the importance of listening as a means of receiving wisdom. ... The importance of listening is also expressed in the iconography of images such as that of Milarepa, the eleventh-century Tibetan poet and meditation master. In a gleaming sculpture, he is shown listening with his entire body. His head is cocked, leaning into his cupped right hand, fingers curled gently, suggesting that he hears even the slightest sound. His smiling lips gently part, suggesting that he is simultaneously singing and listening to his own voice, vividly embodying the idea that one may gain wisdom through listening. (Soundfly 2018)

Hoichi's gradual development into a musician who could appease the spirits is enabled by his ears and sensitivity to listen. In retrospect, Dankai's decision to leave the ears open without the cover of the sutra seems to be deliberate, reflecting a probable belief in the power of ears to protect themselves and Hoichi through their (access to) wisdom, keeping in mind the temple's vicinity to and purpose of helping the lost souls whose lives ended abruptly through suicide at the conclusion

of the Battle of Dan-no-ura. Such sorrowful spirits could be offered solace only by listening to their predicament and the chanting of the sutras. But totally insulating oneself from them with the sutras is not going to deliver their wandering souls and help them be at rest. Bereft of the cultural context, the tearing of Hoichi's ears underscores only the horror and the ghastliness of the rendering of flesh and the goriness of flowing blood. The entire episode of Hoichi is propelled by the centrality of listening and ears as much as by the sound of Biwa and his recitation. The finesse of the music, cinematography, and music are there to lead us to the spiritual core of solace, appeasement, and deliverance. It also recalls the predicament of Zensaku in *Youth of Japan* (1968), which Kobayashi has labelled “a post-war Human Condition.” The commanding officer beats Zensaku “so severely that he became deaf in one ear and has but partial hearing in the other” (Prince 242). Beaten ears, thus, in the case of Kobayashi, are signifiers of the “army's brutal treatment of enlisted men.” Therefore, they play a complex role in this episode: ears provide the space for the spirits to violently express the disgruntlement against their tragic predicament as well as they are the conduits for what they are yearning for—the release from their liminal state. This episode also showcases the power of art to traverse realms, like the specters in the film, and heal not just the characters but the creators of the narrative as well:

‘Hoichi the Earless’ is an eerily beautiful meditation on the power of art to conjure the past and bring it vividly to life, and so serves as a *mise en abyme* of Kobayashi's own period film, which itself resurrects and reenacts not only stories from two different Japanese historical eras, but also the 60-year-old text of Lafcadio Hearn who, having himself lost one eye in his childhood and suffering myopia in the other, was nearly as blind as Hoichi. Closed off through sensory deprivation from this world, Hoichi serves as a medium to the next. (Bitel “Discover This”)

## IN A CUP OF TEA

The final episode of *Kwaidan*, “In a Cup of Tea,” bookends the unique sensorial trajectory of *Kwaidan*: Beginning with the sense of touch (“The Black Hair”), and traversing through sight (“Yuki-onna”) and sound (“Hoichi the Earless”), it culminates with taste and smell (“In a Cup of Tea”). While scholars have not paid enough attention to the sensorium in *Kwaidan*, Kobayashi's meticulous attention to aesthetics enables the distinctive juxtaposition of the ghost stories with the canvas of the senses—anchoring the narratives with the noticeable black hair, cosmic eye(s), ripped ears, and a cup of tea. “In a Cup of Tea” frames the narrative via a writer in 1899, most probably Lafcadio Hearn during the Meiji era, busy at his desk and warning us via narration that the story is going to be “curiously unfinished.” Thereafter, the narrative takes us back 220 years

to reveal samurai Kannai (Kanemon Nakamura) as he is halting at a temple to have a cup of tea (Fig. 26). However, when he is about to have his tea, he has a strange and troubling experience of a young man's image appearing in his cup (Fig. 27). To his embarrassment, the young man, (the spirit of the samurai) Heinai, seems alluring (Figs. 28-29).

The face in the cup upsets the world as the samurai has understood it, and Kobayashi uses an orthogonal pivot to visualize this deracination, this violation of the empirical laws of nature. ... Lafcadio Hearn writes that the face in the tea looks young and beguiling and almost feminine, and Kobayashi presents actor Nakaya Noboru, as the spirit of a samurai named Heinai, in a way that is very consistent with this description. The face is both threatening and inviting. The flirtatiousness of the face—its smile is virtually a come-on—is part of what makes it seem so strange and inexplicable and doubtless helps to provoke the samurai into the heedless action of swallowing the tea along with the face in the liquid. (Prince 221)

When the spirit revisits Kannai, he has no answers to its query regarding his swallowing of its soul. Prince acknowledges the subtext of homosexuality but does not consider it central to the plot: “[H]omosexuality was a coded and ritualized aspect of the samurai world, but it wasn’t licentious and promiscuous, and the way this spirit seems to be flirting could, perhaps, be counted as a transgression.” Therefore, he is unsure why Heinai’s soul became disconnected from his body, “making this tale the oddest in the film,” whereas “the other spirits had motives for their actions” (Prince 222). Here I would argue that in the homosocial world of the samurai and the attendants of the Lord, people like Kannai are driven by their desires for same sex that they do not want to accept and thus they remain conflicted. Therefore, the spirit here is not the Other with a motive. Rather like the fluidity of tea, it is about sexuality and desire being porous—Kannai’s flinging the cup away and breaking it cannot keep his fluid desire away. The spirit, therefore, keeps reappearing in the cup of tea, exemplifying the return of his own repressed desire, which disavows the rigid formal codes of the samurai/military world. Prince’s apprehensions regarding “Heinai’s inscrutability, his insistence that the samurai has wounded him, [and his incomprehensibility, making] him seem more sinister, capricious, and cruel than the other spirits” (Ibid.) is understandable. Nevertheless, Heinai’s spirit is distinctly different, inviting and allowing itself to be swallowed, unlike the avenging black hair or the surveilling/warning eye or the defiant and bleeding ears.

From the black hair, which was a distinct object outside, to the remoteness and proximity of the omnipotent eye, and the speedily traveling, yet caressing sound, the sensorial flow in *Kwaidan* is centripetal—toward the centre. Here the motive is clear and the specter that haunts is the hypocrisy of



Fig. 26 | Samurai Kannai is about to have his tea, 02:40:04. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 27 | Samurai Heinai's face appears in the teacup, 02:40:22. Bungei, 1964.



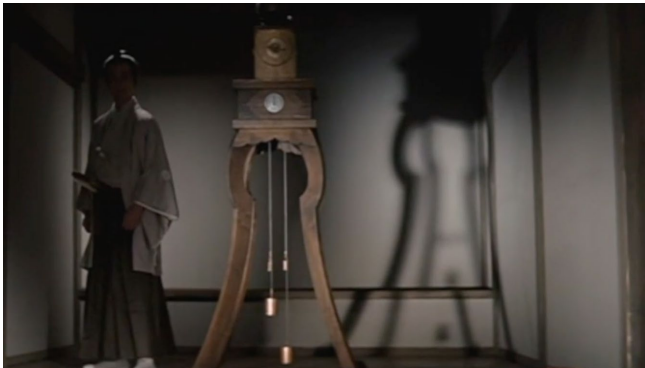
Fig. 28 | Samurai Heinai's inviting smile, 02:42: 19. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 29 | Samuria Kannai is troubled by the transgressive face in the teacup/urn, 03:02:00. Bungei, 1964.



**Fig. 30** | Samurai Kannai fighting the phantom ghost(s), 02:43:33. Bungei, 1964.



**Fig. 31** | The Time Portal where the ghost appears and disappears, 02:45: 29. Bungei, 1964.



**Fig. 32** | The Writer caught in the urn, 03:02:29. Bungei, 1964.

**Here the motive is clear and the specter that haunts is the hypocrisy of heteropatriarchy, symbolized by the macho samurai world, which does not want to acknowledge and accept the differential orientation of Kannai's sexuality.**

heteropatriarchy, symbolized by the macho samurai world, which does not want to acknowledge and accept the differential orientation of Kannai's sexuality. Instead, later when the three attendants of the samurai Heinai—the name rhyming and mimicking the protagonist Kannai, alluding to his subconscious (desire)—come in search of their missing master, he duels with the ghosts and fights a losing battle with the shadows and their unfathomable movement (Fig. 30).

There is the large mechanical clock in Kannai's chambers “that becomes a portal to the other world and a manifestation of the malicious spirit of Heinai.” Prince (astutely) suggests “a relationship between demonic forces (personified by Heinai) and history (recorded time as enabled by the clock). ... If history for Kobayashi is a force of trauma, then in this episode of *Kwaidan* it becomes a portal for malicious spirits to gain entry to the material world and sunder its anchor points. Kobayashi recasts his quarrel with history in a format appropriate for the genre of ghost tales, and plenty of precedent supports this move. Clocks and ghosts often are connected in folktales and in reports of psychic and paranormal phenomena (Prince 222-23). (Fig. 31).

During the denouement, we are back in 1899 with the writer and his apartment with his unfinished works. As we anticipate the closure to the fourth episode, we are informed by the narrator that he would prefer to leave it to the imagination of his readers. Thereafter, when the publisher (Nakamura Ganjiro) arrives to enquire with the madam (Haruko Sugimura) of the house about the author (Osamu Takizawa), they are shocked to see that he has disappeared. Scared, as they flee from the scene, they find the author caught in an urn (Fig. 32). As the camera focuses on the urn, the writer seems to invite us beyond the sensorial into a spectral world to experience a realm beyond the senses. “In his efforts to evoke the ineffable and to portray the limits of the material world, Kobayashi pushed his stylized designs much farther than he had done in *Harakiri* (Prince 223). The story thus remains “curiously unfinished” as the writer presaged. In Hearn's original story there was no device of the frame—the whole episode takes place in the long past, 220 years before the Meiji era. The frame story of the writer (Hearn) is introduced by Kobayashi as a homage to Hearn and to traverse between time. Similarly, the time portal with a large mechanical clock is also absent in Hearn. The frame story with the narrator, thus, involves the voice of two storytellers. One is that of Hearn, whose narrative makes the body, the other, Kobayashi, is the inventor of the frame to posit the original writer (Hearn) and bookend the film. Therefore, as Hearn keeps writing, it is Kobayashi, the other author/narrator, who alerts us to the impossibility of the ending to “In the Tea Cup.” It is because Kobayashi knows the long struggle forward of men in the closet like Kannai to accept who they are, come out, and fight together for their rights. It must begin by accepting their natural inclination and fighting the specters around them that disallow difference. The portal, thus, could be argued to symbolize the temporality of desire which seeks

a temporary refuge but keeps coming back. Thus, Kobayashi is invested in deconstructing the world of samurais, who make fun of Kannai when he confesses about the haunting image of Heinai in his teacup by taunting his ostensible delusion. He also deconstructs their hyper-masculinity driven homosocial

world by pointing to the specter of sexuality at the core of their universe that is disavowed.

*Kwaidan*, thus, retains its preminent status among the Japanese horror films because of its profound engagement with specters deeply rooted in Japanese psyche and culture. ■

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# West Side Story

## Characterizing the “Bad Guy” Through Colour Subconscious

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### ABSTRACT

*West Side Story's* (1961) classic story of rival gangs and star-crossed lovers ties back to *Romeo and Juliet* not only in story but in colour associations. Just as the Montagues and Capulets were visually separated by colour, so too are the Jets and Sharks. However, once this same colour division is placed along racial lines, a more complicated association of “good” and “bad” emerges and reinforces racial prejudicial tendencies of Puerto Ricans. Epitomized through the beginning sequence of the film, the two gangs colour association are instantly tangible from their costumes and environments. Associating the Sharks with dark colours directs the viewers’ subconscious to identify the Puerto Rican gang as “the bad guy.” These same colour associations appear in Spielberg’s 2021 version of the classic film perpetuating their semiotic connotations.

*WEST SIDE STORY* (Robbins and Wise, 1961) sets up a classic dichotomy between two rival gangs, the Jets and Sharks, and star-crossed lovers who happen to be from either side. In both the original Broadway (1957) and Hollywood (1961) versions of *West Side Story*, costume designer Irene Sharaff chooses practical everyday wear costumes, allowing flexibility for dancing and movement. Additionally, in both renditions, Sharaff utilizes red and blue colour palettes seen in historical depictions of the



**Fig. 1** | Frederick Leighton. *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet*. 1855. Agnes Scott College.

Montagues and Capulets, like that of Frederick Leighton’s *The Reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets over the Dead Bodies of Romeo and Juliet* (Fig. 1). This binary is harmless enough in its original form depicting two Italian families in *Romeo and Juliet*, yet presents a more complicated association when used to accentuate racial distinctions in *West Side Story*. Associative colours of each gang expand in the film version beyond that of a single-colour division and depict the Anglo Jets in blue, yellow, and khaki, while the Puerto Rican Sharks are shown in red, black, grey, and purple. These colours are in opposition to one another on the colour wheel, creating a semiotic connotation of “good” and “bad” in the film. Although the film focuses on society’s clash along racial lines, the narrative itself appears to avoid establishing which gang is “right” and instead points to the perpetuation of loss by letting hate into one’s heart. Yet, *West Side Story's* mise-en-scene works in contradiction to the core message of the film by reinforcing white “goodness” and the Puerto Rican Sharks as “bad,” advancing prejudicial tendencies.

From the beginning of the film, the visual division between the Jets and Sharks is accentuated not only through their clothing but their environments. The opening tit-for-tat sequence between the gangs visually depicts each group’s dominance; as the Sharks hold the upper hand, the background holds their colour palette and vice versa for the Jets. Beginning by visually building the Jets group, the Jets’ colours are expanded from a medium close up shot of Riff (Russ Tamblyn) in his yellow

jacket to a medium shot that includes Ice (Tucker Smith) in a blue shirt. Eventually, the entire Jets gang is shown in a long shot with each member in triangle formation behind Riff in their respective colours (Fig. 2). The Jets show their control over the basketball court by picking on people playing, all of whom blend in to the background in greenish brown outfits. As the Jets make it out of the basketball courts and onto the streets, they meet Bernardo (George Chakiris) and mockingly force him to cross the street where we see him on a bright red background. The red accentuates his anger with the situation, but also reaffirms that he's now in Sharks territory as his gang assembles behind him in their respective colours. Eventually, the tables turn and the Sharks find themselves with two lone Jets. The store front behind them is red with a purple and black awning asserting their dominance as they mock the Jets, just as Bernardo was bullied previously. As the group walks behind a car on the street, more Jets are waiting at the other end of the car; the background colour shifts to yellow and white showing the Sharks are yet again outnumbered (Fig. 3). This set up not only shows the tug between the Jets and Sharks, but also furthers the visual connection between colours and each gang, and, in turn, furthers the viewers' semiotic connotation.

The Jets' association with lighter, brighter colours through their costuming and environment and the Sharks' association with darker colours directs the viewer's subconscious to identify the Jets as "the good guys" and the Sharks as "the bad guys." These costuming choices are extensions of deeply embedded cultural biases associating certain colours and tones with moral character. As psychologists Meier, Robinson and Clore assert, these biases can be traced back to the world's earliest influential prophets and philosophers: "...darkness is often associated with evil and death, whereas light is often associated with goodness and life...the prophet Zoroaster characterized the fight between good and evil as the fight between light and darkness, and Plato likened darkness to imprisonment and ignorance and light to freedom and knowledge" (82). Historical connections between colour and metaphorical meaning set up the binary between that of darkness and lightness to create feelings of good and bad. Just as *West Side Story's* opening sequence depicts the push and pull between Jets and Sharks, the fight between good and evil is established visually, too. Socially constructed and deeply embedded cultural semiotic relationships between these simple visual cues rest deep in our subconscious and marks the Sharks as bad, setting up a classic binary on racial lines. Colour associations with good and bad are used consistently throughout film history, and our subconscious connection lies in these established ideals. When surveying subjects, Tham et. al. find universal conceptual colour associations of black with "negative concepts" and white with "purity" (43). The Wicked Witch of the West in her black cloak is an iconic example of these associations and our ability to distinguish a "bad" character by colour. Appearing in the brightly coloured Munchkin Land wearing all black, the Wicked Witch of the West is in direct opposition to the colours of the location and the light pink of the "good" witch, Glinda.



**Fig. 2** | Introduction to the Jets at the beginning of Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins's *West Side Story*, 00:06:48. United Artists, 1961.



**Fig. 3** | The Sharks and Jets power struggle, 00:10:24. United Artists, 1961.



**Fig. 4** | Anita and Bernardo at the dance, with brown make-up stains visible at Anita's waist, 00:38:06. United Artists, 1961.

This common colour association is observed in many characters throughout film history: Ursula of *The Little Mermaid*, Darth Vader, the Joker, and even HAL. The end result is the same: dark colours of black, grey, purple, and red are visual cues that a character is bad. Putting the Sharks in dark colours strengthens our semiotic connotation of them as "bad guys" and instills an association of the "other" as bad.

Part of *West Side Story's* mise-en-scene reaches past the colour of costumes the Sharks wear to include their skin tones, which are significantly darkened to accentuate the difference between the Sharks and Jets visually. Rita Moreno (Anita) likened the brown face make-up the members of the Sharks gang had to wear every day to that of mud because of how thick and dark it was (Moreno 1). The make-up is so thick, during the Mambo scene it can at times be seen on Anita's dress from



Fig. 5 | First cast image shared by Steven Spielberg from the set of *West Side Story*. Amblin Entertainment, 2021.

where Bernardos' hands touched her waist (Fig. 4). Colour in mise-en-scene isolates the audience from the Sharks, enabling our disassociation from the gang. Our emotional separation from the Sharks is guided by the film spending significantly less time with them (other than Maria) than with the Jets. Between the lack of screen time, darkened and unrealistic skin tone, and association with dark colours, the audience's ability to empathize with the Sharks is limited. This lack of empathy supports a damning problem for the audience: “failures in understanding racial or cultural perspectives other than one's own can have negative effects, resulting in [...] an empathy bias...this lack of understanding often creates increased prejudices and negative stereotypes” (Tettegah 176). Empathy is prohibited for the Sharks in the original film version of *West Side Story* by the “bad guys” colour misidentification, which enables racist stereotypes of Puerto Ricans to be perpetuated throughout the film.

As we look towards Steven Spielberg's remake of the classic film, will questions of depicting and creating empathy for stories other than those revolving around whiteness be addressed? Early images and the newly released trailer point to the same divide on colour lines for the Jets and Sharks (Fig. 5). The 2021 remake has a more muted colour pallet than the 1961 version of *West Side Story*, but the lingering visual division is still present. The Jets are in dark blue jeans and dirty white shirts, while the Sharks have black jeans with red and purplish shirts. The two gangs continue to be pitted against one another through mise-en-scene. If anything is learned from the 1961 version, it is that, regardless of the message at the core of the film, the colours

seep into the audience's subconscious. Maria's final monologue deserves to be felt, heard and understood as a poignant (even in 2021) message that hate, and prejudice has no place in the hearts of all Americans. Yet as we watch and visually understand the film, that divide between races and cultures continues and takes a step further by visually tapping into an audiences' subconscious by asserting the Puerto Ricans as bad and white characters as good.

Audiences deserve more from filmmakers when it comes to equal representation on the screen, but it's not just about seeing a character: it's about the way that character is visually portrayed. Continuing to depict the Sharks in dark colours because “that's how it's always been done” is a sad response to the core thesis of the film itself and an even sadder response to the cultural reckoning the United States has been through over the last two years. ■



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# Coloured Lighting and the Aura of Hollywood in Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*

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## ABSTRACT

Looking at Damien Chazelle's *La La Land* (2016), I explore the visual experience of coloured lighting prioritized throughout the film. While these moments of coloured lighting may initially appear to create mood for aesthetic purposes, I would like to contend that Chazelle is doing more by purposefully choosing to fully saturate certain scenes that highlight stark moments of reality that his characters Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) endure throughout the film. In doing so, Chazelle creates a dichotomy between the fantastical and unrealistic elements of Hollywood and the grounding, everyday realities of life that may be influenced by the former, but ultimately remain outside of both Mia and Sebastian's grasp. Chazelle's intentional introduction of colour in *La La Land* personifies this sentiment as it proves that the aesthetic use of colour is a warning that is doomed to fail because it represents a fantasy, something controlled and unreal.

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FROM THE VERY beginning of *La La Land* (Chazelle, 2016), the viewer is cued to expect a film that prioritizes its visual experience. From the Oz-like transformation of the Technicolour insignia before the film begins, to the lyrics in the introductory musical number that echo, "A technicolour world made out of music and machine" (Hurwitz et al.), Chazelle prioritizes colour as an aesthetic and thematic agent within the film's narrative. He accomplishes this task in a variety of ways, flooding *La La Land* with colour that saturates the screen through lush California landscapes, vibrant costuming, and, perhaps most striking of all, coloured lighting that, at moments, seems to overtake the entirety of a scene in often unrealistic, but fantastical, ways. While these moments of coloured lighting may initially appear to simply create mood for aesthetic purposes, I contend that Chazelle purposefully chooses to fully saturate certain scenes in order to highlight stark moments of reality that his characters Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) endure throughout both their relationship and their individual artistic pursuits. In doing so, Chazelle creates a dichotomy between the fantastical (and often unrealistic) elements of Hollywood and the grounded, everyday realities of life that may be influenced by

the former, but ultimately remain outside of both Mia and Sebastian's grasp.

Before I dive into my analysis of several important frames within *La La Land*, it is important to note that the use of colour in film is generally understood to be a highly subjective topic, frequently influenced by a context that "[relies] on introspection and close analysis of the films under investigation" (Flueckiger 212). Furthermore, we must bear in mind "the idea that colour is an aesthetic tool that may or may not be related to what's happening on screen, but is related to what's happening in the storyteller's frame of mind. That's the true liberation of the sense of colour" (Schrader 55). Eli Friedlander also endorses the opinions of colour subjectivity in her analysis of *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) by stressing that although colour is an essential component of the film, there is no one-to-one, or universal correspondence, between colour and meaning that can be extracted across the scope of film studies generally (177). For the purposes of my analysis, I will be utilizing these perceptions when exploring the connections between Chazelle's coloured lighting aesthetic and the narrative timeline in three distinct scenes within the film. These three scenes explore the beginning, middle, and end of Mia and Sebastian's relationship



**Fig. 1** | Mia and Sebastian contemplate their artistic dreams against a red, blue, and purple backdrop, 1:04:53. Lionsgate, 2016.

and engage with a spectrum of emotions including intimacy, nostalgia, anger, frustration, sadness, and even longing.

The first fully saturated frame used by Chazelle arrives just after Mia and Sebastian are presented with career-defining opportunities; Mia's opportunity comes in the form of writing her own play, and for Sebastian it means playing in a blended jazz and pop band (Fig. 1).

The scene is set in the bedroom near the beginning of Mia and Sebastian's relationship, and throughout the course of the scene they engage in a discussion that signals their then-unknown future successes as artists. Mia remarks how her play "feels really nostalgic to me" and even makes Sebastian a logo for his future club, which he will end up using after this dream becomes a reality. The scene foreshadows the events that will transpire near the end of the film, but at this moment both the characters and the audience are unaware of the cost Mia and Sebastian will have to pay in the form of their relationship in order to achieve their dreams.

What the audience perceives, however, are the deeply saturated red, purple, and blue hues of this scene. This use of colour is quite different compared to the natural, vibrant colours of the opening musical number (Fig. 2), or the four coloured dresses Mia and her friends wear as they prepare for a night out in their own musical number (Fig. 3). While the previous scenes' brightly lit costuming and set design often accompany traditional Hollywood elements such as musical numbers with staged choreography, the bedroom scene between Mia and Sebastian is intimate and more realistic in terms of their personal relationship and aspiring dreams as artists. Although the scene still prioritizes

colour, it does so in a way that exemplifies the characters' inner emotional turmoil rather than their perceived, artificial performances played out through prototypical Hollywood clichés such as the musical dance numbers. While the use of colour in the musical numbers presents a cinematic and aesthetic purpose to the audience, the coloured lighting in the bedroom scene (as well as in the two subsequent coloured lighting scenes) offers a more unrealistic use of colour, but juxtaposes itself against the real and personal lives of Mia and Sebastian's characters and their relationship. In doing so, I believe that Chazelle employs the use of coloured lighting to expose and represent the hidden realities of Hollywood through scenes that engage in significant points of intersection between Mia and Sebastian's relationship and their respective artistic journeys.

Another fully saturated scene employing this same symbolism happens later in Mia and Sebastian's relationship, just as their artistic pursuits are about to take flight. Mia has just finished emailing various casting directors about her upcoming play, and Sebastian has taken a night off from his tour to come home and surprise Mia (Fig. 4).

As he does in the bedroom scene, Chazelle again saturates the backdrop with coloured lighting. This time, however, the colour is a sickly-looking, unnatural green that almost intuitively distracts the audience's senses. The innate reaction the audience feels when first viewing this scene prefigures the unfolding narrative that is to transpire throughout the rest of the scene. Over the course of the dinner, an argument ensues between Mia and Sebastian about his involvement with the band, and Mia becomes shocked at his "long-haul" involvement. This event segues into



**Fig. 2** | Opening musical number, 04:22. Lionsgate, 2016.



**Fig. 3** | Mia and her friends wear brightly coloured dresses for a night out, 12:13. Lionsgate, 2016.



**Fig. 4** | Sebastian surprises Mia with dinner against a green backdrop, 1:17:35. Lionsgate, 2016.



**Fig. 5** | Mia reminisces on the ideal version of her and Sebastian's lives together against a blue, purple, and pink backdrop, 1:59:06. Lionsgate, 2016.

a conversation debating the idea of fulfilling one's dreams versus the reality of having an unappealing, steady job. The scene is tense and filled with jarring insults that Mia and Sebastian throw at one another, only to end with a soundless record endlessly rotating and the piercing signal of the fire alarm establishing that dinner is ruined in the oven.

The scene not only ends on a rather dismal note for Mia and Sebastian's relationship, but also, much like the previous foreshadowing of the bedroom scene, it portends the anticipated failure of Mia's play. Once again, Chazelle overtly signals to the audience, both through the brighter, unnatural green colour and the explicit dialogue that the characters engage in, that the implications of this scene are rooted in both the reality of Mia and Sebastian's daily lives and the larger consequences and sacrifices that the world of Hollywood often demands. Additionally, while Chazelle implements the use of coloured lighting at both the beginning (Fig. 1) and middle (Fig. 4) of Mia and Sebastian's relationship and artistic journeys, he does so again at the end of the film after Mia and Sebastian have achieved their dreams, although separately from one another (Fig. 5).

While the deep blue and purple hues of this scene create a nostalgic longing between the two characters, prompting the audience to reflect upon the immense sacrifices a life in Hollywood requires, it is also noteworthy that Chazelle gradually moves from a warmer to cooler display of colour as these three scenes progress. Much like the seasons that define the narrative structure of *La La Land*, so, too, do the changing colours resonate with the rise and fall of Mia and Sebastian's road to Hollywood stardom and their relationship with one another, respectively. At the same time, Chazelle carefully inserts notes of red in this scene as well, thereby creating a connection to the red-coloured lighting of the bedroom scene where Mia and Sebastian's relationship first blossomed. While the aura of Hollywood has now become a reality for both Mia and Sebastian's characters, what remains fantastical is the perfect scenario played out in the vision Mia has of her and Sebastian's alternative life, where both characters achieve their dreams while maintaining their relationship. Once again, Chazelle situates his characters in the reality of their surroundings through the use of coloured lighting.

Like a ghost haunting its characters, Chazelle's coloured lighting in these specific scenes defines the critical moments of Mia and Sebastian's personal and professional lives. Friedlander notes, "Colour is dimly sensed at providing the unifying mood of the world. . . . Yet introducing colour intentionally, designedly, epitomizes the . . . desperate attempt to reproduce that relation to the world, to keep one's hold on the passing" (188). Chazelle's intentional introduction of colour in *La La Land*, signaling the fantastical aura of Hollywood lore, personifies this sentiment as it proves that the aesthetic use of colour is a warning that is doomed to fail because it represents a fantasy, something controlled and unreal. While Mia and Sebastian may have made it in the traditional Hollywood sense, their worlds are ultimately defined by those same lyrics that open the film: "A technicolour world made out of music and machine." ■

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# Under the Skin

## Colour and Production Design in *The Brides of Dracula* (1960)

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### ABSTRACT

*The Brides of Dracula* (1960) follows English studio Hammer Films' penchant for exploitative violence and sexuality. But through its colour palette, the film also uses common horror conventions to "exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance," encouraging "queer positioning" (Doty 83). Though red is foreboding in this film, it is as familiar as it is in most other vampire texts, luring audiences into a false sense of expectation. Red-clad protagonists clash with unsuspected blue atmospheres of each vampiric confrontation, resulting in purples that code characters as existing within the centre of the sexuality spectrum between red and blue. Through the interrelation of the colours red, blue and purple, in costume, props, scenery, and blood, *Brides* specifically explores its characters' sexualities, deviancy, and madness.

HAMMER FILMS' *The Brides of Dracula* (1960) follows the UK studio's tradition of exploiting violence and sexuality. This film is, however, the first of the series and from the studio to use its rich colour palette to specifically explore sexuality, deviancy, and madness. Through its mise-en-scène, *The Brides of Dracula* uses the recurring colours red, blue, and purple to convey and correspond to each character's varying degrees of sexuality and madness.

Each major colour in *Brides'* palette represents a sexual orientation akin to the Kinsey scale, between red (0, "exclusively heterosexual") and blue (6, "exclusively homosexual"), marking purple as the implied measure of bisexuality (3, "equally heterosexual and homosexual") (n.p.). Beginning with red, the colour of choice for vampire texts and its clichés since the advent of colourized film, its clashes with *Brides'* occurrences of blue are what characterize the film's unique perspective on sexuality and vampirism. When looking through the metaphorical lens of blood, there emerges a pattern in which these colours appear to lead into each "purple," queer reveal. When removed from the body, blood which was previously intravenous and blue now appears red. Though red is foreboding in this film, it is clear and familiar, "outside of its skin," luring audiences into a false sense of expectation as Baroness Meinster (Martita Hunt) does when she lures the red-clad, straight-coded Marianne (Yvonne Monlaur) to Castle Meinster to feed her vampiric son, the Baron (David Peel) (Figs. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1 & 2 | Baroness Meinster and Marianne in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:08:44; 00:16:57. Hammer Films, 1960.

Even then, we see a glowing blue surrounding the Baroness (Fig. 1), which is ubiquitous throughout the film. Notably, blue serves the important thematic and atmospheric purpose of signifying when protagonists are about to be tested and when the Meinsters are about to let themselves be seen for who they truly are intravenously or “underneath their skin.” The film signifies the result of these encounters, vampiric and sexual, with purple: a narrative and venereal clash between red and blue. As Fletcher observes, when removed from the veins, still pooling underneath the skin, the resulting physical trauma of blood appears purple, with highlights of blue *and* red when fresh for example, in bruises (n.p).

Purple as a combination of red and blue has a two-fold purpose in *Brides*: one, the red-clad protagonists clash with the blue foreboding atmosphere of each vampiric confrontation, creating the “trauma” necessary for purple “bruising.” Two, this clashing results in a purple that codes characters that exist on the centre of the film’s Kinsey-inspired sexuality spectrum. The Baron, the Baroness, and vampire bride Gina (Andrée Melly) are all characters dressed in key purple costume pieces while having active or past heterosexual relationships/urges *as well as* active queer relationships/urges. For instance, Gina’s transformation into a vampire emerging from a purple-lined coffin reveals her desires for both Marianne and the Baron, clashing with Marianne’s straight sensibilities as she whispers sweetly, “Let me kiss you [...] We can both love him, my darling” (Fig. 3). When *Brides* envelopes their characters in purple, it is to reveal their sexually queer nature, previously hidden “under the skin.”

Peter Cushing reprises his role as Dr. Van Helsing, the straight-acting hero written for the purpose of representing the first important colour of *Brides*’ palette: red. When Van Helsing first investigates Castle Meinster, the only colour highlighted in the dark castle is red, present in the furniture and curtains. It is only when Van Helsing opens a secret door in the wall that we see a glowing blue light emanating from a secret room (Fig. 4).

Suddenly, Van Helsing finds himself surrounded by the Baron and the Baroness. The Meinsters are filmed in wide shots, placed firmly within the centre of their colour palette. The Baron enters the room between a red ornate chair and a table bathed in the blue moonlight as he spreads his lavender silk cape that dominates centre frame; his true nature is revealed (Fig. 5).

When we see the Baroness, she is similarly in a lavish lavender sleeping gown, also standing between blue moonlight and red furnishings (Fig. 6). Film critic Richard Dyer writes that queer or sexually deviant film characters are often coded within their text as originating from of “a web of sexual sickness” within familial units, like the Baron and Baroness, whose dangerous potential lies in their ability to spread said sickness (287). The Baron, having just infected his own mother, stands proudly as he prepares to lunge at Van Helsing. The Baroness is seen hiding behind the sleeve of her gown or covering her face



Fig. 3 | Sister wives in *The Brides of Dracula*, 01:12:21. Hammer Films, 1960.



Fig. 4 | Unveiling in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:49:28. Hammer Films, 1960.



Fig. 5 & 6 | The colours of blood and shame in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:51:31; 00:52:39. Hammer Films, 1960.

with her hands. The Baroness is cognizant enough to express shame at her vampirism. This vampirism and the Meinster's family troubles are those which she believes are a result of her own neglect and deviancy, now draped in the bruising of purple shame. Van Helsing, however, remains immune to their influence, never spatially straying from his own red aura for too long (Fig. 7).

It is when red's provision of secure identity is no longer present to save Van Helsing that he succumbs to the Baron's vampirism.

Towards the film's climax, Van Helsing investigates the Baron's secret lair in the old town mill, a blue light appearing over his shoulder rather than in his path (Fig. 8). The scene's cinematography shows that Van Helsing is, in fact, walking into a trap set by the Baron as the camera follows him across the room, the whole of which glows with a low, soft blue (Fig. 9). Red's assurance has not been present, and will not appear to save him during his fight with the Baron.

After choking Van Helsing into submission, the Baron drapes his purple cape completely over them both as he bites the good doctor, giving them a moment of privacy from the heaving, voyeur vampire brides in the rafters. When the Baron is finished, he leaves Van Helsing splayed out on a pile of hay, covered in sweat, evidence of the sexual undertones of the fight. The resulting blood dripping down Van Helsing's



Fig. 7 | Dr. Van Helsing in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:51:38. Hammer Films, 1960.

neck is a reference to the venerable element of the Meinster's infection (Figs. 10 and 11). Red and blue have clashed, and purple emerges.

Queer theorist Alexander Doty reminds us that horror media conventions often “exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance,” resulting in a story that encourages “queer positioning” (83). While Hammer's *The Brides of Dracula* is consistently praised for its production value, “opulently mounted with Technicolour flashing, slickly [and] meticulously produced” (Hearn 41), it also presents this queer positioning through the conflict between the presence of red, blue, and purple within the mise-en-scène of the film. ■

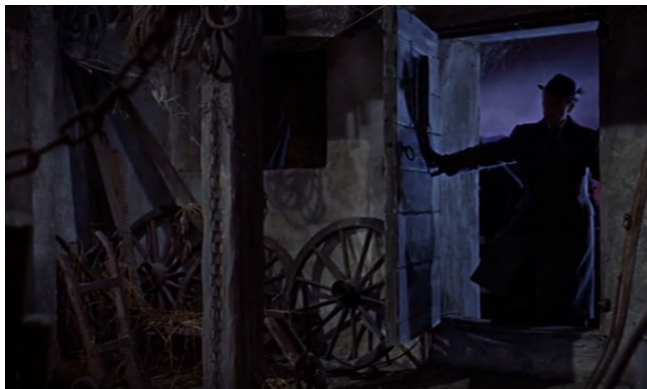


Fig. 8 & 9 | Caged heat in *The Brides of Dracula*, 01:15:32; 01:16:08. Hammer Films, 1960.



Fig. 10 & 11 | Unprotected sex in *The Brides of Dracula*, 01:18:40; 01:18:50. Hammer Films, 1960.



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# Decadence and Decay in Paul Morrissey's *Blood for Dracula* (1974)

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## ABSTRACT

The overarching theme of Paul Morrissey's *Blood for Dracula*, aka *Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1974), is the vampire's inability to achieve an idealized reality. Freed by his mythical status and aristocratic heritage from the realities of everyday human existence, Dracula lives a life of hedonistic excess. Yet, one thing evades the vampire: virgin blood, which no amount of wealth or power can acquire. In the disarmingly simple opening scene of *Blood for Dracula*, in which Dracula applies cosmetics before a mirror, Morrissey employs a heightened artificiality and a depiction of decadence that foreshadows Dracula's ultimate downfall at the film's conclusion. Briefly establishing the use of decadent aesthetics in the early films of Andy Warhol (by way of the Decadence the *fin de siècle*), this featurette analyzes Morrissey's contrasting depiction of decadence. Through analysis of the *mise-en-scène* of the opening scene of *Blood for Dracula*, it will be discussed how Morrissey utilizes artifice to signify Dracula's decay, and how Dracula's anomie allows others to seek power and pleasure at his expense.

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IN ANDY WARHOL'S *Mario Banana* (1964), a bejewelled drag queen (Mario Montez) silently and seductively peels and devours a banana for three minutes. Camp, cultic, and voyeuristic, *Mario Banana* embodies all of the aesthetic elements that would come to signify Warhol's early films. Inspired by early Hollywood's presentation of performers as icons, Warhol's films eschewed plot and psychology in favour of the fleeting and the ephemeral, Warhol refining the films' stars into a radiating, glamorous essence. From behind his camera, Warhol simply watched as his superstars were forced to enact a meagre premise and to provide a performance that transcended their surroundings. Warhol's early films, Jon Davies writes, developed out of the social milieu of Warhol's studio, The Factory, with its ambience of "casual decadence, witty one-upmanship, [and] hard-won glamour" (27). "Decadent" is an apt descriptor of The Factory. Replete with drag queens, androgynous socialites, hustlers, and junkies, The Factory was a crucible of exhibitionism and deleterious sensualism. In capturing this spectacle on film, Warhol synthesized art with life, and projected it onto the silver screen.

Reverberating through The Factory's walls were echoes of *fin de siècle* Decadence. At the *fin de siècle*, Decadent writers and artists, resisting the clamour of political, scientific, and cultural revolutions, embraced self-destructive hedonism and

exalted in the ephemeral nature of life, their work replete with images of anxiety, stagnation, destruction and decay (Desmarais & Baldick 5). Figures such as Oscar Wilde, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Aubrey Beardsley pre-figured the Warholian style of pursuing and documenting all possible sensory pleasures. Chronicling these pleasures in their work, the Decadents divorced art and beauty from didactic moralism, proclaiming an art-for-art's-sake mantra, and shocked the bourgeois with seductive images of vice and sin. Indeed, Beardsley's illustrations of vampiric femmes fatales and sybaritic androgynes are evoked in the wearied flesh, artificial beauty, and grotesque wit of Montez in *Mario Banana*. Decadence, however, historically presages a decline—the term "decadence" stemming from the Latin *cadere*, "to fall" (Weir 1). In *fin de siècle* Britain, Decadence flourished in urban centres as the empire declined. Were Warhol's experiments the swansong of the 1960s counterculture, or even of the fine arts as a medium? By absorbing pop culture into the arts, Warhol redefined and undermined the avant-garde, and mechanically distributed it for mass cultural consumption.

Warhol's input into his films receded after 1968. Under Warhol's imprimatur, Paul Morrissey took over directorial duties, and directed a sequence of films from 1968–74, each successively less Warholian. As a director, Morrissey emphasized humanity and narrative over Warhol's provocative, un-evolving

mise-en-scène. Gone was Warhol's experimentalism in favour of the façade of casual authenticity. Decadence, however, remained a central tenet of Morrissey's oeuvre. Maurice Yacowar writes that Morrissey, disillusioned by "Warhol's mechanical, passive stare [...] is compelled to feel [...] for the human ruins in his focus" (37). Unlike Warhol, Morrissey evokes pathos for his decadent characters, and ambivalently questions the cultures in which they thrive and decline. Morrissey's films thus repeatedly dramatize the decline of a coherent social and moral order as his characters, questing for full expression of their individualistic egos, succumb to unimpeded indulgence.

Morrissey's penultimate film under Warhol's name, *Blood for Dracula* (1974), was a liberal adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)—itself a repository of anxieties concerning the declining British Empire. As Fred Botting writes, Stoker's vampires represent the "threat of wanton and corrupt sexuality", their "decadence, nocturnal existence and indiscriminate desires" distinguishing the vampire as a licentious, polymorphous threat to Victorian notions of race, sexuality, gender, religion and life itself (141). Morrissey's vampire embodies a similar, nocturnal landscape of decadent mutability, exemplified in *Blood for Dracula's* opening sequence—a short scene of exaggerated artifice, in which Count Dracula (Udo Kier) sits before a mirror and uses cosmetics to paint a human mask onto his deathly-pale countenance. On initial viewing, this ritual of physical refinement seemingly represents nothing more than an act of artificial humanization. Repeated viewings, however, disprove this theory. Rather, Dracula's application of cosmetics before a mirror encapsulates the decadence and decay of the Dracula line, and foreshadows the reduction of an ancient, aristocratic ancestry to a single, mutilated corpse at the film's denouement (Fig. 1).

Having renounced social relationships, Dracula has withdrawn into the cloistered realm of his ornate castle. Surrounded by antique books and taxidermy birds of prey, Dracula is entombed within a dead past over which he is master (Fig. 2). Yet Dracula's mastery is crippled by a humiliating dependency on virgin blood. Having drained Romania dry, Dracula flees to Italy where he is seduced by the aristocratic di Fiore family's false promise of virginal daughters. Unbeknownst to Dracula, the marriageable di Fiore daughters have already been bedded by the overtly virile Marxist handyman, Mario (Joe Dallessandro), thus rendering their blood "tainted". Upon tasting this "tainted" blood, Dracula graphically retches to rid his body of the blood's impurities, and subsequently withers into a weakened husk (Fig. 3). As Yacowar writes, in Dracula's "corrupted world, sex means death for the great romantic hero" (87). Capitalizing on the vampire's weakening emetic exsanguinations, Mario dismembers Dracula and stakes him through the heart. Unimpeded, Mario becomes the de facto master of the di Fiore estate, representing a transition of power from the crumbling aristocracy to the proletariat. This violent conclusion, terminating both Dracula and the narrative, realizes a prophetic vision suggested in the film's introductory scene.



Fig. 1 | The helpless, mutilated body of Dracula as Mario prepares to stake him, 01:40:16. Euro International Film, 1974.



Fig. 2 | Dracula, contemplating the lifeless possessions over which he presides, 00:04:50. Euro International Film, 1974.



Fig. 3 | Dracula retching after having drunk "tainted" blood, 01:15:54. Euro International Film, 1974.

*Blood for Dracula* opens with a static, shallow focus close-up of Dracula's face, which dominates the right plane of the frame. Dracula's powdery white complexion is offset by Kier's glacial blue eyes that plaintively gaze beyond the frame's limits (Fig. 4). Simultaneously, Claudio Gizzi's melancholic nocturne plays as the opening credits dissolve in and out over the unfocused left plane of the frame. Exuding a languorous, mournful simplicity, Gizzi's composition articulates the sorrowful contemplativeness of Dracula's stare. Morrissey maintains this mise-en-scène as Dracula dyes his eyebrows black and contours his cheeks with rouge (Fig. 5). Whilst painting his lips (the



**Fig. 4** | The opening shot, in which Dracula plaintively stares beyond the frame, 00:00:00. Euro International Film, 1974.



**Fig. 6** | Dracula exposes his fangs whilst painting his lips red, 00:01:29. Euro International Film, 1974.



**Fig. 5** | Dracula dyes his eyebrows black, 00:00:16. Euro International Film, 1974.



**Fig. 7** | Dracula dyeing his white hair black, 00:02:04. Euro International Film, 1974.

lower lip red, the upper lip black) Dracula exposes his fangs (Fig. 6), his vampirism revealed through aesthetics rather than action. Morrissey here plays with Dracula as a cultural icon, a set of fangs the only signifier necessary to convey his vampiric nature. Revealing this nature within a prolonged static tableau of heightened artificiality, Morrissey makes known Dracula's apathy and vanity. Gone is the relentless, batlike hovering of Max Schreck's Count Orlok (*Nosferatu*, 1922), as is the genteel omnipresence of Christopher Lee's stately Count (*Dracula*, 1958). Despite mimicking Bela Lugosi's pale skin and elegant widow's peak, Kier's Dracula shares more in common, both aesthetically and psychologically, with Conrad Veidt's sleep-walker, Cesare, from Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920). Both Kier and Veidt possess a similarly sculpted, artificially painted face. And, both Dracula and Cesare are introduced as somnambulistically gazing at visions beyond the audience's field of view. When actualized, these visions articulate the violent downfall of their subjects, of which neither Dracula nor Cesare can stop from occurring.

As the camera slowly pans out to a medium wide shot, Dracula, now central within the frame, is revealed to be seated within a red chamber illuminated by a blazing fire. Dracula sits before a vanity table, strewn with a melange of powders and pigments, one of which is an inky-black dye that Dracula combs through his shock of white hair (Fig. 7). Contrasting his seemingly youthful appearance, Dracula's white hair—slicked

back and cropped at the nape of the neck—unsettles, a symbol of something once thriving but now diminished. Despite his attempts to affect a human façade, Dracula's demeanour eerily contrasts the naturalism with which the other characters are presented. Dracula's artificiality most strikingly differs from the oft-unadorned Mario, who repeatedly exposes naked flesh in acts of voluptuousness and vigorous assertion (Fig. 8). Thus, visually, Dracula's use of cosmetics contradictorily reinforces his inhumanness. Venerating cosmetics as a defiance of nature, the Decadent poet Charles Baudelaire wrote that the application of make-up transformed the wearer into an *objet d'art*, "something superior and divine" (427). Coincidentally, Baudelaire wrote that Dracula's chosen colours of adornment, red and black, represent a "supernatural and excessive life" (427). Yet, Baudelaire's wearer of *maquillage* is a woman. Inverting Baudelaire's gendered assertion, Morrissey affirms the notion of the vampire as a perverter of gender and sexual norms. Emphasizing Dracula's artificiality thus reinforces his decadent alterity, his languor the fatigue of one detached from nature. Powdered and rouged, Dracula undergoes a decadent aestheticization of the self, prophesizing his own inevitable demise.

Whilst Dracula continues to dye his hair, the camera arcs around him to reveal the mirror, in which Dracula—in accordance with vampire lore—bears no reflection. The camera then switches to a POV shot and pans in on the focus of Dracula's stare: the now seemingly empty chair he sits on. Morrissey halts



**Fig. 8** | Mario, stripped to the waist, chops wood with the axe he will later use to dismember Dracula, 01:22:30. Euro International Film, 1974.



**Fig. 9** | The reflection of the "empty" chair Dracula sits on, 00:02:33. Euro International Film, 1974.

motion in this frame-within-a-frame, presenting the viewer with the static image of Dracula's empty reflection (Fig. 9). Yacowar argues that this image acts as a climactic revelation, emphasizing "what is not seen" (83). Morrissey's emphasis on the void reflected in the mirror, Yacowar continues, heightens the tension between "the substantial and the phantom" (83). This prolonged, static image is an omen of Dracula's unbecoming, prophesizing the reduction of Dracula's corporeal form into a mutilated corpse and his eventual dissolution into nothingness at the close of the film. Gazing at his vacant reflection, Dracula foresees the extinction of his line. Not only has Dracula's dependence on the scarce "pure" blood of Europe rendered him weak, but it has also exposed him to Mario's insurgent attempts to seize power from the upper classes. Breaking the static shot, the "empty" chair is pushed back as Dracula rises. Panning to the floor, Dracula's feet are seen exiting the chamber, a departure from both the screen and civilization.

Mario's final revolt against the aristocracy is neither Morrissey's championing of a Marxist cause, nor the lamenting of a lost nobility, but something much more ambivalent. Although neither vampirically thirsting for blood like Dracula, nor beleaguered by the financial and moral bankruptcy of the di Fiore family, Mario is equally corrupt, prone to sexual exploitation and violence to achieve his ideals. The final power shift in *Blood for Dracula* is therefore just one predatory politic consuming the former. Stressing the cyclical nature of both life and of power structures, Morrissey asserts that, if allowed to rule unimpeded, Mario too shall succumb to self-gratifying desires, and will be reduced to a physical presence with no reflection. As Carlo Altinier writes, "society itself materializes the vampire" (181). Thus, *Blood for Dracula* begins and concludes with a melancholy and pessimistic premise: regardless of the system, humanity is destined for corruption, decadence, and decline. ■

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# The Remix, Archive, and Memory in *Fifi Howls from Happiness*

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## ABSTRACT

Inspired by archival remix in diasporic cultural productions that deal with cultural memory, this featurette demonstrates the potential of filmic remix as a technology of remembrance for challenging normative archives and historiographies. The featurette considers various remixed elements at work in a poetic documentary of Iranian cinema, *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (2014) directed by Mitra Farahani. With a background in visual arts, the France-based director positions her film as an act of writing the neglected visual artist Bahman Mohasses into a much needed historiography and moving image archive of Iranian contemporary art. This featurette envisions the filmic montage in *Fifi Howls from Happiness* as a technology of remembrance that recreates quasi-abstraction and queer compositions that were central to Mohasses' oeuvre with many pieces missing and lost.

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IN THE POETIC documentary *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (2014), Mitra Farahani captures the last days of the visual artist Bahman Mohasses' life. By the time Farahani tracked down Mohasses, deliberately retreated to a private life in a hotel room in Rome, he had been absent long enough for the art world to suspect whether he was still alive. In an interview with a Farsi radio channel based in France, Farahani explained how she got in contact through an acquaintance with the secluded misanthrope (Rostami and Farahani). She travelled from France to Rome with a digital camera to meet him and ended up staying for two months to film. While Farahani succeeded in convincing Mohasses to be filmed, she soon realized that his fierce presence and brazen personality would be the driving force behind the direction the film would take. His insistent and sometimes humorously assertive input on how Farahani should proceed has been built into the film, transfiguring the film's initial genre of documentary into semi-autobiography. We hear his voice in different moments of the film, commanding Farahani what to do and how to juxtapose images with sounds. *Fifi Howls from Happiness*, in turn, is a potent contribution to documentary cinema and queer archives reminiscent of early New Wave and Iranian feminist cinema. The film technologically translates Mohasses' virtuosity in paper collage into filmic montage.

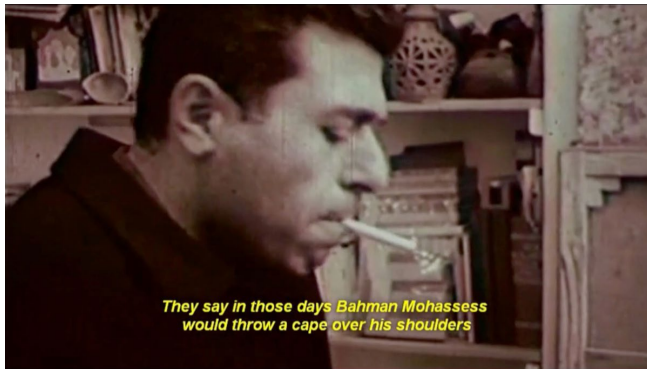
An artist belonging to pre-revolutionary generation of Iranians living in diaspora, Bahman Mohasses lived most of his life in Rome. He left Iran during the 1950s and died in 2010

during production of the film while Farahani's camera was rolling in his hotel room. Mohasses witnessed historical turmoil during his life that informed his visual oeuvre, often performing his rage at shameful legacies of human history. In this filmic ode, Farahani remixes the archival catalogues of the artist's figurative abstract paintings, paper collages, and sculptures that predominantly use expressionist representations. *Fifi Howls from Happiness* becomes essentially the technological reproduction of Mohasses' archives, remixed with the interviews between him and the director in the hotel room, set against shots of Italian seascapes, Rome's cityscapes, and old footage from a 16-minute black and white piece documentary, *The Eye that Hears*, showing young Mohasses directed by Ahmad Faroughi in 1967 (Fig. 2) as part of a documentary series for the Iranian National Television archives. Today, Mohasses is mostly recognized for his figurative paintings, sculptures, and paper collages, many of which he himself discarded, while some have been destroyed by the Iranian governments, and still others are missing, with few sitting in public and private collections.

Farahani carries through the film the negative affect of loss regarding Mohasses' unwritten place in history. With a background in painting and visual arts, the France-based director uses film to write Mohasses, in his own terms, into a much-needed historiography and moving image archive of Iranian contemporary art. As such, one can envision that filmic montage offers Farahani what elsewhere I have termed "a technology of remembrance"



**Fig. 1** | Mohassess in his hotel room. The film's title painting, *Fifi Howls from Happiness*, is seen on the background wall, 00:10:38. Music Box Films, 2014.



**Fig. 2** | Old footage from a 16-minute black and white piece, *The Eye that Hears*, directed by Ahmad Faroughi in 1967 as part of a documentary series for the Iranian National Television archives, 00:04:49. Music Box Films, 2014.

(Akhtari) to recreate quasi-abstraction and queer compositions that are also central to Mohassess' oeuvre. Farahani's filmic remix technologically reproduces the artist's ephemera within which queerness goes beyond his sexual identity and lived experience and instead becomes a poetic condition prevalent to his visual compositions and worldview. In the worlds Mohassess made for his audiences, and Farahani's film remakes in her film, queerness is evoked as what Lee Edelman contends would effectively constitute the limit of politics (75).

Farahani describes how the making of the film early in the process became for her, and arguably for Mohassess, an instrument of revenge, a stubborn gesture of disapproval at history. *Fifi Howls from Happiness* accomplishes the political task of writing the unwritten into the archive of moving image and remembering the forgotten. But more crucial is Farahani's strategic use of remix in queering the archive and inheritance. How else can things be inherited besides in the institutional preservation of their material remains? Can inheritance remain in filmic representations of its material disappearance and destruction? The film captures destruction both in its portrayal of now-destroyed pieces of artwork and as a re-occurring thematic element in Mohassess' compositions. As the frame zooms in on individual pieces, with the same eccentric laughter, Mohassess' voice repeats different phrasings, affirming the same action: "I burnt that," "that's gone," "no more," "tore apart," "that's dead," and so on (Farahani). All

these verbs denoting destructive action re-enact self-mutilations, regenerating the often disfigured, headless, broken-limbed, and grotesque figures in Mohassess' paintings and collages one sees in the film.

The film technologically reproduces the artist's destroyed and missing pieces and, as such, extends the possibility of montage as a cinematic convention to archival remix. It assumes the audience's awareness of media specificity for archival images of pieces remixed together in the film. By constellating what has been mostly destroyed or lost, Farahani's archival remix, in turn, becomes a strategy expressing rage at politics that led to withholding materiality from pieces that now only live on in photographs. The film, thus, remixes archival images to reconstruct and to remember their aesthetic truth and to refuse the acceptance of their material loss. It brings to fore now lost material worlds of textile, wood, paper, bronze, and metal, but also the greater loss of life—that of the film's subject and his oeuvre.

Almost fifteen minutes into the film, in one of the interview episodes, as the two sit together and continue turning over the pages in his catalogue, Mohassess pauses on one painting. He tells Farahani, "Make sure you show this! Make it wide angle. Let me tell you the exact name . . . This is about the occupation of Iraq. And this title cannot be translated into Farsi. You must say it exactly like this when you show it, the voiceover should say 'this is called "*un spectacle nommé honte (A Performance Called Shame)*"' (Farahani) (Figs. 3, 4 & 5). Mohassess' discontent with shameful legacies of human history is manifest in his other works portraying the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, the student and worker movements of May 1968 in France, the 1969 political self-immolation of the Czech student Jan Palach, and years later the Chernobyl disaster (Fig. 6), 1990s Gulf Wars (Fig. 7), and the war in Halabcheh. The frequent presence of animal figures (particularly fish) in his paintings and collages are influences of the wilderness of his birth and childhood place in the coastal province of Gilan, Iran. But more prominently, these figures portray his attention to the more-than-human world facing ecological catastrophe. Farahani accounts for Mohassess' care for animals. For example, one of the earliest scenes in the film captures a fish market in Rasht, Iran, where the camera focuses on a man as he cuts and cleans a fish for sale (00:06:10).

Part of *Fifi Howls from Happiness*' allure is indebted to its charming and eccentric male subject. However, it is Farahani's (dis)embodied voice that really binds the filmic remix together, as she poetically essays throughout the film. Her presence in the film as such evokes the Iranian New Wave and feminist cinema. Scholars in Iranian cinema studies, such as Sara Saljoughi and Farshid Kazemi, have considered the experimental use of the disembodied female voice in Iranian New Cinema. In her discussions of "a collectivity that is yet to come" (2) in Forugh Farrokhzad's experimental poetic cinema, *The House Is Black (Khaneh siyah ast, Iran, 1962)*, Saljoughi considers Farrokhzad's "female authorial voice" (19) as one of the formal strategies that defines Farrokhzad's experimental cinema. Examining examples in preceding decades and in post-revolution Iranian cinema in the 1990s, Kazemi, too,



considers the disembodied female voice as a pivotal element to Iranian New Cinema, which, in turn, he argues reverses the conventions of voice in classical Hollywood cinema wherein the narrator is often a male voice and female voice almost always is synched to a female body's visual representation (62).

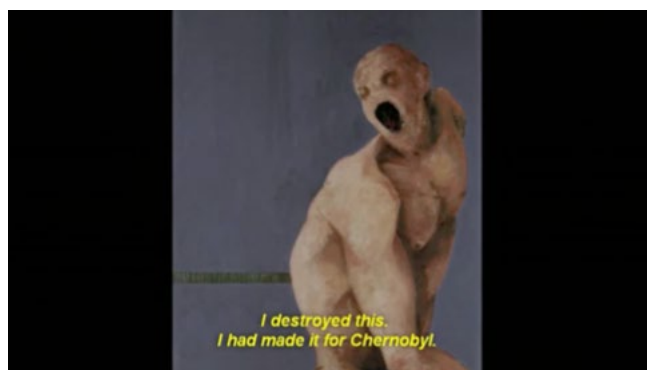
Reminiscence of these acoustic experiments, Farahani's approach in using her voice to anchor the film arguably expands this experimental convention. She introduces the queer feminist discourse, accounting for an urgency facing broader Feminist Iranian Cinema. Farahani includes Mohasses' complex remarks on his disidentification with queerness and critique of homonormativity, as he paradoxically proclaims, "All its [homosexuality's] beauty was in the prohibition" (Farahani). It is rather Farahani's own feminist politics that, in search and rescue of a queer ancestor, her voice re-enacts opening new possibilities for a New Queer Feminist Iranian Cinema. In one of the most



**Fig. 3, 4, & 5** | Mohasses directing Farahani how to juxtapose the painting titled *un spectacle nommé honte*, 00:16:40, 00:16:50, and 00:17:07. Music Box Films, 2014.

sensational moments, for instance, as the camera takes the viewer outside the hotel into the back alley, we hear Farahani's (dis)embodied voice reciting her observation of the paintings and collages: "Destruction. Devastation. Death. As he bore witness to the theatre of the world's destruction, he became the god who destroys his own creations. Undoubtedly, he sees modern man as so utterly condemned to devastation, he cannot bring himself to leave any work as a legacy" (Farahani) (Fig. 8). Farahani's essayist voice echoes her subject's queer futurity and particularly that of his disidentification with social reproduction and immortality. On more than one occasion in the film, we hear Mohasses telling of his lacking desire to leave anything behind. Many of his public sculptures have been frowned upon, burned, and scattered into pieces by the Iranian governments, both in the late Pahlavi era and after the Islamic revolution of 1978-79, mostly due to joyful depictions of dangling phalluses and displays of orgy (Figs. 9 & 10). Through the years, however, Mohasses himself has made more than a few visits to Iran when he willfully destroyed the pieces he had left in his private studio. He eloquently utters in the film, his lack of desire to leave anything for "scavengers" (Farahani).

In the second chapter of the film, entitled "The Commissioners," two Dubai-based young Iranian brothers, Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, following an invitation from Farahani, arrive in Rome to commission the now old Mohasses to paint an oversized oil-painting for their private collection. Mohasses suggests to the director that including scenes of his



**Fig. 6 & 7** | Mohasses' paintings inspired by the Chernobyl disaster the Gulf wars, 00:16:07 and 00:16:05. Music Box Films, 2014.



Fig. 8 | Shot of hotel room's back alley, 00:32:04. Music Box Films, 2014.

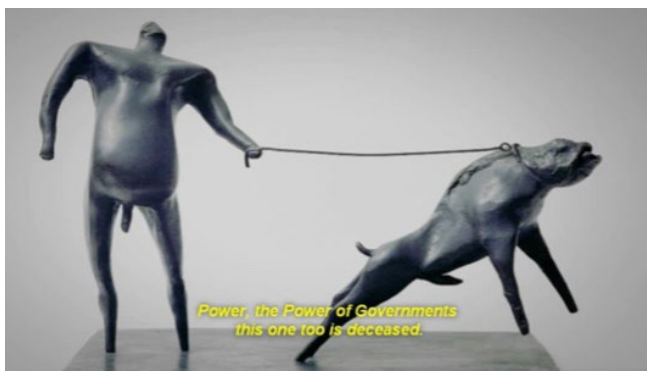
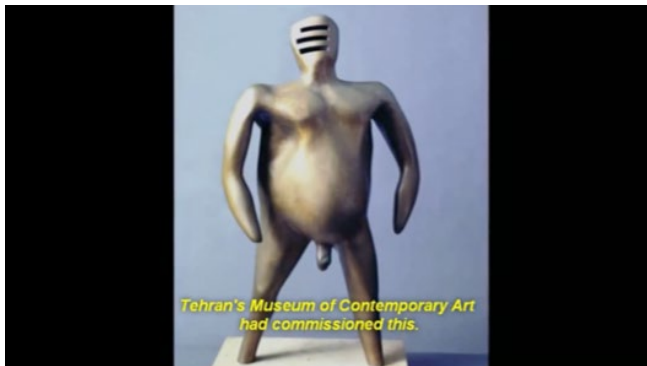


Fig. 9 & 10 | Sculptures that exemplify Mohasses' depictions of phallus often frowned upon by Iranian national institutions, 00:19:38 and 00:28:17. Music Box Films, 2014.

painting in studio would complement the film. So Farahani invites the Haerizadehs because, in their own terms, it has been their long-life dream to “own a Mohasses” (Farahani). Their arrival adds to the intergenerational relations central to film’s narration. The brothers leave after they commission the painting and purchase some of Mohasses’ small pieces. The film then continues with brief shots taking Mohasses out of the hotel room as he purchases paint and supplies, and we hear from him about the studio space he had rented across the street from his hotel room. Shortly, though, we reach the end of the film that tragically overlaps with his death.

Before the ending sequence in which a housekeeper cleans the hotel room (Figs. 11, 12, & 13) that has been Mohasses’ home for the past decades and movers pack his artworks, labelling the

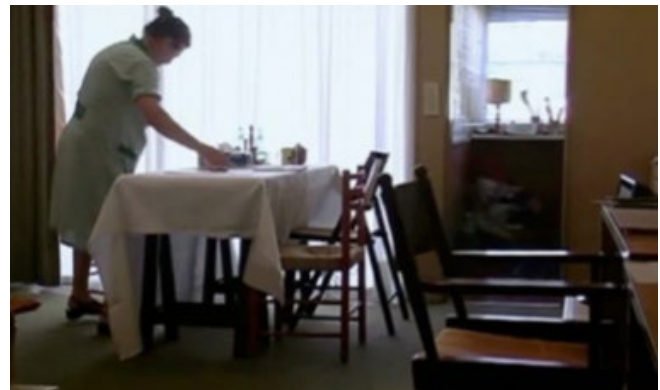


Fig. 11, 12, & 13 | Shots depicting the housekeeper cleaning Mohasses' room and movers packing his art works to ship to Dubai, 01:34:28, 01:35:23, and 01:36:10. Music Box Films, 2014.

parcels with a shipping address in Dubai where the brothers live, we encounter the most sublime moment--that of dying--that documentary cinema can ever capture. The lens zooms in on one of Mohasses’ sculptures in the room where most of the conversations between director and her subject have taken place. We hear an off-screen conversation between Mohasses and Farahani, whose presence remains in her (dis)embodied voice. We hear her in awe: “Wow! Wow! that’s a lot [of blood], really a lot” (01:31:22, Farahani). Soon, as viewers, we discover we are witness to the off-screen death of the subject of the film. As his death unravels, we remember Mohasses’ remarks about history, legacy, and inheritance. We remember that, among all his declarations, he said how he wants to die--a death that is aesthetic: “I want to die like an animal with integrity” (Farahani). ■

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# Confinement and Duplicity

Mise-en-scène in Sir Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express*

BY SAHAR HAMZAH  
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## ABSTRACT

*Murder on the Orient Express* (20th Century Fox, 2017) provides an example of some of the features that often distinguish the directorial films of Sir Kenneth Branagh, such as his deliberate choices designed to involve the audience members as active participants in the cinematic experience through the use of elements of mise-en-scène, including camera movement and angles, costuming, the set, and casting. In the scene in which the detective Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) reveals the news to his fellow passengers that there has been a murder on the train and that someone on the train must be the murderer, all of these elements appear as Branagh creates a sense of confinement and immediacy, enclosing the audience with Poirot and his fellow passengers on the train and establishing them as participants in the action.

KENNETH BRANAGH USES elements of mise-en-scène to consciously involve the viewers in the cinematic experience by placing them, along with the passengers, within the narrow, claustrophobic confines of the train carriages in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Camera movement and camera angles are employed to achieve this goal and to foreshadow the duality and duplicity of the natures of the characters. Historical authenticity of additional elements of mise-en-scène, including costuming and set, further enhances the feeling of engagement and familiarity.

In the scene in which the detective Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) reveals the news to his fellow passengers that there has been a murder on the train and that someone on the train must be the murderer, Branagh creates this sense of confinement for the viewers. In this scene, Branagh “invite[s] people onto the train ...to enclose them as well” (Branagh and Bateman). In the opening medium shot for this scene, the camera is placed eyelevel with the seated passengers, placing the viewer as one of them, on the train with a point-of-view shot looking up as Bouc and Poirot enter the dining car to announce the news (Fig. 1).

In the establishing shot that follows, the actual passengers of the train are seated at different tables along either side of the aisle, establishing the placement of the characters in relation to each other within the narrow dimensions of the train carriage. Prominently displayed are the symmetrical parallel lines of the doorways, windows, and the receding walls of



Fig. 1 | Looking Up at Poirot, 41:31:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

the train converging towards the assumptive vanishing point (Fig. 2). This symmetry of the centre aisle, the passengers on each side, is used to demonstrate the power and strength of Poirot, making him seem in control of the situation. He is at the centre of the story, both emotionally and physically. The mirroring of the characters and tables on either side of the aisle adds a hint of foreshadowing of the duality that exists within each of the characters.

Branagh's research into the history of the Orient Express is evident in the replica of the interior of the train which was built to serve as the set for the film. As Branagh states, “We did recreate all of this... We found all those original plans from the people who designed this amazing thing” (Branagh and Bateman). The dining car, with its tables for four on one

side of the aisle and tables for two on the other, is authentic to the period setting of 1934 and the design by which luxury trains were built by Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (CIWL), the Belgian company founded by Georges Nagelmackers which built the Orient Express as well as the 1920s and 1930s restored carriages that make up the modern Venice-Simplon Orient Express ("History of Compagnie Internationale") (Figs. 3-4).

The establishing shot is followed by a point-of-view tracking shot as Poirot moves down the centre aisle, mimicking his eyes as he glances from side to side at the various passengers, assessing each of them as his gaze travels across them. They, in turn, feel compelled to raise their eyes to him and remark upon the murder when he holds their gazes (Figs. 5-6). This tracking shot emphasizes the limited parameters of the train. It further accentuates the understanding that the killer is among them with nowhere to hide.

Poirot then stops at the end of the compartment and turns to inform the passengers that he is "probably the greatest detective in the world" (*Murder on the Orient Express*). This closeup shot is another study in symmetry, with Poirot positioned as the centre of power in the middle of the doorway with lighted sconces equidistant on either side of his head. He instructs the passengers to stay inside their compartments with the doors locked, to which Caroline Hubbard (Michelle Pfeiffer) replies, "I feel like a prisoner here" (*Murder on the Orient Express*). Her statement is indicative of the feelings of the passengers, as well as the audience, that they are all imprisoned. The train represents a beautiful prison, but nevertheless, still a prison.

Costuming here is a significant factor in exuding period authenticity. Women wear short curls, like those exemplified by 1930s-star Myrna Loy, and mid-calf to ankle length skirts with slim-fitting silhouettes. Men are elegantly attired in three-piece suits with wide, padded shoulders and baggy trousers. All are tailored to match the 1930s styles popularized by Hollywood stars such as Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy (Figs. 7-8).

A medium tracking shot then features the seated characters through the beveled glass of the doorway between the compartments, with the refraction from the glass presenting dual images of each character before moving on to the next. This technique of observing the characters from outside the room through the glass of the windows is used to create a voyeuristic and sometimes paranoid feeling that someone is watching, thereby giving Poirot an almost omniscient presence on the train. The double reflections through the glass are symbolic of the duplicitous nature of the characters, each of whom hides a secret identity that is yet to be revealed (Figs. 9-10). The refracted images are used to further foreshadow the duality and duplicity of the characters.

In Branagh's choice for Poirot's moustache, his attention to detail and authenticity can be seen, as well as his homage to the original hypotexts (Fig. 11). In the hypotext upon which the film is based, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, the tenth Poirot novel, Poirot's character is already established and is



Fig. 2 | Establishing shot, 41:33:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



Fig. 3 | Dining Car of CIWL Train circa 1906. Wagons-Lits Diffusion.



Fig. 4 | Restored Dining Car of Venice-Simplon Orient Express. Luxury Train Club.



**Fig. 5 & 6** | Hector MacQueen (Josh Gad) and Mary Debenham (Daisy Ridley) meet Poirot's gaze, 41:46:00/41:57:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



**Fig. 7** | Myrna Loy. Turner Classic Movies.



**Fig. 8** | Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy in Sam Wood's *Whipsaw*. MGM, 1935.



**Fig. 9 & 10** | The duplicity of Mrs. Hubbard (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Henry Masterman (Derek Jacobi), 42:45:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



Fig. 11 | Poirot's Moustache, 42:22:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

# BRITONS



Fig. 12 | World War I poster of Lord Kitchener. War History Online, 2016.

described as "a little man with enormous moustaches" (Christie 3). The first novel that introduces Poirot, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, provides the physical description of Poirot that dictates his character throughout the rest of the series. He is described as "an extraordinary looking little man... [who] carried himself with great dignity... The neatness of his attire was almost incredible" (Christie, *The Mysterious Affair* 42). In reference to the moustache that he maintains, Christie states that "His moustache was very stiff and military" (42). It is to this description that Branagh refers in his choice of moustache for the film. Branagh chooses one that represents the historical type worn by men in the British military in the early decades of the twentieth century, as exemplified by Lord Kitchener in the posters from World War 1 (Fig. 12).

This scene thus demonstrates the ways that Branagh uses elements of mise-en-scène such as costuming and set, as well as camera movement and angle, to place the viewers on the train. The camera angles and tracking shots create an immediacy and sense of confinement for the viewers, while the movement of the camera is further used to foreshadow the duplicity of the characters that is later revealed. The authenticity of the set and costumes provides a sense of familiarity that contributes to placing the audience in the scene as participants in the action. ■

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# Hockey and Horror

## An Illustrated Analysis of Stephen Campanelli's *Indian Horse*

BY LAURYN BECK

*Kwantlen Polytechnic University*

IN STEPHEN CAMPANELLI'S film *Indian Horse* (2017), an Indigenous boy named Saul (Sladen Peltier, Forrest Goodluck, and Ajuawak Kapashesit) is taken away from his grandmother (Edna Manitowabi) and his home and forced into the St. Jerome's Indian Residential School. Although this film is a redemption/coming-of-age story, for a large portion of the film it feels more like a thriller or a horror movie. Blue covers every object and dulls any warmth, especially in the scenes which take place within the school. Cinematic voyeurism is applied as the audience follows Saul's story through the traumatic moments in his life which continued to haunt him into his early adulthood. The traumatic moments highlighted in the film act as ghosts which follow Saul throughout his life, such as when Father Leboutilier (Michiel Huisman) appears years after Saul had left the school and his presence triggers a form of PTSD in Saul. This initiates the falling action of the plot as Saul quits hockey and struggles with alcoholism.

In my illustration, I wanted emulate a horror movie poster. I used a monochromatic colour palette to create heavy shadows and soft lights. There are three levels to the image: background, middle ground, and foreground. The boy in the lower centre of the image is meant to resemble a young Saul, the details in his face and hair are in focus, and around him is a glowing fog

alluding to his innocence as well as the fog that hovers over the hockey rinks. The middle ground features three dark figures, two nuns and a priest; because the nuns seemed to be more interchangeable throughout the film, I covered their faces in a blanketing shadow and only included luminated eyes for facial detail giving them a demonic appearance. In between the nuns a priest hovers over Saul; his features are not in focus but are exaggerated to show that he is glaring down towards Saul with a twisted look on his face. I included facial features in the priest's design because perhaps the most sickening part of the film was the realization that the priest that seemed to show Saul kindness was sexually abusing him. In the background I used a reference image of a residential school and placed it on top of a hill as a nod to the horror trope of the haunted house.

Campanelli's film *Indian Horse*, had an uplifting ending where Saul is given support, recognition, and was reunited with his people. However, in events in Saul's life represent a very reality for the Indigenous survivors of Canadian residential schools and unfortunately not all found an escape through hockey. This film is chilling, and the abuse depicted forces the audience through cinematic voyeurism to view some of the horrifying traumas that the Indigenous peoples of Canada faced in the residential schools. ■

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# Open Call For Papers

ISSUE 7.2 · WINTER 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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the disciplines**

**Transmedia**

**Film spectatorship**

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Situating itself in film's visual narrative, *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration* (ISSN 2369-5056) is the first of its kind: an international, peer-reviewed journal focused exclusively on the artistry of frame composition as a story-telling technique. With its open-access, open-review publishing model, *MSJ* strives to be a synergistic, community-oriented hub for discourse that begins at the level of the frame. Scholarly analysis of lighting, set design, costuming, camera angles, camera proximities, depth of field, and character placement are just some of the topics that the journal covers. While primarily concerned with discourse in and around the film frame, *MSJ* also includes narratological analysis at the scene and sequence level of related media (television and online) within its scope. Particularly welcome are articles that dovetail current debates, research, and theories as they deepen the understanding of filmic storytelling. The journal's contributing writers are an eclectic, interdisciplinary mixture of graduate students, academics, filmmakers, film scholars, and cineastes, a demographic that also reflects the journal's readership. Published twice a year since 2016, *MSJ* is the official film studies journal of Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Vancouver, Canada. It is included in EBSCO's Film and Television Literature Index.







**ONE FRAME AT A TIME**