MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The Journal of Film & Visual Narration

Vol. 08 No.01 I Spring 2023

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

MSJ

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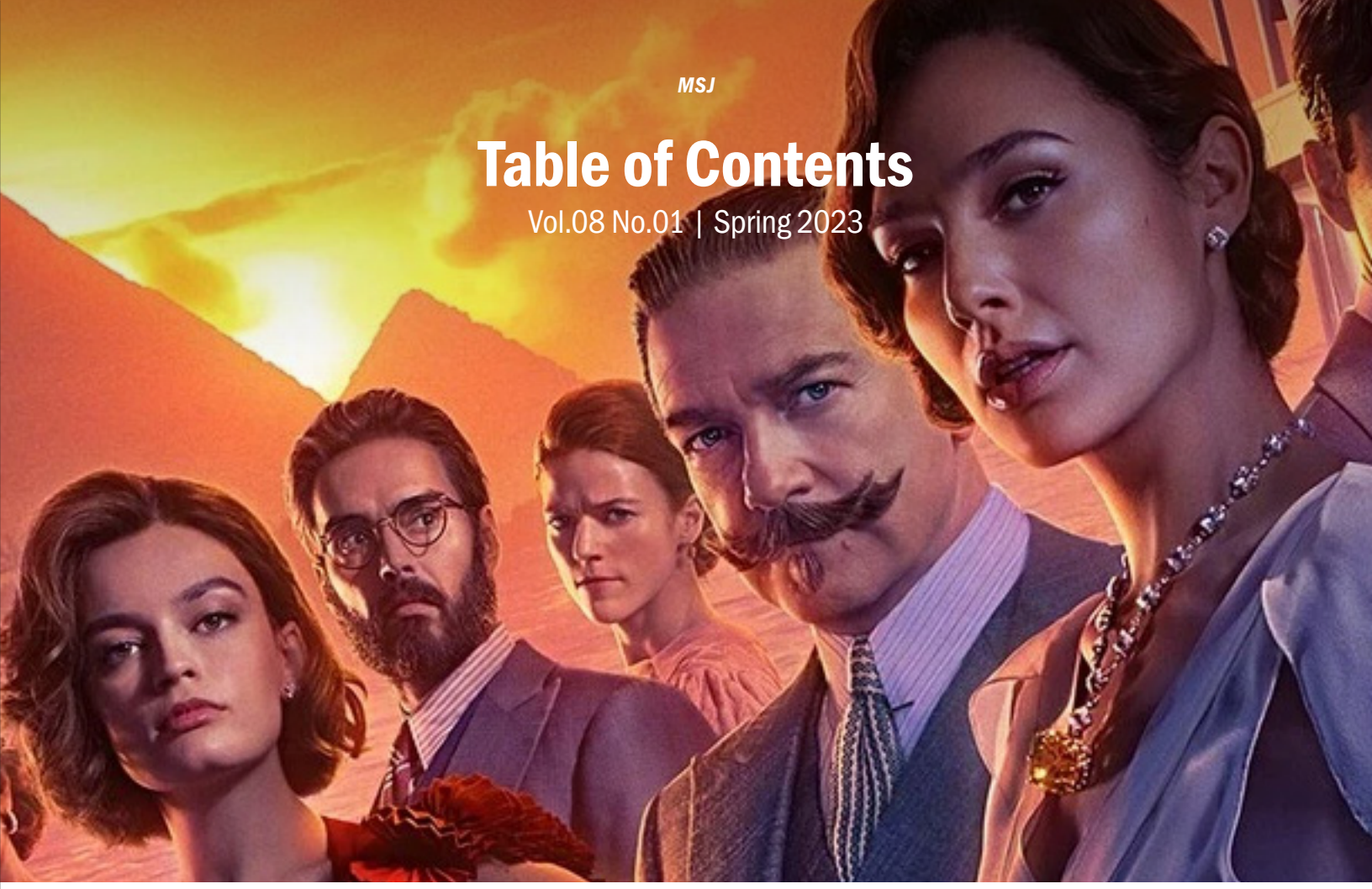

Kenneth Branagh's *Death on the Nile*, 2022.

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Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration
is published by Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada

WEBSITE
journals.kpu.ca/index.php/msq/index

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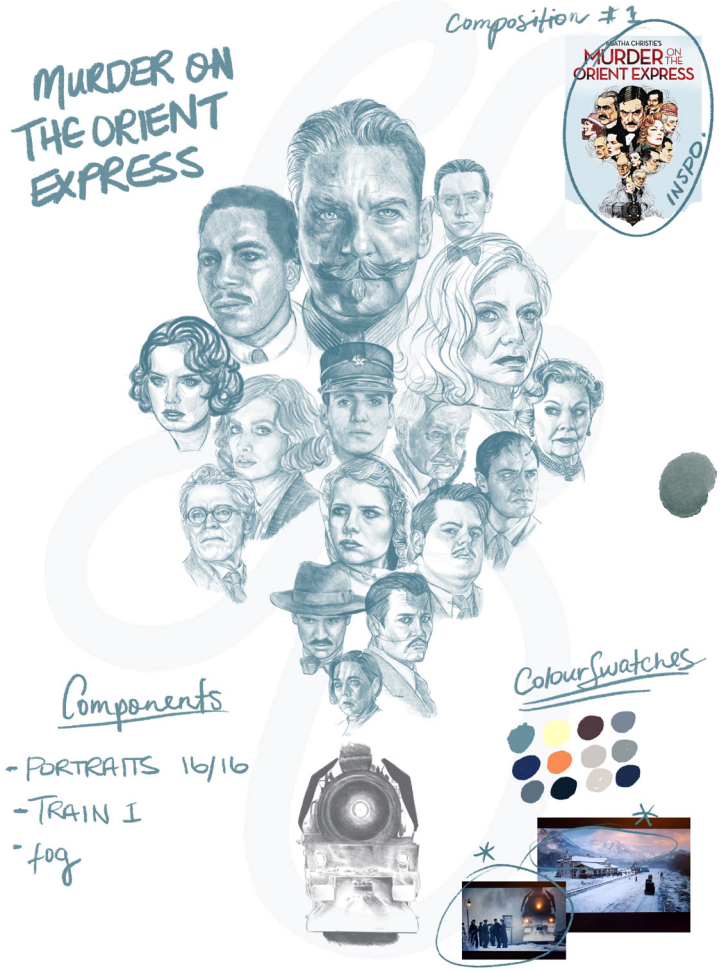
ISSN: 2369-5056 (online)
ISSN: 2560-7065 (print)

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 storytelling technique. With its open-access, open-review publishing model, *MSJ* strives to be a synergitic, 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 annually in the spring and winter, *MSJ* is the official film studies journal of Kwantlen Polytechnic University, where it is sponsored by the Faculty of Arts, the KDocsFF Documentary Film Festival, the KPU Library, and KPU's English Department. In print, it can be found in KPU's and Cinemateca Portuguesa-Museu do Cinema's libraries. *MSJ* appears inEBSCO's Film and Television Literature Index. ▪

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

Letter from the Editor



Dear Reader:

Ever since *MSJ* launched eight years ago, this editor's dream has been to commission a cover art piece to front one of our issues. Now a reality with Issue 8.1, our first custom-made cover speaks to the depth of visual narration within a frame.

The design process began late last year when I reached out to Lauryn Beck, who previously contributed the visual essay "Hockey and Horror: An Illustrated Analysis of Stephen Campanelli's *Indian Horse*" (Issue 6.2), to pitch the idea of her designing a cover for an upcoming issue. She agreed to the commission, being familiar with *MSJ*'s layout, style, and approach to showcasing its authors' research and scholarship. Typically, I use the unifying theme of the issue or choose an article or a featurette in the publication queue as the inspiration for the cover design. Issue 8.1's lead article, Sahar Hamzah's "Symmetry and Centrality as Power: The Use of Mise-en-scène to Create Power in Sir Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*," proved to be the ideal choice for the cover tie-in. I could vividly picture some of this article's key concepts—Poirot's centrality, the rule of thirds, and symmetrical frames as foreshadowing—converging somehow on a cover. Lauryn's first draft reimagined the 1974 promotional artwork for *Murder on the Orient Express* with the cast of the 2017 adaptation arranged around Hercule Poirot as a sinister cloud of smoke emanating from the train. I knew that Issue 8.1's cover would be a defining moment in the journal's history when she shared this initial sketch.

For the second draft, I suggested a design that integrated characters and settings from both of Kenneth Branagh's adaptations. Lauryn not only included all of the characters from *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022), but also spliced together the Orient Express and the Karnak to best represent the two halves of Sahar's argument. The hot and cold colour values add even more depth to the cover's artistic expression, which our savvy layout editor Patrick enhanced with the blue masthead and the orange subheadings.

Please enjoy *MSJ*'s crime film edition from cover to cover.

Greg Chan
Editor-in-Chief

Our Contributors

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Dr. Laura L. Beadling earned her doctorate in American Studies in 2007 from Purdue University. She currently teaches film and screenwriting at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. She has recently published on Cherokee filmmaker Randy Redroad's film *The Doe Boy* and Alexander Payne's screenplay and film *Downsizing*. Her research interests include contemporary American independent film, voiceover narration, genre, and issues of gender in filmmaking. She is currently at work on a book about Alexander Payne.

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Hailey Glennon is an undergraduate student in English literature and creative writing at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. When she is not writing realistic short fiction or complex fantasy novels with characters paving their own destinies, Hailey can be found writing essays for her English classes and planning for grad school. In the realm of film studies, she is particularly interested in researching the shift in boundaries on genre theory, the influences of pop culture in media, and the intersection between feminist film theory and diasporic cinema across various genres. As a mixed South Asian woman, Hailey is interested in discovering more about the ethnic and gender-based representations showcased in film and how this medium of storytelling differs from literature.

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Alison Hirsch is a senior at Princeton, majoring in art history with minors in American studies, European cultural studies, humanistic studies, and environmental studies. She is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society, and her Senior Thesis analyzes Monsanto's marketing oeuvre, including its historical context, corporate agenda, and public perception. Alison currently interns at Little Monster Films and has previously worked for film writer, director, and producer Linda Yellen, Story Syndicate, and Stay Gold Features.

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Carolina Rocha is an undergraduate student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, where she is currently pursuing a BA in English and a Minor in Creative Writing. Her academic interests include queer theory, fandom culture, and classical studies, and she hopes to explore how Greco-Roman mythological inheritances permeate western literature in future research. She is a lifelong film enthusiast and is passionate about her creative as well as scholarly work—outside of her academic pursuits, she is a writer and works professionally as a graphic designer. Her personal essay, *This is How You Say You Love Me*, has recently been accepted at *pulpMAG*. This is her first academic publication.

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Born and raised in the North Delta, BC, Ava Sasaki is a third-year student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, majoring in English with a focus in film studies and intersectionality in media. She currently works as the senior arts editor at *pulpMAG*, and interns as a junior copyeditor at *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film and Visual Narration.*

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

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ARTICLE

Symmetry and Centrality as Power

The Use of Mise-en-scène to Create Power in Sir Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*

BY SAHAR HAMZAH
Arabian Gulf University

ABSTRACT

Murder on the Orient Express and *Death on the Nile* director Sir Kenneth Branagh employs elements of mise-en-scène to convey his characters' sense of power or powerlessness and their control or lack thereof in a given situation. This article explores the various means by which Branagh achieves these conveyances through the use of blocking, set design, symmetry of images, camera angles, and costuming. In both of these films, the character Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) is the main seat of power and is often placed at the centre of a shot. When Poirot is not in authority he is placed off-centre, indicating that he has lost control of the situation and other characters move to the centre. Camera angles, the use of colour, and set designs consisting of repeated parallel lines in architectural features all contribute to defining the power structure that exists between the characters.

In his film adaptations of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022), director Sir Kenneth Branagh uses symmetry and centrality to illustrate who wields power and control. Branagh conveys this power, or the illusion of power, and the desire for control in a variety of ways using elements of mise-en-scène, including set design, blocking, camera placement, and costuming. In addition, the compulsive need for balance in aspects of his life is a further motivation for the actions of the lead character, Hercule Poirot (Sir Kenneth Branagh). The theme of balance is also evidenced in Branagh's frequent use of symmetry in his frame composition. Thus, this article explores the means by which Branagh conveys the sense of power or powerlessness of his characters, their control or lack thereof, and Poirot's desire for balance.

Poirot's need for balance is demonstrated in an early scene from *Murder on the Orient Express* when Poirot walks through the street and accidentally steps with his right foot into a pile of manure. Unnerved by the imbalance of having manure on only one shoe, he steps into the manure with his left foot. As Branagh states, "It's not so much with this new Poirot that he is prissy and precious about getting his hands, or indeed, feet dirty, it's something else, which is balance" ("Commentary" 00:03:35). Poirot feels compelled to step into the manure a second time so that there is balance and both feet are the same.

This compulsion for balance is also highlighted in *Death on the Nile* when Poirot moves the right foot of the corpse of Linnet (Gal Gadot) so that it is neatly aligned and parallel with the left foot (Fig. 1). In the scene, Poirot is in the centre of the screen with a light hanging directly over his head, purposefully illuminating his quirks and eccentricities.

Like Poirot, Branagh creates a world of balance in *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile* where this balance frequently equates with strength, power, control, authority, and stability, and it is translated on film as a world full of symmetry.

Fig. 1 | Parallel feet of Linnet, *Death on the Nile*, 1:12:59. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

The use of symmetry has been a constant in many of the directorial films of Branagh, as it is in life itself. The existence of symmetry has been shown to be essential in nature to create stability. Even at the molecular levels of such building blocks as proteins, it "confers stability on the molecular system" and is "associated with cooperativity," yet "mild perturbation from perfect symmetry may be essential…for dynamic functions" (Blundell and Srinivasan 14243). The properties of symmetry in architecture and art mirror those seen in nature.

In his book *Symmetry*, which deals with his classic study of the principle of symmetry in nature and in the arts, Hermann Weyl states, "Symmetric means something like well-proportioned, well- balanced, and symmetry denotes that sort of concordance of several parts by which they integrate into a whole. *Beauty* is bound up with symmetry" (3), particularly in the case of "bilateral symmetry, the symmetry of left and right, which is so conspicuous in the structure of the higher animals, especially the human body" (4). Bilateral symmetry, where "the halves of a composition mirror each other…is by far the most common form of symmetry in architecture, and is found in all cultures and in all epochs" (Williams 271). For example, the Parthenon in Greece, the Taj Mahal in India, and the Alamo in the United States are each representative of bilateral symmetry. Kim Williams, in her study of *Symmetry in Architecture*, argues that this popularity of bilateral symmetry in architecture may be "an expression of our experience of nature, and in particular with our experience of our own bodies. As many cultures believe that God created man in His own image, architecture has in turn probably been created in the image of man" (271).

Weyl points out that artists as far back as the ancient Sumerians, circa 2700 BC, regularly used bilateral symmetry in their works, as have other artists throughout history (8-15). Bilateral symmetry can refer to mirror images of each other along a vertical axis or to examples of "broken symmetry… where the precise geometric notion of bilateral symmetry begins to dissolve into the vague notion of *Ausgewogenheit*, balanced design" (15-16). In these instances, elements on the left side of the vertical axis may be different than those on the right, but may still present a balanced Fig. that gives the appearance of being symmetrical. I.C. McManus, in his study of symmetry in Italian Renaissance art, concludes that "Asymmetry, when it is used in the arts, is used to season symmetry…some asymmetry is added to that symmetry to generate interest and excitement, for a little asymmetry, correctly used, makes objects optimally satisfying" (176).

McManus provides a "summary of the psychological and aesthetic properties of symmetry and asymmetry, according to art historians and philosophers" (160). According to McManus's findings, symmetry represents law and order, binding and constraint, fixity, and stasis. Following in the tradition of millennia of such artists, Branagh is a strong proponent of the aesthetically- pleasing aspect of symmetry in cinema and its ability to convey the notions of strength, stability, authority, and control. However, Branagh also employs the use of broken symmetry, or balanced design, as well as asymmetry to generate interest and excitement in the set design and the camera framing in his films.

As a filmmaker, Branagh is a proponent of formalism, which "tempts one to set highly visible" styles above more naturalistic ones but does not…demand this hierarchy" (Dudley 84), for, as questioned by Béla Belázs, "Who could find the atmosphere of Claude Monet's paintings in actual nature?" (176). In filmmaking, the aesthetically pleasing is more important than realism, and actors, as well as props, are used to create symmetrical frames.

The production designer for both *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile* was Jim Clay, who also worked with Branagh on the production designs of *Artemis Fowl* (2020) and *Belfast* (2021). Also working on both films was director

of photography Haris Zambarloukos, who served in the same capacity for Branagh's films *Sleuth* (2007), *Thor* (2011), *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014), *Cinderella* (2015), *Artemis Fowl*, and *Belfast*. The production designer, director of photography, and director all worked together to bring to life Branagh's vision of lateral symmetry and broken symmetry to symbolize both beauty and power in *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*.

In *Death on the Nile*, the characters take a cruise down the Nile River on a ship called the Karnak. For the design of the ship, Jim Clay states, "We researched the Thomas Cook fleet…and then designed our own. [Branagh] had specific requirements about how the boat should look. He wanted it to feel rather threatening and sleek and shark-like, because these waters of the Nile were dangerous, especially in our particular case. So we adapted the shape of the hull" ("Design" 2:32:27). The ship is filled with repeating symmetrical vertical lines that are mirror images along a vertical central line to convey the power, strength, and stability of the ship (Fig. 2).

The same can be said of the design for the Cataract Hotel. In describing his design for this hotel, Clay states:

> There is a real place called the Cataract Hotel, and in fact, it existed in the 1930s. Agatha Christie stayed there and was reputed to have begun writing *Death on the Nile* in the Cataract Hotel…we didn't copy it. We used the name, and I used an amalgamation, of various styles of architecture from Egypt in the 1930s, and we built our own composite set specifically for the requirements of the script. ("Design" 2:29:09)

Like the Karnak, the hotel is composed of numerous examples of symmetrical architectural features that highlight its strength and stability.

These examples provide a sharp contrast to the opening scene of the film, which begins with a flashback to Poirot's time on the battlefields in World War I. The opening shot of the Yser Bridge in Belgium on October 31, 1914 (00:00:49) depicts a broken symmetrical image, or balanced design, of burnt-out trees on either side of the ruined road littered with craters created by artillery shells. Smoke clouds rise and dissipate on either side of the desolate landscape. Near the end of the bridge stand similar carts on either side, further adding to the balanced design of the image. The parallel vertical lines of the tree trunks lining the path lead towards the vanishing point on the far side of the bridge and appear shattered and weak, the opposite of stability. This opening image, with its broken symmetrical design, evokes strength and power, while emphasizing the all-encompassing, domineering, and destructive power of war.

In numerous instances for Branagh, the symbolism of symmetry as strength goes hand-in- hand with the significance of centrality in the framing of his characters, the definition of centrality implying not only taking position in the middle of the screen but taking and commanding authority and control of the action. Centrality of the characters represents a break

Fig. 2 | The Karnak, *Death on the Nile*, 00:34:22. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Branagh is a strong proponent of the aesthetically-pleasing aspect of symmetry in cinema.

from the usual rules in cinematography, wherein the rule of thirds is the more common feature. This departure from the rule is employed when a specific reason or purpose is evident or intended.

In his 1797 book *Remarks on Rural Scenery*, English writer, painter, and engraver John Thomas Smith is the first to coin the phrase, "the rule of thirds." In examining paintings created by the master painters, especially those of Rembrandt, Smith noticed that

> the principal light is most frequently placed near the middle of the scene; and that above two-thirds of the picture are in shadow. Analogous to this Rule of thirds (if I may be allowed so to call it) …I have found the ratio of about two thirds to one third, or of one to two, a much better and more harmonizing proportion, than the precise formal *half*…and, in short, than any other proportion whatever. (Smith 15)

This rule of thirds proposes that, in composition for painting, photography, and cinematography, the frame be divided into thirds and "major points of interest in the scene [be placed] on any of the four intersections of the interior lines" (Blain 26).

The rule of thirds has been used by artists for centuries to create what is commonly believed to be the most aesthetically pleasing image as it tends to draw the eye of the viewer deeper into the image instead of simply focusing on the centre. However, "Filmmakers often use a deliberate violation of these principles for a particular effect" (26). In these two films, Branagh's often breaks this rule by using centrality to showcase power, control, and authority. As he states in the commentary of *Murder on the Orient Express*, "I feel when I watch the movie, I hope that those of you watching at home [feel]…the sense that everything probably means something" ("Commentary" 00:34:29).

From Poirot's first appearance in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Branagh quickly establishes him as the seat of power. As Poirot is being served his breakfast, two eggs of equal size, the shot depicts Poirot seated in the middle of the room, in

the middle of the table, and in the centre of the doorway (Fig. 3). On either side of Poirot, the image is a study in bilateral symmetry with black and gold pillars on either side of the doorway. Next to them are windows with latticework that are mirror images, and another black and gold pillar on the other side of each window. This symmetry of the set puts emphasis on the centre of the screen and the focus of power, and even while focusing on the centre, it helps to highlight the symmetry.

Two additional characters grace the scene: the policeman standing slightly off-centre to the right in the doorway and the waiter slightly off-centre to the left at the table. However, it is Poirot who commands attention, even though his back is to the camera, as he sits in the exact centre of the frame. Much like in the films of Wes Anderson, the blocking and symmetry "seem not just meticulously designed in their interiors but very carefully arranged in their presentations- and arranged specifically to be viewed from one particular angle at which the camera obligingly positions us" (Kornhaber 30). In the composition of this frame, using blocking of the additional characters and the symmetry of the set design, Branagh demonstrates from the beginning of the film that Poirot is a man of power and authority.

Branagh uses this technique again in *Death on the Nile* in the scene in which Poirot reunites with Bouc (Tom Bateman), his friend from *Murder on the Orient Express*. As the scene begins, the overhead establishing shots of the Pyramids of Giza follow the rule of thirds, with the two largest pyramids occupying the two dividing lines (00:16:21). The pyramids are not symmetrically aligned because the purpose of these shots is to establish the location and there is no need to break the rule. The pyramids are shown to be of different sizes with the Great Pyramid, the largest, situated between the other two.

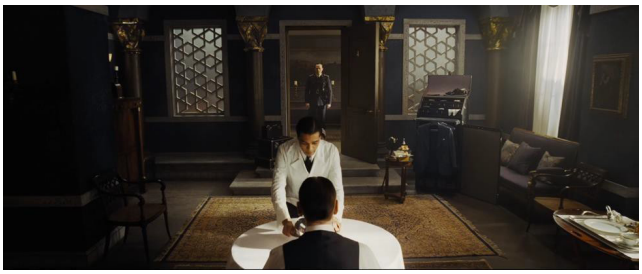

Fig. 3 | Poirot as the Seat of Power, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 00:02:21. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

Fig. 4 | Poirot in Control, *Death on the Nile*, 00:16:39. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

However, these establishing shots are followed by a symmetrical shot that shows the largest pyramid in the centre of the screen and the two smaller pyramids on either side (Fig. 4). The two pyramids on either side are depicted in the previous scenes as being of different sizes, yet in the following figure they appear to be of equal size. This is done in order to create the symmetry needed to aid in demonstrating Poirot's authority.

In the centre of the largest pyramid is the imposing figure of the Sphinx. In the exact centre of the Sphinx is Poirot, shown from the back as he faces the Sphinx head-on, as though he is facing off with it. This demonstrates Poirot's authority and power as the eye is drawn to Poirot in spite of the commanding presence of the Sphinx and the might of the pyramids facing him. His centrality establishes him as the one in control, heightened by this juxtaposition of the might, reverence, and longevity of these great Wonders of the Ancient World. His costuming, the white suit and hat, adds to the emphasis on Poirot as he stands out against the browns and tans of the rest of the scene. This emphasis is further enhanced by the broken symmetry of the stonework and the two tables on either side, creating a balanced image. The two eggs of similar size on the left table reference the above-mentioned scene from *Murder on the Orient Express*. The centrality of Poirot in the following reverse shot reinforces his dominance in his surroundings (00:16:44). The symmetry of the buttons on his suit, the way he sits with legs slightly spread and knees bent at a ninety-degree angle, and his hands placed firmly on his thighs indicate that he is a confident man who is in control.

In *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*, centrality is also used to help in the storytelling process for other characters. For example, in a scene from *Murder on the Orient Express*, it is not Poirot who is in control as Dr. Arbuthnot (Leslie Odom Jr.) holds a gun on Poirot and threatens to shoot him. Arbuthnot has power and control, standing in the centre of the broken symmetrical interior of the train, the vertical lines of the door, the windows, and the shelves framing Arbuthnot, adding a feeling of strength (1:25:22).

Similarly, when Linnet (Gal Gadot) is first introduced in *Death on the Nile*, both symmetry and blocking are used for her entrance into the club, designed to announce her as a powerful woman (Fig. 5). Linnet is spotlighted in the centre of the screen as she comes down the stairs with the crowd parting to make way for her advance, giving her significance in the centre of the frame. Couples dance on either side of the pathway that is created to showcase Linnet's power.

Linnet is in control of the situation, dressed in a glimmering silver gown that makes her appear almost angelic, foreshadowing her role as an innocent victim. Linnet is a pale contrast to the striking red that Jackie (Emma Mackey) wears in the same scene, foreshadowing her role in the film. Studies have shown that "the color red is known to influence psychological functioning, having both negative (e.g., blood, fire, danger), and positive (eg., sex, food) connotations"

(Kuniecki et al). This makes red a fitting colour for the character of Jackie because she is deliberately trying to manipulate the feelings of those around her, leaving them feeling upset, anxious, and unsettled. In this way, costuming is used to give insight into these two characters, one as victim and the other as master manipulator.

This scene in the bar provides foreshadowing of the rivalry that is to come in the film between Jackie and Linnet over the affections of Jackie's fiancé Simon (Armie Hammer), whom Linnet soon marries. Initially, Linnet appears to be in control. However, appearances are deceptive as Jackie has hidden advantages about which the audience does not yet know. Therefore, they appear to begin as equals (Fig. 6). The symmetry of the two profiles indicates that they are supposedly both equal components competing for power, rivals for control, and counterbalanced. Although these two characters appear here to be on equal footing, there will be clues provided as the film progresses that indicate Linnet's declining power and Jackie's emergence in this battle for the centre, for control and dominance.

This use of side-by-side depiction of the characters is duplicated in a later scene when Bouc confesses his love for Rosalie (Letitia Wright) to Poirot as the Karnak continues its journey down the Nile. Bilateral symmetry is demonstrated in the architecture along the central pole as axis, as well as in the rattan chairs on either side. Both Bouc and Poirot have their hands in similar positions atop the rail and they are in mirror positions in the middle of the chairs behind them.

No longer taking the central position, Poirot allows Bouc his moment in the sun as Bouc reveals his true feelings, giving Bouc equal footing as his friend. This is not a case of a younger man going to his elder friend for guidance, but an example of equality in friendship with Poirot allowing Bouc to share in the spotlight for that moment and again when they take a seat in the chairs behind them. The closeup that follows of Bouc, seen through the latticework of the chair, is reminiscent of a confessional as Bouc bares his soul before Poirot, confessing his love but worried about gaining the approval-and financial backing-of his mother, Euphemia (Annette Benning). Much like the usage of symmetry in Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), the symmetry in these shots "draws our attention to the relationship between the actors and the sets, encouraging us to read the scene intellectually" (Lawrence 77).

In the battle for control between Linnet and Jackie, the first indication of Jackie's rising control is her walk up the steps to enter the Cataract Hotel (Fig. 7).

As Jackie ascends the steps, she is also ascending in power. She appears once more bedecked in vibrant red in sharp contrast to the pale pinks, whites, and beiges of the other guests at the wedding party. She encompasses the colour red and everything the colour represents. She is full of danger, passion, love, aggression, dominance, and power, with the train of her dress flying behind her like a red flag signifying the presence of impending trouble and danger.

Fig. 5 | Linnet as Power, *Death on the Nile*, 00:11:47. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Fig. 6 | Rivals for Power, *Death on the Nile*, 00:13:37. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Fig. 7 | Jackie's Ascension, *Death on the Nile*, 00:26:06. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

As Jackie ascends the steps, she is also ascending in power.

Jackie is defined as a powerhouse with the symmetry of the image as she takes the centre of the screen, walking up the bridge with mirroring stone railings on either side amid the rocks that form the edge of the water. In the shot that follows, Jackie rises in the centre of the screen at the top of the stairs, flanked by symmetrical stone columns, palms trees, large pots, and rattan chairs (00:26:18). This is a power play and Jackie is making her move to gain control and power over the situation.

This scene, along with the first entrance of Linnet, bookends the battle between Linnet and Jackie. The outcome has already been decided, although the audience does not realize this yet. Linnet, as she enters, descends the staircase, symbolizing and foreshadowing her loss. Jackie, as she enters, ascends the staircase, symbolizing and foreshadowing her victory. Although in a later scene Jackie appears to be out of control

Fig. 8 | Poirot as Perceived Protector, *Death on the Nile*, 00:32:01. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Fig. 9 | Euphemia in Control, *Death on the Nile*, 00:47:08. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Fig. 10 | Rosalie, Simon, Jackie, and Bouc, *Death on the Nile*, 1:00:37. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

He is, again, centralized within a symmetrical set design above and around him.

and tells Poirot she cannot control herself, the foreshadowing in this scene reveals the truth, that she is a woman fully in control of the situation and her own actions and is capable of manipulating the emotions and actions of others.

The emotionally distressed Linnet turns to Poirot for help and protection. She and her new husband, Simon, ask for Poirot's guidance and suggestions for what should be done about Jackie's constant stalking of the newlyweds (Fig. 8).

In this scene, Poirot is central with multiple arches above and behind him. The architecture of the set boasts bilateral symmetrical lights, windows, and pillars, indicating strength and stability. The wine glasses on the central dining table, the placement of the chairs on either side, and the smaller table lights that appear behind the table, are all symmetrical, with the two waiters on either side providing a balanced design. Linnet and Simon are on either side of Poirot, and are seated at the table and looking up at him. All elements combine to demonstrate the perceived power of Poirot over the newlyweds as they acknowledge his authority and control of the situation, and seek his guidance.

However, this scene is designed to demonstrate the idea of perceived rather than actual power. Poirot appears to be in control, yet actually is ultimately powerless in preventing the impending murder of Linnet. It is Simon, in his continuing efforts to deceive, who has taken control of the narrative and herein allows Poirot, and the audience, the perception of Poirot's being in control while Simon is secretly intending to murder his wife. To this end, the newlyweds choose to ignore Poirot's advice at this point. Instead, the passengers all board the Karnak and begin a cruise down the Nile.

When the passengers disembark at Abu Simbel, Bouc's mother Euphemia proves to be more of a problem than he had anticipated in his desire to marry Rosalie. In the scene at Abu Simbel, Euphemia commands the attention, centrally located between the colossal statues with mirror images on the bases of the statues. With the camera angle shot from below, she is almost at an equal height with the massive statues (Fig. 9).

This low-angle shot indicates Euphemia's dominance, power, authority, and control over her son, Bouc. She controls his actions because she controls his finances, limiting his choices and thereby, unbeknownst to her, contributing to the terrible actions that follow for Bouc and his decision to steal Linnet's extravagant Tiffany & Co. yellow and white diamond necklace. The shot that displays the necklace has it positioned in the centre, thus foreshadowing its importance in the action of the film. It is displayed atop a wood and mother-of-pearl table, placed in the centre so that the two ends of the table also create a balanced design within the shot (00:32:22).

As the larger-than-life Euphemia walks towards Bouc in the scene, she is still shot from below and centrally located as opposed to Bouc who is very small next to these huge statues (00:47:15). The image demonstrates his powerlessness before her and sets the stage for what is to come when Linnet is subsequently murdered and Bouc steals her necklace.

When the passengers of the Karnak return to the ship, they all learn that Jackie has joined the cruise at Abu Simbel. Jackie and Linnet are given centre position and are again battling for control. Jackie is now winning. Linnet had tried to escape Jackie, but she has returned. Jackie appears confident and full of power, surrounded by wide open space (00:53:32). In contrast, Linnet is frazzled and upset (00:53:24).

While this article argues that Branagh often uses centrality to demonstrate power, this is an example of how his use of centrality is not limited to exclusively showcasing strength and power. In this case, the shot of Linnet is significantly more symmetrical than that of Jackie. Linnet faces the camera directly while Jackie stands at a quarter turn from the

camera, which enhances the sense of symmetry of Linnet's shot in comparison to Jackie's. However, the vertical lines that frame Linnet in the windows make it appear as though they are closing in on her and she is losing the battle. Thus, centrality in this case does not demonstrate her power but rather her feeling of being trapped in a bad situation that she cannot escape.

As this action takes place, Poirot watches from above, indicating his watchful eye and omniscient presence that sees everything. He is, again, centralized within a symmetrical set design above and around him. This also occurs in *Murder on the Orient Express* as Poirot observes everything from the outside, "watching, and he sees everything. No one can hide the truth from him" (Hamzah 67).

Onboard the Karnak, blocking becomes an element of symmetry in setting the stage for the confrontation that is to come between Jackie and Simon (Fig. 10). The symmetry of the set is emphasized by the multiple vertical lines of the boat windows and by the doors at the centre of the screen. The blocking further underscores the symmetry as Rosalie and Bouc move to either side with Jackie and Simon, coming together in the centre of the screen as the scene sets up the impending murder of Linnet. As Branagh describes it, "This edginess, this danger, this sense that lust will turn into something darker, means that hatred and murder are never far from the center of things" ("Design" 2:30:38). With Rosalie and Bouc, again like in Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, "the actors are absorbed into the set design, there to provide symmetry for the compositions and nothing more" as "Symmetry is all" (Lawrence 74).

Tensions run high as Poirot begins his investigation into the murder of Linnet, and the additional murders of Linnet's maid Louise (Rose Leslie) and Poirot's friend Bouc. Poirot's questioning leads to a confrontation with numerous characters accusing each other of the murders. This scene is filmed through the beveled glass on the doors, causing each character's image to be doubled, indicating the deception that these characters are all perpetrating as they try to cover up their guilt, not of the murder, but of their possible motives for it (Fig. 11). As Branagh states, "Sometimes, to play with the audience's sense in a thriller of what may or may not be the truth, it's useful to sometimes consider distorting the point of view" ("Commentary" 00:57:44).

Branagh also uses this method of showcasing the duplicity of the characters in *Murder on the Orient Express*. In the scene in which Hardman (Willem Dafoe) confesses that he has been lying about his identity and comes clean about his real reasons for being on the train, his confession is itself another lie. His character is not only two-faced, but is actually three-faced, covering a lie with another lie, and never revealing his true face until Poirot uncovers the truth (Fig. 12).

In the scene leading up to the confrontation between Poirot and the killers, whom he will now name, Poirot is again a man in control (1:44:20). He is again in the centre of the screen, the vertical lines of the doors and windows

Fig. 11 | Duplicity of the Characters, *Death on the Nile*, 1:33:37. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Fig. 12 | Three Faces of Hardman, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1:19:38. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

Fig. 13 | The Two Faces of Poirot, *Death on the Nile*, 1:53:29. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Fig. 14 | A New Poirot, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1:21:45. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

Poirot is along the dividing line for the rule of thirds because he is vulnerable and no longer the master in control of himself.

Fig. 15 | Poirot as Predator, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1:27:58. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

Branagh consistently uses elements of mise-en-scène to convey who wields power and control in a scene.

symmetrical, as are the ropes and boat railings on either side of him. Even Poirot is standing flat-footed, almost aggressively, with his weight evenly distributed on both legs. He is the authority and confident that he knows the truth about everything.

When Jackie pulls her gun and points it at him, Poirot is ready and does the same. Here, seen through the beveled glass, is a humanized Poirot, the two faces of the man, one the clever detective, cold and ruthless, and the other, the man in pain over the useless death of his dear friend Bouc (Fig. 13). No longer in the centre position, the shot follows the rule of thirds, with the two Poirots along the dividing lines, indicating his torn feelings as he battles with his pain.

This is similar to the image of Poirot, this "Poirot for a new generation" ("Art of Murder" 00:01:52), as he examines his photo of his lost love Katherine in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Here is a sensitive Poirot who cares deeply for others. He feels himself completely out of control of the case. No longer positioned in the centre of the screen, Poirot is split, one figure on the right and his reflection on the left (Fig. 14). He is uncertain and of two minds, unsure where to go next in his attempt to uncover the murderer. This is a condition that he is not accustomed to feeling.

The train itself is also used to reinforce how the situation is out of control, derailed and leaning to the side (00:48:48). This "beached whale that is the train" ("Commentary" 00:49:49), as Branagh describes it, is centralized in the frame, pulling focus to the train within the broken symmetry of the tunnel and the equal number of workers on either side of the track. Much like in the opening scene of *Death on the Nile*, this shot is designed not to emphasize the stability of the tunnel, but rather to demonstrate the power and destruction of nature.

When Poirot uncovers the truth behind the murder of Ratchett (Johnny Depp), he assembles all the passengers outside in the tunnel along a table reminiscent of Leonardo DaVinci's *Last Supper*. Like in the painting, there are thirteen suspects assembled here, arrayed down its length like the disciples of Jesus in the painting, implying that here, too, a traitor may be sitting among them (1:28:02). As Branagh says, "The idea was that somehow he'd seen it before in these Biblical terms. So now, here was the *Last Supper*. Judas was there somewhere" ("Commentary" 1:28:11).

Poirot has now solved the crime and he moves towards the culprits as they sit quietly, under his spell (Fig. 15). He is in control and he walks like a predator about to pounce upon his prey. As screenwriter Michael Green points out, "It is adversarial. It's us versus them. It's me versus this group of potential killers," to which Branagh adds, "Well, me and the train versus this group" ("Commentary" 1:29:05). Branagh is at the centre of the screen, in the middle of the tracks, with the train behind him as support, backing up his conclusions because the train carries all the clues. This centrality makes Poirot appear aggressive and intimidating as he comes forward to unveil the killers.

In the final moments of the film, Poirot wanders alone down the interior length of the train. He contemplates the matter of justice and his own conscience. The interior of the train is an example of symmetry and Poirot is again centred in the middle, aware that he has power and control over all the lives of the passengers (1:43:02). As he moves down the train, he comes to the decision to lie to the authorities and to let the murderers go free.

In the beginning of the film, Poirot, as Branagh states, has the "idea that there's right, there's wrong, there's nothing

in between [which] gives him some sort of absolute position, he thinks, but it's what sets up what's going to be the challenge to that position through the rest of the story" ("Commentary" 00:08:11). Poirot has been forced to come to a new revelation of his character, that there is not always absolute right and wrong. Poirot's desire for human beings to be better than the beasts is tested when he has to "confront the evidence that often they are not, including, in this case, where twelve beasts attacked a defenseless human being in a compartment on a train" ("Commentary" 1:29:05).

In the scene in which Poirot reveals to the passengers the decision that he has made concerning the murder on the train and those responsible for it, he is a changed man (1:44:00). As such, he is feeling a bit lost. Here there is no symmetry in the image. The windows on either side of Poirot are not the same. Poirot is along the dividing line for the rule of thirds because he is vulnerable and no longer the master in control of himself. He is a changed man and, as Michael Green states, "He must learn to live with the imbalance" ("Commentary" 1:29:06).

This article thus demonstrates that Branagh consistently uses elements of mise-en-scène to convey who wields power and control in a scene through his choices of camera angles, framing, blocking, and costuming. In doing so, Branagh often chooses to break the rule of thirds and centralize his characters to showcase their actual or perceived dominance and authority for reasons that aid the storytelling process. ▪

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Food as Story and Spectacle in *Big Night* (1996)

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ABSTRACT

Big Night (1996), one of the earliest American examples of a food film, is comprised of two distinct but intertwined aesthetics. One involves immigrant restaurateur brothers, Primo (Tony Shaloub) and Secondo (Stanley Tucci), and another involves a competing establishment run by conniving Pascal (Ian Holm). Tucci and Scott use mise en scéne and camera work to portray the spectacle of food as a corollary to authenticity. Primo and Secondo's restaurant focuses on offering genuine Italian food from their childhoods while Pascal's restaurant is all about showmanship, not food. Tucci and Scott film each restaurant in starkly different ways to link the identity to the spectacle of food. Unlike much of the dialogue which concerns business and uneasy personal relationships, spectacle in *Big Night* focuses on food. While the main narrative strand explores character tensions, much of the running time and screen space showcases Italian food being prepared, eaten, and enjoyed.

Big Night (Campbell Scott, Stanley Tucci, 1996), one of the earliest American examples of a food film, showcases the distinct but intertwined aesthetics of two spaces. One involves the restaurant of immigrant restaurateur brothers, Primo (Tony Shaloub) and Secondo (Stanley Tucci), and another involves a competing establishment. The brothers' restaurant, Paradise, is a place of simple authenticity in which Primo serves as chef while Secondo runs the business. Secondo must somehow make money despite his brother's uncompromising culinary ethic that constrains the restaurant's menu and budget. Nearby is the highly successful Pascal's, run by another Italian immigrant, Pascal (Ian Holm), who duplicitously treats Secondo as a brother yet he plots to ruin Paradise so as to acquire the talents of Primo. Directors Scott and Tucci use mise en scène and camera work to portray the spectacle of food as a corollary to authenticity, which is significant because the brotherly feud shows the ease with which identity can be lost following a bid for assimilation after immigration.

Although spectacle is a "fundamental cinematic concept," it has proven difficult to define (Brown 157). Critics Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale note, "As an aesthetic phenomenon, spectacle has proven easier to exemplify than to define" (5). Critic Simon Lewis highlights that spectacle "seems to be fairly straightforward," but understanding how it functions is complicated (214). Lewis also argues that while spectacle can be the antithesis of narrative, the two are closer than previously acknowledged: each "*transmits information* to the spectator" (216). Likewise, Patrick Keating outlines a "cooperative model" of diegetic elements, including spectacle, that "work together to produce an intensified emotional response" (4). *Big Night* exemplifies this definition; scenes that push the narrative line and those that focus on the food itself (its preparation, cooking, serving, and consuming) work together to create the movie's emotive tableaus.

Unlike much of the dialogue which concerns business and uneasy personal relationships, spectacle in *Big Night* focuses

on food. While the main narrative strand explores character tensions, much of the running time and screen space showcases Italian food being prepared, eaten, and enjoyed, crucially, as a spectacle.[1] However, spectacle can also be any moment that is meant to be appreciated in terms other than as a means to advance the narrative. In a later book, King defines spectacle as "the production of images at which we might wish to stop and stare," which describes the food in *Big Night* (4).

The competing settings of the individual restaurants are showcased early in the film by Secondo walking through each restaurant. To establish the uncompromising nature of Paradise, Scott and Tucci predominantly use long shots, deep focus, minimal camera movements, and sparse editing. The restaurant is portrayed as it seems, with no pretense or pretension, only excellence. In the first scene, the three primary characters associated with Paradise—Primo, Secondo, and the taciturn waiter Cristiano (Marc Anthony)—prep for the evening as the camera remains in a long shot of the kitchen and the three characters (Fig. 1). The opening sequence is just over two and a half minutes long with only one cut, when Secondo leaves the kitchen and enters the front of the house. Secondo walks through the dining room, sets up the bar, and opens the front door. Within the first few minutes of the film, the whole space of Paradise has been clearly laid out.

By opening with two lengthy shots, *Big Night* viscerally demonstrates Paradise's authentic but constrained personality. In *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, critic David Bordwell notes that average shot length in American films shortened from 8-11 seconds before 1960 to 3-6 seconds by 1996. Thus, these opening shots set a specific pace and feeling of continuity (121-22). The two brothers are always proximate; not even editing gives them escape. The success of one is absolutely dependent on the success of the other, but the brothers do not see eye-to-eye. There is little clutter or colour in the kitchen or dining room, emphasizing that food, not atmosphere, is primary in Paradise (Fig. 2).

Conversely, Pascal's emphasizes pizzazz as made clear when Secondo walks through the space early in the film. The first time we meet him, Pascal reinforces that he is a businessman who gives customers what they want; Primo, the food artist, repeats that customers must learn to appreciate authentic food. While Pascal's has the trappings of a stereotypical Italian restaurant that includes plates of antipasto, comically classic songs like "O Sole Mio," and numerous trays of pasta, the real attractions are live singers and the omnipresent showman Pascal, who lights desserts on fire and dramatically uncorks bottles tableside (Fig. 3).

In stark contrast to Paradise, Pascal's symbolizes how easy it is to lose one's identity after immigration and assimilation. Pascal is who Secondo hopes to be—a successful businessman with a busy restaurant—yet the spectacle of his restaurant makes it clear that Pascal has sold out his heritage. While Primo believes that great food is about communion with God, Pascal exploits facile Italian stereotypes to be a successful American businessman. In the final confrontation between Secondo and Pascal, the latter claims, "I am a businessman. I'm anything I need to be at any time." To claim the identity of a businessman, though, Pascal admits that everything else is exploitable.

Fig. 1 | Primo, Secondo, and Cristiano work in Paradise's kitchen in *Big Night*, 00:02:56. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

Fig. 2 | Secondo readies the dining room for the night's service in *Big Night*, 00:03:25. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

Fig. 3 | Pascal's restaurant with live singers, Pascal's wife and dog, and loud décor in *Big Night*, 00:24:29. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

1 Critic Geoff King notes that spectacle in Hollywood action films can be summed up as "Dinosaurs. Sinking ships. Fantastic cities. Spaceships. Alien landscapes. Explosions (lots of explosions). War. Disasters," and, generally, the "scale and impact" of special effects (178).

Fig. 4 | Unlike Primo, Pascal has no problem serving big portions of spaghetti with meatballs in *Big Night*, 00:24:06. Rysher Entertainent, 1996.

Fig. 5 | The two brothers make pasta in *Big Night*, 00:41:05. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

Fig. 6 | The labor-intensive preparation of authentic Italian food by hand in *Big Night*, 00:41:25. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

Accordingly, Pascal's restaurant illustrates how he has rejected authentic Italian culture. Instead of static camera work, scenes at Pascal's are dominated by oneiric Dutch angles and spinning tracking shots that confuse the eye. Although the camera portrays the same spaces in both restaurants—the kitchen, the front door, the dining room, and the bar—there is no clear spatial logic or connection. In Paradise, the kitchen is paramount, but at Pascal's the camera does not even enter it. Unlike Paradise, Pascal's is dark, cluttered, and infused with a lurid red light (Fig. 4). While the simple, bright, uncluttered space of Paradise allows the food to shine, the ambience of Pascal's does everything possible to obscure the food, which, although popular, is inauthentic. Like Pascal himself, the food served at his restaurant is empty of any real connection to culture or heritage. The diners who eat there are being served their own reductive ideas of what Italian food is rather than experiencing a different cuisine.

Even more damning than the décor is the fact that Pascal does not subscribe to Primo's scrupulous respect for the traditional food of his homeland, as demonstrated by the lingering shot of spaghetti and meatballs, which connotes the Americanization of Italian food. Primo will never compromise because he understands that assimilation comes at a cost. While Pascal is rich, he cannot claim any identity other than one as businessman; while he appreciates Primo's food, he is unwilling to do the work to present traditional food to his American diners. Selling out his culture has made him rich, but it has not made him happy or fulfilled. He appears to know that his wife is sleeping with Secondo but does nothing about it. He chases his own chef out of his restaurant after setting his apron afire. He ruins the man he claims to share brotherhood with. Pascal will do anything for money and his inauthentic food is linked to his inauthentic self.

The spectacle of food truly begins once Pascal fools Secondo into thinking that a famous jazz musician will visit Paradise, thereby offering hope for the restaurant's salvation. Primo and Secondo go all out, investing their last resources into the "big night." Much of the second act features this event. Despite familiar tension, the spectacle of cooking emphasizes brotherly harmony; their food (and the heritage it represents) is more important than their individual differences. Shots of food preparation focus not on the characters—and in fact it is often difficult to distinguish the brothers—but on cooking techniques (Fig. 5), often through bird's eye angles (Fig. 6).

Alternatively, the camera is constantly in motion around Pascal in the dining room, never lingering on diners or cooks. Meanwhile, in Paradise, particularly during the big night itself, the camera deemphasizes story and lingers on the enjoyment of food. These moments of bliss are in shallow focus to emphasize the bodily sensation over narrative drive. While most of the diners at the celebration are nameless (Fig. 7) and without significant narrative presence (Fig. 8), the camera nevertheless lingers on facial expressions and epicurean appreciation. The spectacle comes from the overwhelming pleasure of Primo's food while there is almost no such pleasure in Pascal's restaurant.

After the financially ruinous big night, the film ends with an almost five-minute-long shot of Secondo cooking an omelet, part of which he serves to his brother, implying that the two are united even in defeat. This scene is both cooking spectacle but it also, in Keating's words, cooperates with narrative to close the film with an emotional catharsis. The final lengthy shot returns to the minimally edited, deep-focus style of the beginning to show that integrity and authenticity are still important. The big night ends with Primo and Secondo arguing. Secondo screams that he has done "everything" to try to make the restaurant a success while Primo has done "nothing" Primo responds by

saying that he has tried to teach Secondo but he has "learned nothing." The final confrontation of the night involves Secondo and Pascal. Secondo tells him that what Primo has is rare and that Pascal will "never have him." Secondo has finally learned what Primo has been trying to teach him: inauthenticity kills. The last scene in which Secondo cooks the omelet is filmed in the same style of minimal camera movement and editing as the beginning, demonstrating that the lesson has been learned as now Secondo's cooking is filmed in the same way that Primo's cooking had always been filmed. Without words, the two brothers are reconciled as Primo accepts and eats the food his brother has prepared. *Big Night* helped launch the food film trend that continues to accelerate today, but its attention to the craft and labor of preparing traditional food remains unmatched. ▪

Fig. 7 | The camera lingers on this nameless character in *Big Night*, 01:19:20. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

Fig. 8 | The camera lingers on another nameless character in *Big Night*, 01:19:15. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

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Humour Meets Heart

Aesthetic-Driven Transformation in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the use of media aesthetics and humour theory in John Hughes's *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (1987) to illustrate how production techniques can create comedy with an emotional impact. During one of the film's pivotal scenes at the Braidwood Inn, unwilling travel companions Neil Page (Steve Martin) and Del Griffith (John Candy) clash in an argument that transforms both characters for the better. Using a mise-en-scène examination, this essay explains how Hughes's comedic scene construction skillfully executed framing, depth of field, and editing to express key humour approaches such as Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, and comedic juxtaposition. Such aesthetic practices paired with classic humour theories effectively combine in this 1980s comedy classic, its well-rounded characters made both funny and relatable through humour with heart.

Driven by its mise-en-scène, one critical scene adds emotion and humour while transforming advertiser Neil Page (Martin) and shower curtain ring salesman Del Griffith (Candy). It takes place at the Braidwood Inn, a typical interstate motel, where both characters are forced to share a room. Building to the characters' first altercation, Neil soon realizes that he must sleep in the same bed as Del. From a point of view shot, Neil's eyes dart around the room and focus on the bed, followed by a whip pan that reveals Del making the best of the situation with a smile (Fig. 1). Not only is this effective storytelling without dialogue, as sharing a bed with Del is perhaps Neil's worst nightmare, but it also leads to a potential laugh as information is presented in an unexpected way. According to Vandaele, using the element of surprise in film corresponds with a leading theory of humour, Incongruity Theory; this theory states that humour is created when events violate the perceived normalcy in media with a playful twist (221-224).

Neil then finds temporary respite in the shower, in a white bathroom in sharp contrast to the dimly lit sleeping area. As steam fills the bathroom, Neil's eyes glance up at the shower curtain rings that were likely sold by Del—another hint that both travelers may be spending more time together than desired (Fig. 2). Yes, a simple insert shot of the otherwise banal object becomes funny as Martin reacts with an incredulous smile while realizing he may never escape Del. One delayed flight has created two polar opposite roommates.

The film begins cross-cutting between the characters, cementing their differences, as Del now smokes a cigarette while enjoying the vibrating bed. However, it is at this point that the film takes a poignant turn when Del longingly gazes at his wife's picture. Though the film does not yet reveal that she is deceased, there are implications that something is awry as Del's expression conveys sadness. The aesthetics of this shot continue the melancholic implication, now from Del's perspective, creating

Fig. 1 | Neil's panicked eyes whip to a smiling Del, 00:17:57. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 2 | Neil spots the hotel's shower curtain rings, Del's specialty, 00:18:35. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 3 | Del gazes at his wife's picture as if heartbroken, 00:19:03. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

index vectors at the picture's edge that lead down to Del's cigarette. Smoke billows upward beside the photo, providing more clues that she may be in the afterlife above him (Fig. 3). This tender moment also serves as a contrasting joke setup to the punchline about to pay off in the bathroom.

When Neil hesitantly steps out of the shower, we see a close-up of his feet. The once-safe zone for Neil is now revealed to be a disgusting mess, the floors soaked and littered with Del's newspapers. With no spoken words, this scene displays Neil's escalating rage (Fig. 4). Cross-cutting also enables humourous juxtaposition, a comedic production technique wherein vastly different visuals or scenarios are edited back-to-back; while Del relaxes, unaware of the disarray he has caused, Neil tiptoes through filth.

The next three frames feature both characters in bed. Masterfully composing this shot to reveal humour through Z-axis depth, Hughes places Neil in the foreground with Del in the background. There is also a shallow depth of field to focus attention on Neil's disturbed reaction, as Del conducts the first of three pre-slumber rituals—reading a book lit by his lighter's flame (Fig. 5). This moment effectively establishes the start of the comedic technique known as the Rule of Three or Comic Triple—what Levine defines as a specific joke structure wherein three separate but similar elements culminate in an unexpected event (n.p.).

Del then proceeds to crack his neck as Neil grows more agitated (Fig 6). Depth of field again enhances the humour as background blur on the Z-axis can exaggerate a character's actions; by not displaying all detail and allowing viewers to fill in information, John Hughes has used media aesthetics to make Del's routine even more irritating, fitting with Zettl's suggestions for effective visual storytelling (249-253). Furthermore,

Fig. 4 | Neil's feet touch as little tile as possible to reach his towel, 00:19:52. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 5 | Neil tries to sleep while Del flicks his lighter to read, 00:21:42. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 6 | Neil still can't sleep as Del cracks his neck, 22:07. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

this neck-cracking is the reinforcing step of the Comic Triple technique, setting a pattern for the developing joke with similar aesthetics and theme.

As Neil's face contorts, the camera briefly returns to the same composition before Del performs his final ritual—aggressively clearing his sinuses. The loudest snort then becomes the third and final component of the Comic Triple, as the camera unexpectedly cuts to a close-up of Del in bed, no longer blurred by the narrow depth of field (Fig. 7). Because the angle and loudness break the pattern of Del's reading and neck cracking, the blaring snort becomes funnier as the third escalating item of the Comic Triple, fitting with McKeague's model of the Comic Triple (174-178). Creating laughter by depicting Neil's torture, Hughes has also executed another leading approach to humour, Superiority Theory—as Hobbes writes, watching characters go through pain can create cathartic laughter opportunities for audiences (54-55).

Now at his breaking point, Neil jumps up and turns on the light. As he unleashes his litany of annoyances, a series of high-angle shots are used when displaying Del's reaction, a production technique used to convey that the subject is weak or inferior. The camera remains at Neil's eye level momentarily, conveying his anger and dominance; this scenario becomes humourous as Neil hikes up his pants as if in a lovers' quarrel, again displaying comedic juxtaposition (Fig. 8). As the attacks grow and the audience may laugh at Neil's verbal assault, reaction shots of a dejected Del are inserted. Such a shift in tone, through the mise-en-scène, forces viewers to reevaluate both characters.

In the final portion of this scene, Del shockingly stands up for himself and matches Neil's eye level. With his calming

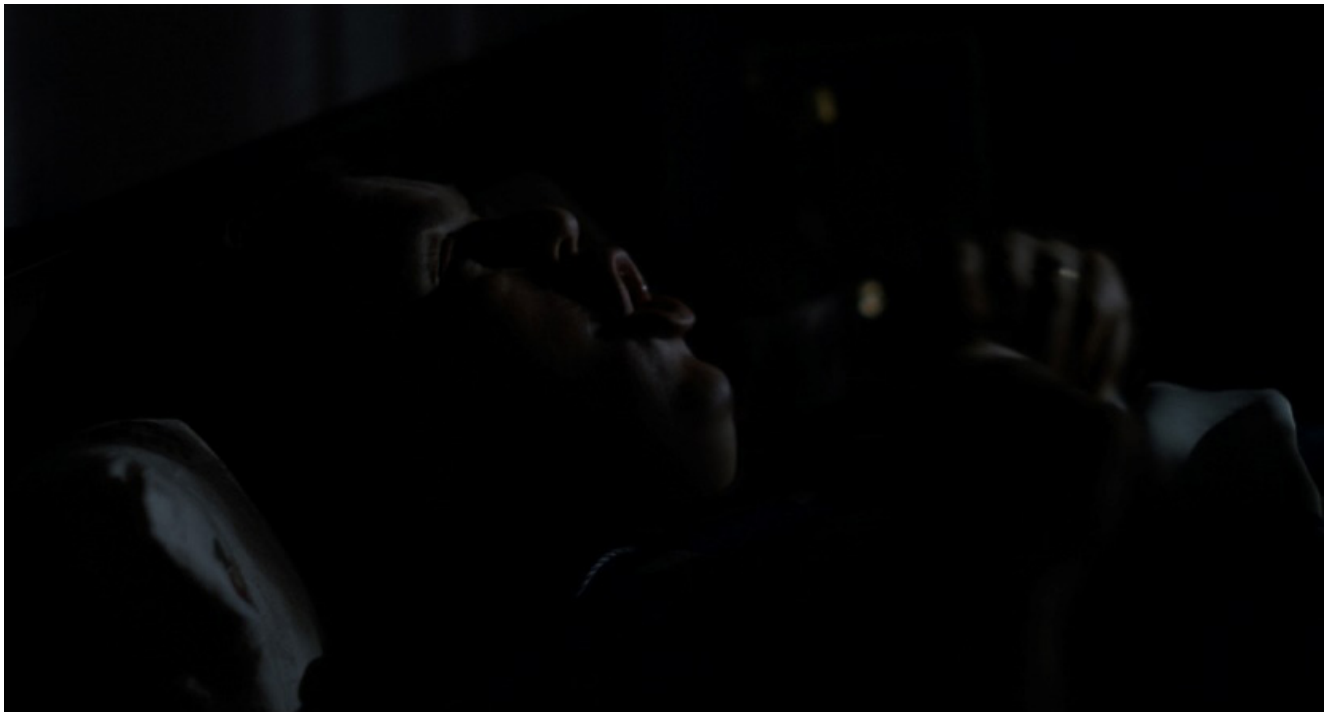

Fig. 7 | Del forcefully snorts, making Neil snap, 00:22:27. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 8 | Having enough of Del, Neil rants, 00:23:16. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

Fig. 9 | Del delivers a powerful monologue, matching Neil's candor, 00:26:08. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

blue pajamas now contrasting Neil's cold white shirt, Del holds back tears in his retort:

> You wanna hurt me? Go right ahead if it makes you feel any better. I'm an easy target … I could be a cold-hearted cynic like you, but I don't like to hurt people's feelings … I like me. My wife likes me. My customers like me. 'Cause I'm the real article. What you see is what you get. (00:25:49-00:26:27)

Here, the characters' relationship shifts, both cutting through their previous small talk. Del's vulnerability is now clear, bolstered by his close-up's shallow depth of field and the blur surrounding him, as compared to Neil's clear and detailed medium full shot (Fig 9). Del transforms from a jovial pest to a gentle giant with feelings, full of humanity. John Candy's acting contains no humour in this moment; however, it serves as vital character-development, connecting to the film's crushing reveal that Del has been a widow for years.

After their heated confrontation, the two return to bed and finally get some sleep. In one last comedic kicker to the scene, morning sunshine beams inside as the camera pans across the bed. Continuing the squabbling lovers comparison, the two strangers are now revealed to be sound asleep in a spooning position (Fig 10).

Here, the Incongruity Theory of humour is used once more, as Neil embraces Del's hand and Del responds with a gentle kiss in an unexpected twist. Lonely travelers now physically interlocked, they realize their error, spring out of bed, and banter about football to deflect as patriotic, non-diegetic music plays. Not only have the characters changed, but also they are now creating humour through Superiority Theory, where

Fig. 10 | The rested travel companions wake up cuddling, 00:28:37. Hughes Entertainment, 1987.

audiences can find temporary relief from the tense moments and laugh at the characters' mistake.

Though the film's tone drastically shifts during this scene, the emotion and humour continue to build until the credits roll. In an interview, John Hughes discusses striking this delicate balance in his work: "I think any good comedy has to have a variety of styles. You don't want to keep hitting the same note" ("Writing and Directing" 01:30-01:36). I suggest that Hughes and his crew succeeded with *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, creating a comedy that can make viewers cry in two ways—both from the laughter rooted in classic humour theories and also the emotional visual storytelling enhanced by the film's mise-en-scène. ▪

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‘Quoting Cowboys’

False Idols of the Mythical West in *The Power of the Dog*

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ABSTRACT

Although the events of Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog* (2021) miss the golden age of frontier stories in the American West, its sullen protagonist clings obsessively to the myth of the cowboy—the ultimate figure of American masculinity, by then belonging to a distant past—as a means of disguising his taboo homosexual desires. Attempting to mimic the cowboys of old and stake his claim over the mythical landscape of the classical Western, Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch) hides his shame behind layers of grime and aggression that the film gradually reveals as a mask—a mask which, as its cracks begin to show, reflect the fictitious nature of the idealized masculinity he is desperate to embody.

Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog* (2021) begins with a question: “What kind of man would I be if I did not help my mother?” asks the enigmatic Peter Gordon (Kodi Smit-McPhee) over a hauntingly dissonant score, which already hints at the tension permeating Campion’s adaptation of Thomas Savage’s 1967 novel. While setting up the motivation behind Peter’s actions, the line also introduces a question that drives another major character, Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch): what exactly makes a man? From the moment we meet him, Phil is obsessed with recapturing an image of manhood that is rooted in the past. “They were real men in those days,” he mourns to young Peter (01:22:58-01:23:00), having suddenly taken the boy under his wing after relentlessly ridiculing him for his effeminacy. Of course, what Phil reverently refers to is the mythic cowboy of the boundless West, the ultimate icon of Americanism and traditional masculinity—an identity Phil adopts as a way of masking his repressed homosexuality. Although he attempts to teach Peter to take up the same guise, his own persona is riddled with contradictions that reveal the mythic cowboy as fiction—an ideal belonging to an unreachable past.

As scholar Heike Paul writes in *The Myths That Made America*, the myth of the West adapts a “much older” (312) pastoral fantasy of simplicity and self-sufficiency which, coupled with the expansionism at the heart of the frontier myth, transforms the American West into a land bigger than itself—a utopian landscape at the edge of wilderness and civilization that enables a return to the past through a return to the land. Where these two aspects of Western mythology collide is where the cowboy arises as a nostalgic, gendered ideal: the “masculinist” frontier hero tasked with protecting an idyllic way of life by asserting dominion over the land—a task largely accomplished through self-legitimized violence (Paul 314). The Western genre is thus built on the mythology of the cowboy, an ideal that Phil is intent on embodying and perpetuating through his mentoring of Peter in *The Power of the Dog*. From the film’s opening shot (Fig. 1), which references John Ford’s *The Searchers*’ iconic final image (01:58:37)—John Wayne,

Fig. 1 | Phil framed by the ranch window in *The Power of the Dog*, 00:01:51. Netflix, 2021.

Fig. 2 | John Wayne wanders back into the West at the end of *The Searchers*, 01:58:37. Warner Bros., 1956.

framed by a doorway, walking alone into the desert (Fig. 2)—Ari Wegner's cinematography invites us to consider Phil as a hardened, Wayne-esque cowboy with little interest in civilized domestic life by tracking him through the windows of the ranch house (White 25) (00:01:51). At first, this representation of Cumberbatch's character appears accurate: he refuses to bathe in the house, wear gloves while doing the castrating, and tells his brother George Burbank (Jesse Plemons) of his desire to ride into the wild and live off the land using only his physical prowess. But the longer we watch, the more is Phil's behaviour revealed as inauthentic.

Despite Phil's posturing, *The Power of the Dog* comes not in the midst of cowboy culture, but on its heels. The film is set in 1925, thirty-five years after the U.S. Census Bureau's declaration that the famed frontier no longer existed (Paul 313). As Campion herself observes, "[*The Power of the Dog* is] a ranch story . . . Nobody's got a gun . . . the cowhands are working there because they love cowboys of old and they are getting their clothes from the mail orders" (Thompson). They are not, despite Phil's best attempts to convince the world otherwise, *real* cowboys; what he does is mere imitation—a "quoting of cowboys." Try as he might to project authenticity, Phil lives "just on the end of that mythology" and cannot transcend a poor reenactment of the cowboy lifestyle (Thompson). In fact, although the figure we meet is a rough-spoken, bath-averse ranch worker, we soon learn that his past lies far from the rural West. Before taking over the ranch twenty-five years prior, Phil had been Phi Beta Kappa at Yale University as a high society

Fig. 3 | A bodybuilding magazine bearing Bronco Henry's signature in *The Power of the Dog*, 01:15:28. Netflix, 2021.

Classics scholar. More importantly, the aggressive homophobia he directs toward Peter is a facade meant to disguise his own suppressed homosexuality. Everything about Phil, from his clothes to his speech, is part of a "performance" of masculinity (Aranjuez 19), an overcompensation for the aspect of his true identity that brings his manhood, in the context of his time and place, into question. Furthermore, not only is Phil's display of extreme masculinity a performance, but it is also, in the words of gender theorist Judith Butler, "a '*compulsory* performance'" (qtd. in Aranjuez 19, emphasis added)—a well-constructed act learned from and enforced by his now-dead mentor, Bronco Henry.

While he never appears in the story, Bronco haunts Campion's film with the same mythical weight of the cowboy. At the Burbank ranch, the cowhands build folklore around him, sharing stories of his grandiosity and toasting to his name; and Phil, as if he cannot help himself, brings him up incessantly, unwilling to let Bronco's legacy be forgotten. In the eyes of the men who knew him, Bronco was the epitome of the masculinity that they aimed to embody. To Phil, he was "the wolf who raised [him]," who brought him closer to the agrarian myth of the old American West by teaching him "ranching," and, in consequence, how to be a man (00:09:43-00:10:10). Yet Bronco was more than a mentor to Phil: he was a lover, the object of the very taboo desires driving his masculine performance. Staying true to the secrecy of their relationship, Campion reveals its true nature only through props—the handkerchief Phil uses to masturbate, embroidered with "B.H."; Bronco's saddle, which Phil lovingly polishes, handling it with a sensual touch; and the bodybuilding magazines in Phil's hiding place in the woods. The latter bear two noteworthy details that further clarify the film's backstory: a handwritten label claiming ownership by Bronco, and the tagline, "Weakness a crime; Don't be a criminal" (Fig. 3). While these props confirm Phil's homosexuality to Peter and the audience, they also expose Bronco's, further bringing into question the idealized image of the cowboy.

Moreover, while the act of perfecting the masculine persona offered to him by Bronco earns Phil the fear and respect of his fellow men, it also "affords him a type of pleasure beyond sex" (Aranjuez 27). Because he successfully displays a form of masculinity so contrived as to be beyond questioning, Phil is allowed to navigate masculine spaces and form relationships, albeit superficial ones, with other men at the ranch, like his brother and fellow ranch workers. Having lost his homosexual bond with Bronco, the man who simultaneously offered him the taboo connection he craved and instructed him on how to best disguise it, Phil clings to homosocial bonds largely built on the culture of hypermasculinity they cultivate. Rose Gordon's (Kirsten Dunst) arrival on the ranch, however, disrupts this dynamic. Critic Patricia White notes in "Women Auteurs, Western Promises" that "white women have been central to the mythology of the Western, representing the triumph of garden over wilderness or the grit that helps 'destiny' manifest itself" (32). For Phil, however, Rose brings along a femininity that threatens his sanctuary as well as his facade, as it reflects the exact quality he fears in himself and which, when he sees Peter display it without shame, incites him to torment the boy. His hatred of mother and son thus stems from a complex mixture of "displaced self-loathing and -policing" (Aranjuez 21) and a need to assert his masculine authority.

Nevertheless, the movie's setting—so intrinsic to Phil's carefully constructed masculine identity—is as much an illusion as his cowboy persona. The land and its connotations of freedom and opportunity in the myth of the West are a central part of the film's cinematography. Wegner, *The Power of the Dog*'s director of photography, notes that in scouting the locations for the film, Campion placed great emphasis on considering Phil's connection to the landscape: "[Campion] felt we needed a place where the mountains could be close

Fig. 4 | A Native American trader and his son in *The Power of the Dog*, 01:40:37. Netflix, 2021.

enough to touch. Something that Phil could feel a connection to, in terms of how he felt about *his* place." Like the cowboys he admires, Phil claims ownership over the land; he looks to the hills and finds meaning in the figure of the dog, in the very ability to see it, while others cannot. However, while the story is set in Montana, the real locations used by Campion are not in America but in New Zealand, the director's "backyard" (Wegner). While speaking of building a "massive ranch . . . in southern New Zealand" for shooting exteriors, Campion describes the space as having a "mythic, epic feeling about it, that [they] couldn't find [in America]" (Thompson). In a film that centres around a man's obsession with retaining the sacredness of the American West, this production detail adds a layer of irony that enriches its themes, strengthening the idea of the West not as a tangible place, but as an idea—one that, if challenged, would endanger the mask Phil has built for himself.

Still, or perhaps *because* of the West's metaphorical nature, Phil puts great emphasis on his self-proclaimed dominion over the ranch and its surrounding landscape—"his" territory. While the film does not broach settler colonialism directly, the peripheral presence of Native Americans at the Burbank ranch mounts a subtle critique of the colonial past from which the cowboy cannot be separated. Whether in its "agrarian" or "expansionist" form, the myth of the American West relies on the "dismiss[al]" of "the [I]ndigenous population as inhabitants of the land" (Paul 325), and Phil's own myth-building is no exception. Throughout the film, be it by demanding "any Indians camping . . . be moved off the property" (01:03:12-01:03:20) or burning hides rather than selling them to Native American traders, Phil denies these peoples any access to the land and its resources in an effort to reinforce his own authority and claim over settled territory—and, in consequence, strengthen his cowboy persona. In doing so, however, he prompts a reversal of the traditional hero-villain dynamic of the classical Western, wherein colonization is a righteous campaign to defeat the monstrous "Indian," and which requires the victimization of the white American woman for the heroic cowboy to rise. Another marker that *The Power of the Dog* eschews the golden age of frontier stories is that its Native Americans (Adam Beach and Maeson Stone Skuggedal) appear not as fearsome, animalistic enemies at the heart of the conflict, but as non-threatening, displaced figures unreasonably antagonized by the ranch's occupants (Fig. 4). In this way, they are not unlike Rose, whom Phil targets in part because of the perceived threat she poses to his ownership of the property. In fact, Campion makes a point of aligning Rose—whose victimhood is explicit—to the Native Americans: when it finally comes, her rebellion against Phil is an act of kindness toward them. By giving away the hides, Rose uses her "grit" (White 32) *against* rather than *for* the settler narrative wielded by Phil, challenging his authority on the ranch as both patriarch and colonizer. In her tearful acceptance of the traders' gift, a pair of "deliciously soft . . . beautiful" leather gloves (*The Power of the Dog* 01:40:30-01:40:44) which symbolize protection all the more blatantly given the film's ending, the Western's traditional victim and victimizer establish mutual compassion. Or, at the very least, they establish mutual respect. In the vacuum created by this subversion, Phil arises as the source of their mutual suffering; in Campion's West, the pseudo-cowboy becomes the antagonist.

Phil's claim over the land and its associated mythology is also bound to his unique ability, learned from Bronco, to see the image of a barking dog on the hills facing the ranch. He boasts this sight as something that sets him apart from others—namely his brother, George, whom Phil dismisses with a smirk when a fellow rancher asks whether anyone has seen what Phil sees (00:23:09-00:23:16). After all, George, whom we first meet in the bath as an antithesis to the ever-filthy Phil

Fig. 5 | Phil gazes up at the hills around the Burbank ranch in *The Power of the Dog*, 00:23:24. Netflix, 2021.

Fig. 6 | Phil and Peter observe the figure of a barking dog in *The Power of the Dog*, 01:24:37. Netflix, 2021.

and later see almost exclusively in his crisp suits and behind the wheel of his car, appears more interested in retaining the aura of his "cosmopolitan upbringing" (Aranjuez 22) than tending the ranch with his brother. Much like his relationship with Bronco, however, Phil's ability to see the dog is bound in contradictions: at the same time as it represents the ideal masculinity he aims to project and later teach, it also reflects his self-inflicted isolation, and the longing he feels for the companionship he shared with his now-dead mentor. When he gazes up at the hills, seeing what no one else seems capable of seeing, Phil's expression fills with a sadness that hints at his loneliness (Fig. 5). It is not surprising then, that after choosing to mentor Peter by shaping him into the masculine cowboy Bronco taught him to be, he would be eager to share with him the knowledge of the dog (Fig. 6). In a surprising turn, however, Peter admits to having spotted the figure upon his arrival at the ranch, a revelation that exposes the cracks in Phil's persona: whereas Phil had to be taught to see the dog—and, in parallel, to be "a man"—Peter, conversely comfortable with exhibiting the feminine traits Phil wishes to purge, possesses a more inherent sight. The moment offers a glimpse into Peter's real nature and intelligence, which he disguises throughout his time with Phil as a means to deceive him and, ultimately, take his life. But it also brings into question the sanctity of traditional masculinity that Phil is so desperate to impart. Of what value, then, are Phil's lessons to Peter? Of what value, in a new and developing age, is the myth of the cowboy?

When Phil dies at the end of the film, in a way, so does his idealized image of the utopian West and its masculine hero. Peter, his would-be protégé, rejects the mantle Phil believes, for most of the movie, that he needs to pass on, as Bronco did for him. Ultimately, his carefully constructed mask—the layers of grime and aggression he refuses to wash off, should his true self be revealed—are taken away upon his death, leaving only the skeletal figure of a clean-shaven, unrecognizable man, stripped completely of his power and unable to control how others perceive him. His obsession with becoming the cowboy of old, so destructive of himself and those around him, is meaningless in the end. The revelation of Peter's murderous plot casts a chill over the film's final moments, but, at the same time, the man's absence appears to lift a weight off the other characters, as if they, without his overbearing presence, can drop their own masks as well, letting go of the mythical past he fought so fiercely to maintain. ▪

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Cannolis, Crime, and the Cost of the American Dream

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ABSTRACT

An hour into Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is a scene that captures one of the film's central themes: the cost of American assimilation. The two minute and sixteen seconds revolve around a car ride in which Clemenza and Rocco carry out Paulie's murder. As a narrative unit, the scene's three-part trajectory traces the car's trip from departure to destination – from Clemenza's driveway to Pauli's massacre. With Sicilian natives and an automobile, a symbol inextricably linked with American ideals, the drive alludes to an immigrant's journey from homeland to promised land. Building upon this connection, the scene's perspective, setting, composition, structure, sound, and cinematography impart a series of insightful but disturbing realities regarding the American dream – a dream destined to become a nightmare.

An hour into Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is a scene that captures one of the film's central themes: the cost of American assimilation (00:56:00–00:58:16). Two minutes and sixteen seconds revolve around a car ride in which Peter Clemenza (Richard S. Castellano) and Alex Rocco (Moe Greene) perform Paulie Gatto's (John Martino) murder since he betrayed the Corleone family. As a narrative unit, the sequence's three-part trajectory traces the car's trip from departure to destination: from Clemenza's driveway to Paulie's death. With Sicilian natives and an automobile, a symbol inextricably linked with American idealism, the drive alludes to an immigrant's journey from homeland to promised land. Building upon this connection, the scene's perspective, setting, composition, structure, sound, and cinematography impart a series of insightful but disturbing realities regarding the American Dream—it is a dream destined to become a nightmare.

The first forty-five seconds of the scene depicts a family and a home, much like how immigration begins with a heritage and a homeland. The scene opens with an eye-level shot from across the street looking at the shiny car parked in Clemenza's driveway. For the first few seconds, everything in the frame is still except for two boys squealing as one pushes the other in a toy car. As the sole visual and audible subjects on screen, the children encourage us to consider their significance. The play car's juxtaposition with the real car presents a parallel between the boys and men, as if to say that sons will follow their father's pursuit of the American Dream (Fig. 1).

In this way, Coppola implies that the impact of immigration is multigenerational and inevitable. The scene then cuts to a shot filmed from behind Clemenza that features him facing his wife (Ardell Sheridan) while they converse near the doorway. The camera tilts up to capture the top half of the wife who occupies centre-screen, towering over her husband standing on a lower step. Scale shows her to be in a position of power, but the setting renders her powers as restricted to the household (Fig. 2).

Even after Clemenza exits the frame, his wife remains in front of their home. She smiles while watching her husband leave for work, happy that he has opportunity though she does not. In her final contribution to the scene, she reminds Clemenza, "Don't forget the cannoli" (00:56:11). Given the importance of the cannoli in Italian culture, her line can be understood as a warning against losing touch with tradition. Moreover, just as it indicates an affliction faced by immigrant children, the scene comments on the constraints placed on immigrant women. While women can assert power at home, they are prevented from pursuing the American Dream other than through their husbands. Consequently, women remain connected to their country of origin, which may allow for a more secure sense of self; however, as exemplified in the famous cannoli line, it also makes women responsible for maintaining their family's cultural ties.

Fig. 1 | Clemenza's driveway, *The Godfather*, 00:56:00. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 2 | Clemenza and his wife, *The Godfather,* 00:56:05. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 3 | Paulie's last drive, *The Godfather*, 00:56:25. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 4 | Midtown Tunnel, *The Godfather*, 00:56:52. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

As the scene continues, the camera and therefore the audience accompany Clemenza in leaving home to execute his boss's orders. A medium shot is maintained although the camera is now stationed inside Paulie's car, close to the passenger seat Clemenza occupies (Fig. 3). Dynamic lighting illustrates the scene's duality and divide.

Sunlight from the windows partially illuminates the car's dark interior, including half of Clemenza and Paulie's faces; alone in the back seat, Rocco is entirely obscured by shadows. Here, light signifies the men's two-faced nature: Paulie feigns his loyalty to the Corleone family; Clemenza pretends he is not planning to kill Paulie. The contrast can additionally be interpreted as a visual manifestation of their dual identities as both Italian and American. Colour further suggests such identities to exist in conflict with each other rather than in cohesion. The black car's juxtaposition against the green yard reinforces the barrier separating the professional criminals from the children playing. Rather than representing Clemenza's disregard for his sons, these barriers demonstrate his devotion to their safety. To ensure that the barriers remain intact, he instructs Paulie to "watch out for the kids when you're backing out" (00:56:38). Despite previously dismissing his wife's inquiries about the length of his absence. Clemenza embarks on his business with family at the forefront of his mind. Through the shot's cinematography and portrayal of Clemenza, Coppola suggests that immigrants pursue the American Dream not for themselves but for their family for they are driven by the desire to provide their children with a better future.

The sequence's second section, consisting of Clemenza, Paulie, and Rocco's car ride, offers insight into the process of assimilation. The use of slow transitions presents the passage of time in a pace that builds suspense; this use of dramatic irony and symbolic imagery establishes an ominous element. For instance, a shot of the car leaving Clemenza's house dissolves into a darker setting (00:56:50), as if the distance from his family corresponds to the lack of light, moving from the familiar to the foreign (Fig. 4).

The increased distance between the camera and the car adds to the scene's mystery—we cannot see the men, but we hear them through a voiceover. Clemenza tells Paulie to search for "mattresses" (00:56:28) or safehouses, misleading him so he is distracted and unsuspecting. Their deceitful dialogue is

echoed in the scene's darkness before it dissolves into a long shot of the car in a city street (Fig. 5).

Unaware of the irony, Paulie exclaims, "They told me they exterminate them," referring to the mattresses. In response, Rocco snickers as Clemenza replies, "Watch out we don't exterminate you!" (00:57:04–00:57:08). This foreshadowing is rendered even more eerie as the car is flanked by a Red Cross banner on the left and an American flag on the right. The image then dissolves into an open road (00:57:08). As the men approach the outskirts of the city, they start cracking scatological jokes in Italian, reverting to childish humor. The difference between their childhood in Italy and their life in America lies in intention: the once innocent jokes aimed at lighthearted laughter now aim to deceive and to manipulate as a prelude to murder.

The third and final section of the sequence focuses on the car's destination and its implicit implications for American assimilation. The camera captures the car's profile from afar as Paulie pulls over for Clemenza "to take a leak" (00:57:19). Seconds later, the camera closes in on a medium shot of Clemenza exiting the vehicle and proceeds to follow him as he approaches the field. He relieves himself while the camera turns to the car from a distance and two gunshots are fired: Roccco has killed Paulie. The jarring juxtaposition of Clemenza urinating while Paulie is slaughtered paints murder to be perfunctory and primal. Further, the distance between the car and Clemenza (and the camera) underscores the impersonal nature of the cold-blooded crime. Also present in this long shot is the Statue of Liberty from across the field, bearing witness to the cruel consequences caused by the very ideals it embodies (Fig. 6).

The camera then offers a medium close-up of Clemenza for the third gunshot, followed by music for the first time in the scene. Instead of instilling a sense of intimacy, *The Godfather*'s score highlights the insignificance of Paulie's murder since the song is not specific to this scene but is also played throughout the film. It is only when Clemenza returns to the car that through the windshield we see a bloody, lifeless Paulie slumped over the steering wheel (Fig. 7).

Clemenza remains unfazed and reacts only by ordering Rocco to "Leave the gun—take the cannoli" (00:58:03–00:58:06). The line's coupling of leaving the gun and taking the cannoli emphasizes the emergence of another tradition: a criminal one. Rather than referring to a nostalgic dessert, this assimilated custom includes homicide. Later, Clemenza teaches this custom of "dropping the gun" to Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) before he murders Captain McKlusky (Sterling Hayden) and Virgil Sollozzo (Al Lettieri). The scene ends with Clemenza and Rocco stepping out of the frame, abandoning the scene of the crime. Alone on screen in the closing shot, the car and the corpse symbolize the death of the American Dream (Fig. 8). The association between cars and corpses recurs in the film in relation to Sonny Corleone (James Caan) (Fig. 9) and to Michael's Italian girlfriend, Apollonia Vitelli-Corleone (Simonetta Stefanelli) (Fig. 10).

Fig. 5 | A city street, *The Godfather*, 00:57:03. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 6 | The field of freedom, *The Godfather*, 00:57:25. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 7 | The aftermath of Paulie's murder, *The Godfather* 00:58:10. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 8 | The death of the American Dream, *The Godfather* 00:58:15. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Throughout the scene, Coppola uses his camera to expose the expensive car as a flashy façade and the American Dream as a dangerous fantasy. The scene's visual treatment of the characters conveys an inevitable cycle imposed upon immigrant

families that culminates in a tragic fate: stifled mothers and morally compromised fathers sacrifice themselves to create a promising future for their children, specifically their sons, only for them to follow in their fathers' footsteps. In this way, the scene serves as a microcosm of *The Godfather*. Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) devoted his life to providing his youngest son Michael with the opportunity to become an American titan based on honest success. In fact, what Don Corleone least wanted was for Michael to lead a life of crime like his father. Tragically, Don Corleone sees this fear come to fruition as the film unfolds. ▪

Fig. 9 | The death of Sonny, *The Godfather*, 01:57:33. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Fig. 10 | The death of Apollonia, *The Godfather*, 02:05:57. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

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The Godfather. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Genre Theory and *Stranger Things*

Breaking Boundaries, Nostalgia, and the Pop Culture Influence

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ABSTRACT

Netflix's original series *Stranger Things* (2016-) took over the world with its scary monsters, lovable characters, and nostalgic 1980s rural setting. The series embodies the genre of horror at its roots with the mangled monsters and otherworldly villains, while also using these elements to reveal the truths of society and adolescence. With references to the third and fourth seasons, this essay argues how the classic elements of the horror genre, such as the physical monster and body, are at the foundation of this show. At the same time, the apparent themes such as the coming-of-age struggles and mental health issues showcase the ways the show breaks boundaries to exceed certain conventions within genre and twist the viewers' expectations.

Stranger Things (The Duffer Brothers, 2016 - present), a speculative fiction and horror-based television series, follows a group of kids, teens, and adults from a small fictional town in Indiana during the 1980s. From conflicts of growing up and discovering one's identity, to a lethal succession of supernatural forces invading through a portal leading into an alternate dimension, it is one of the most recognizable and watched original productions on any streaming platform. The series is striking in the many ways in which it utilizes inventive takes on horror tropes and the supernatural in a nostalgic setting. It also twists the idea of genre theory – and how these classic conventions are used to help aid in what the audience expects when going into their viewing experience – to become a legendary name in the industry of film and pop culture.

Film scholar Thomas Schatz argues in "Film Genre and the Genre Film" that a genre film is not necessarily defined by its physical characteristics such as setting, but rather, it relies on "cultural milieu where inherent thematic conflicts are animated, intensified, and resolved by familiar characters and patterns of action" (455). Essentially, through the identification of these repetitive patterns of actions, a film will then find itself defined into what would be considered a specific genre. This can range from the classic horror to the epic fantasy, all the way to the slapstick comedy and the musical. Each genre holds specific conventions and characteristics that help define a film (or TV show) physically, but also what social and cultural concepts are addressed that help illustrate underlying themes and conflicts. *Stranger Things*, while marketed in the teen genre, contains traditional horror conventions while also breaking from accepted horror traditions and expectations. With this intention of keeping the traditional conventions of body and gore, *Stranger Things* wields concepts of social issues such as mental health and the influences of nostalgia in ways that enable spectators across many generations to connect with the narrative. It uses the foundation of the speculative horror genre, to give a unique and unexpected perspective in regard to how certain themes are portrayed all while making sure that despite the numerous monsters,

alternate dimensions, and deadly stakes presented, hope, overcoming the darkness, and an exploration of relationships are still at the heart of the show.

In genre theory, "a genre . . . represents a range of expression for filmmakers and a range of experience[s] for viewers" (Schatz 455). For Thomas Schatz, "each genre film incorporates a specific cultural context" (455) where a viewer's "familiarity with any genre seems to depend less on recognizing a specific setting. . . [and more] on recognizing certain dramatic conflicts that we associate with specific patterns of action and character relationships" (455). Sure, for this series, the humble small town filled with the 80s aesthetic is what initially draws spectators to lose themselves in the thrilling plot, but it is the fierce motherly love of Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), the loyal companionship of the five main kids, and heroic sheriff coming into fatherhood with Jim Hopper (David Harbour) that makes the audience stay. From iconography to the evolution regarding genre theory, Schatz breaks this down in ways that can be further applied to how *Stranger Things* fits and breaks these molds and genre expectations. Schatz describes iconography in genre theory as "involv[ing] the process of narrative and visual coding that results from the repetition of a popular film story" (455) or rather "a visual area in which the drama unfolds and also an intrinsically significant realm in which specific actions and values are celebrated" (455). In other words, when specific physical elements of a film are combined, they produce a place for the film in a certain genre. In *Stranger Things,* this could be anything from the haunting grandfather clock, the *Dungeons and Dragons* game boards, the 80s style bikes, or the Christmas lights in the Byer's household. Iconography helps the audience understand and connect a film to a certain genre. When applying genre theory to a film, there is this idea of the same formulaic story, however this does not mean that "genre films . . . have no aesthetic value or . . . social value" (465). For this series in particular, the seat-gripping horror sequences paired with nostalgic 80s setting provides the aesthetic value, and the deeper social appeal formulates in the way the exploration of relationships, including the five main kids and their loyal friendship, the budding romances, and the unconditional love of families transcend. Within any genre film or television series, "aesthetic potential may have been tapped by filmmakers" (465), where the "narrative artistry – ambiguity, thematic complexity, irony, formal self-consciousness . . . tend to work themselves into the formula itself as . . . [the genre develops and] evolves" (465). Through the process of making a film and producing it to the big screen, a film may seem formulaic in its genre, but it is the filmmaker's job to create more social value while also appealing to its aesthetic. While Hollywood genres find themselves between different categories, there is still plenty of room for value laden stories that force "genre filmmakers . . . [to] continually vary and reinvent the generic formula" (462). Amongst many arguments, *Stranger Things* in one show that does all of this. By mixing the conventions of the horror genre and combining it with the influences of nostalgic pop culture references such as *Dungeons & Dragons, Star Wars,* and *Ghostbusters*, as well as sci-fi and drama elements, the filmmakers and creators of this show, Matt and Ross Duffer, have been able to warp genre theory beliefs by mocking this expected formula and surprising viewers with the narrative.

In general, horror is a genre that focuses on taking an unapologetic deep dive into the uncomfortable, the taboo, and the body. It is sometimes considered to be the epitome of "low" culture in this area of genre according to some elitists and has been thought to be "less than" by many critics. Many individuals associate this genre with gore, demonic monsters, and an overall dark aesthetic, and while that is true in many cases, the genre itself has evolved just as any genre has "from transparent social reaffirmation to opaque self-reflexivity, [where] there is a gradual shift in narrative emphasis" (Schatz 464). From mere aesthetic to deeper social messages and themes, the horror genre has opened many different subgenres, including horror verité. This truthful sub-genre of horror is defined by scholar Alison Landsberg as

> deploy[ing] the standard cinematic conventions of horror - strong sound and visual cues that shock and unsettle the viewer. . .that involves either supernatural/science fiction elements, the struggle for survival of a person who is being chased by a psycho-killer, and/or a haunted house - but it does these things in the context of very real material and historical circumstances. (6)

Horror is still evolving from its stereotypical cheesy monster story and many spectators can now detect hidden meanings about societal issues and conflicts from all subgenres of horror. Even though early examples of horror have had their moments of engaging with taboo topics, it is now becoming more acknowledged and praised. *Stranger Things* is one of those TV shows that many are familiar with, such as the creepy monsters and beasts that bring chills to its viewers, but it also touches on deeper societal issues such as mental health seen with Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink) in Season Four and the struggles with trauma, discovering sexualities, and coming of age like with Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) in seasons two to four. From the Demogorgon in Season One to the curse of Vecna in the show's fourth season, there are strong elements of the dismantled and mangled body paired with the gory deaths in each season that provides both a physical and lethal supernatural threat to the characters as symbols for their internal struggles.

In the Season Three finale, "The Mind Flayer," the mangled villain that the series has been setting up throughout the previous two seasons, appears for the final battle (Fig. 1). It is a beast that not only takes up the entire frame when presented on screen but has a looming psychological shadow that looms over the audience and characters. Again, this can be drawn back to the way this show uses the conventional horror elements such as the classic scary monster but explores the way these monsters can symbolize the deeper struggles of the characters. Billy Hargrove (Dacre Montgomery) has been a character

Fig. 1 | Billy Sacrifices himself to the Mind Flayer, *Stranger Things 3* "Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt", 00:49:42. Netflix, 2019.

struggling with the abuse from his father and the abandonment of his mother. By having Billy face the beast in this medium shot, it helps symbolize him standing up to not only to the physical monster, but his internal demons as well. The dimmed and dark colours (Fig. 1) create the tone of impending doom for the spectators and the characters, and while the small fires burning in the background should provide light, it only illuminates the massive unearthly threat. By having Billy positioned in the centre of the frame (Fig. 1) with the Mind Flayer above him, this gives the spectators a bone chilling realization of where the scene will lead; a foreshadowing if you will. From the tentacles grabbing onto Billy to the legs holding itself up, the symmetrical shape of the creature creates this image and being that seems too indestructible even for the characters within the show to defeat. People that struggle with mental illness or trauma may sometimes feel like their own demons are too big to overcome and there is no way to escape its clutches, and might find themselves seeing this scene as a symbol for their struggles.

Another example of *Stranger Things* embodying classic horror elements such as the grotesque monsters, the vulgar death scenes that send chills down the spectator's spine, and dark, dimly lit shots, comes with the iconic Episode Four in Season Four, specifically with its classic gory monster leading heavily on the idea of the body – or rather the mind in this episode's case. The focus of the frame (Fig. 2) relies on the monster's, Vecna's (Jamie Campbell Bower), long shadowed and mangled fingers. Presented in the foreground, the warped hand not only looks physically disturbing, but viewers who have watched the show leading up to this point understand the symbolism of the close up. The hand becomes the object for immense amounts of pain, suffering, and death. Max Mayfield's

Fig. 2 | Vecna watches Max escape from his mind trap, *Stranger Things 4* "Chapter Four: Dear Billy", 01:12:57. Netflix, 2022.

figure is blurred out of focus as she runs towards the only source of light in the frame, illuminating the season's theme of hope and overcoming mental turmoil. Classic horror elements are prevalent in everything that appears in *Stranger Things*. We see this in the way the upside-down dimension is portrayed and how it is simply a nightmarish and shadowed portrayal of our world, where the setting is filled with monsters ready to impend doom and destruction. Darkness is a dominating factor in the tone and many of the shots as well. At the same time, it addresses elements about real world societal issues. The show's themes focus on Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and her journey into adolescence and adulthood alongside her gang of friends, but as scholar Zachary Griffiths notes, it also "relies on [the] ambiguity produced through connotation, and beyond overly familiar maxims such as "friendship is important" and "growing up is hard" (5). This is where horror verité comes in

Fig. 3 | Max reads a letter to Billy's grave, *Stranger Things 4* "Chapter Four: Dear Bill", 00:58:50. Netflix, 2022.

Fig. 4 | Max desperately runs towards her friends and away from Vecna, *Stranger Things 4* "Chapter Four: Dear Billy", 01:13:34. Netflix, 2022.

play. Using the elements of horror, *Stranger Things* also "symbolize[s] society's fears in the form of a monster" (Landsberg 6-7). In Season Four, the monster, Vecna, takes the form of a physical being but his presence lays heavily on the internalized mental sufferings of who he targets in this world. While a physical being, Vecna is truly a psychological demon. Spectators understand the complex layers of this monster who becomes a symbol for those who may be dealing with traumatic experiences and mental illness. In the previous season, Max witnesses her brother, Billy Hargrove, gruesomely murdered in the finale, and experiences survivors' guilt, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Vecna lures in individuals possessing past traumas and uses their suffering to viciously murder them to his own advantage. While there is the physical stereotypical gory element seen in the horror genre, underlying messages of overcoming mental health issues can be seen here as well, particularly in Episode Four of Season Four.

As Max sits in front of Billy's grave (Fig. 3), she reads the letter she wrote for him as a last-ditch effort to say what she wants to say to those in her life as she is next on the Vecna's kill list. Not only does the cemetery provide a classic horror setting, but it helps progress the tone and emotions of the scene. By placing Max at the centre of the frame, the weight and attention of the spectator is drawn to her. However, despite her being at the centre of the frame, the colours of her clothes do not necessarily make her stand out against the other colours used around her. It fits the scene and her guilt well, allowing her to blend in as she confesses how she's thought of wanting to die instead of him. Max almost becomes one with the cemetery and its surroundings.

The iconic scene of Max running back to her friends and away from Vecna (Fig. 4) not only provides a tense action sequence of the character running from the monster, but a more metaphorical hint of overcoming depression or mental health issues in times of utter darkness. This combination of fill and backlighting highlights Max against the darkness, shadows, and lurid red lighting filling the frame, leaning into this idea of overcoming and running from the darkness. Max is running away from the fog and shadows of her mind towards the light of living. While the setting of this dark place coincidentally is supposed to be the "dark place" of Max's mind and thoughts, Matt and Ross Duffer use various elements of the horror genre, such as the dark colours, the physical monster and body, as well as incorporating horror verité to address social issues. Each inclusion adds to the impact of the show.

While *Stranger Things* is a show that breaks boundaries within genre theory, it is one that breaks away from the "rather one dimensional" stereotype and provides a combination of multiple genres to provide a "rich, complex, and perhaps even profound series" (Griffith 5).It uses the complexity of genre crossover while also using nostalgia and pop culture to influence its impact and popularity. Critic Alex Godfrey notes that "the 80s and 90s are perfect fodder for contemporary horror, providing nostalgia as well as a context that speaks perhaps to where we have ended up today." In reference to nostalgia,

> the series has been seen as a distinctly celebratory, nostalgic vision of the 1980s and its media . . . as a critique of the 1980s, and middle-class suburbia . . . [and] an allegory or metaphor for the traumatic experience of coming-of-age and entering into a world of adult conformity. (Griffith 5)

Being all these things, it is no surprise that this show "is, in other words, not interested in investigating the 1980s as a historical moment" (7), but rather it aims towards using the time period as a backdrop to appeal to both modern and old issues with a wide set of characters from a multitude of backgrounds and experiences. This is an important note to make when comparing it to other films or television shows that aim to produce nostalgic pleasures. *Stranger Things* has almost become a genre of its own simply for its nostalgic setting and its symbolic objects, costumes, and characters. From the presence of Eggos, a food Eleven loves so much (Fig. 5), to the iconic costumes that fit so perfectly for the period and the individual characters (Fig. 6), everything this show does is intentional for the way newer generations view these decades or the way older spectators reminisce on their earlier years.

Each nostalgic item presented within this TV series has "gained iconic status within its fandom" (Griffith 3). The costumes and even the monsters fit into this idea of nostalgic 80s vibes since the monsters, like the Demogorgon, are

Fig. 5 | Eleven sits in front of a freezer of Eggos while entering the void during mind walking, *Stranger Things 3* "Chapter Seven: The Bite", 00:26:43. Netflix, 2019.

Fig. 6 | The group watches as some help arrives for the final battle, *Stranger Things 3* "Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt", 00:03:06. Netflix, 2019.

supposed to be reference to early *Dungeons and Dragons* characters – a popular game in the decade. The wave of popularity this show is riding is another reason to why so many 80s related items and merchandise have gained popularity alongside the show. The soundtrack is also very monumental and helps make the show what it is. Chalked full of classic hits from the 80s, the pop culture of today can find itself heavily influenced by the imprint of this show. From Tik Toks of people dressing like the characters, to the Kate Bush hit "Running Up That Hill" that played during Max's big scene in Episode Four of Season Four (01:13:34), which has now hit the charts again after years of laying under the radar, you can find influences of *Stranger Things* everywhere. Reviving the 80s highlights a perspective that pop culture and nostalgia have immense influences on society, whether that be from the parts of the audience who grew up during this time period or sparking new passions with the newer generation.

For the many individuals analyzing and critiquing the series, *Stranger Things* acknowledges elements of the 80s and classic genre conventions and brings it to life from a new angle. Applying Schatz's genre theory, formulaic film making might just be significant for impactful shows like this one to make a statement in today's society in providing more awareness to more taboo topics in an accessible format. From the struggle of teens with their sexualities, troubled families, and showing the unique experiences with mental health issues, *Stranger Things* have been able to find space for everything. Future filmmakers can use this series as a way to dissect the ways genre films can have immense impacts and influence on a variety of spectators. Film and the concept of genre is constantly evolving, and it is crucial that as this evolution continues to occur, conventions and aesthetic values are twisted, and social topics become priority. ▪

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KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Report

BY AVA SASAKI
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Founded by Kwantlen Polytechnic University instructor, Janice Morris, KDocsFF—Metro Vancouver's premier social justice film festival—has hosted a plethora of powerful documentaries. Aiming to educate and create discussion within social justice circles, the theme this year was "People. Places. Power." With 23 feature-length films, two short docs, and nine Q&As/Panel Discussions across February 22–February 26, the festival's opening night was a welcome sight for both returning guests and new ones. The Vancity Theatre in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia offers cozy seating and an even more cozy atmosphere with its kind staff and volunteers. Before moving to opening keynote speakers Alex Winter and Carol Todd, the festival began with a land acknowledgment, with Morris thanking Kwantlen, Musqueam, Katzie, Semiahmoo, Qayqayt, and Kwikwetlem peoples, on whose unceded sovereign lands the theatre and KPU campuses stand (Fig. 1).

The YouTube Effect (2022), created and directed by Alex Winter, premiered the five-day-long event (KDocsFF's longest yet), offering an in-depth investigation into the YouTube platform and its parent company, Google (Fig. 2). The documentary follows the history of the platform from its humble beginnings with creators Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, who met while working at PayPal. Chen gives his perspective on how the site started—crediting early creators such as Smosh for helping the site take off. Chen also recounts Google's 2006 acquisition of YouTube as a turning point, followed by Chen's and Hurley's departures in 2011 (as YouTube's first Chief Technology Officer and CEO, respectively), and the eventual appointment of Susan Wojcicki as

Fig. 1 | KDocsFF Founder and Festival Director Janice Morris opens KDocsFF 2023

CEO [Chen, Hurley, and Karim—who always remained an informal advisor—remain Google shareholders]. Wojcicki offers her own recollections and insights, further explaining the site's algorithm which, prior to 2012, optimized the system for clicks and views. The onset of clickbait and thumbnails that left users unsatisfied needed to change, Wojcicki recalls.

This change, Winter highlights, is when YouTube's algorithm shifted to optimize user watch-time and satisfaction, leaving the platform's creators in a constant cycle of changing formats to keep up (Fig. 3). Since 2016, the algorithm and transparency envisioned by Wojcicki and the YouTube team are arguably more muddled than ever. With the addition of YouTube Kids—a sub-platform of the YouTube

Fig. 2 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night film, Alex Winter's The YouTube Effect (2022)

Fig. 3 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Keynote Speaker, director Alex Winter (*The YouTube Effect*)

brand targeted towards children and preadolescents—and its many controversies regarding allowing gore, violence, hate-speech, and scary imagery seemingly "approved" by the YouTube safety filters, the platform's professed transparency regarding site recommendations and video filters has been voided, according to some.

The documentary highlights how YouTube's algorithm has radicalized some now far-right users—specifically, young, white men—and how they fall down a rabbit hole that starts with seemingly well-intentioned mental health videos and ends with misinformation and conspiracies theories. The algorithm targets these viewers' insecurities, slowly grooming them and their worldview into one of "us vs. them." These viewers feel a connection to radical speakers—charismatic individuals who appear intelligent and knowable. These conspiracists eventually turn their victims towards ethnocentrism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. The film demonstrates how the cycle endlessly repeats itself, creating isolated and insular conspiracy communities. Once primed, these communities are then called into action—"cleansing"—and thus begins a second cycle of violence and hatred outside the Internet.

When asked about this phenomenon, YouTube remains incredibly vague about its call to action, the documentary contends. YouTube's persistent claim that it is working on the filtering system and monitoring the algorithm only holds so much promise when large-scale acts of violence against marginalized communities continue and its abusers proclaim YouTube their rite of passage. This is further emphasized when considering live streaming—the film highlights the atrocities committed during the 2019 Christchurch attack, in which a terrorist live-streamed himself on Facebook while attacking multiple mosques, killing over 40 people. The killer attributed his radicalization to YouTube and the enclave of white supremacist content he found there. Such an incident raises questions about the ethics of social media—how can we continue to allow white supremacy and neo-Nazism to run rampant in online spaces? What are these companies doing to combat this rampancy, if combating it at all? *The YouTube Effect* raises questions like these throughout its 99-minute runtime and challenges the notion of not only YouTube's ethics and accountability, but also those of social media sites everywhere.

After a brief 15-minute break, the festival resumed with Keynote Speaker Carol Todd, mother of Amanda Todd and Founder of the Amanda Todd Legacy Society, a non-profit organization that aims to raise awareness about bullying (especially cyberbullying), online safety, and exploitation (especially sexploitation) (Fig. 4).

Todd introduced the night's second film, *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2022), a hard-hitting and thought-provoking documentary that focusses on how misogyny navigates through the digital world and the resultant violence that women face daily. Co-directed by Guylaine Maroist and Léa Clermont-Dion, the film presents stories of women facing intense misogyny through online harassment, bullying, and violence (Fig. 5). In part, the film interviews and reflects upon the experiences of two politicians: Laura Boldrini, an Italian politician, and Kiah Morris, an African American politician who left her state of Vermont after receiving intense threats from extremists. Both Boldrini and Morris received death and rape threats, and Morris experienced a break-in in her and her family's home.

Shifting its focus to Marion Séclin, a French YouTuber, *Backlash* expands on the tens of thousands of death and other

Fig. 4 | Opening Night Keynote Speaker, parent, teacher, and advocate Carol Todd (Founder, Amanda Todd Legacy Society)

Fig. 5 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Film, Guylaine Maroist and Léa Clermont-Dion's *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2022)

violent threats she received after making pro-feminist videos on her channel around the peak of the #MeToo movement in 2017. Eventually, she took a hiatus from the site for the safety of her mental health. Séclin is now back on the site, continuing her work through pro-feminist videos and sharing her personal experiences with misogyny, and she also is pursuing an acting career.

The film then introduces Laurence Gratton, a Quebecois teacher who was verbally harassed by a classmate while at university. She, alongside countless other female students, was harassed by the same man and received no help from her university or the local police. These students were threatened, verbally abused, and cyberbullied. Gratton herself admits she was afraid to go home, as the abuser knew where she lived. She now lives in relative peace as a teacher and routinely instructs her students on online safety. Finally, the film shares the experiences of Glen Canning, father of Rehtaeh Parsons, a young woman who committed suicide after photos of her alleged rape were shared online. Rehtaeh was 17 when she took her life, and Canning now speaks to schools across Canada about abuse, bullying, and the dangers of rape-culture.

Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age sheds light on the harsh reality that women face online, and asks, *why?* Why is so much misogyny ingrained in our society, and to such extremes? How can we let harassment continue like this? What can we do to stop it? Inevitably, there are no simple answers. Centuries of misogyny, sexism, and systemic oppression of women cannot be undone with words alone. However, it is films like *Backlash* that give voices to the victims of violence, that allow us to see and recognize the extremes of hate, and that spark action. As the film shows, the victims did not go quietly—they fought (and continue to fight) for their stories to be heard because their existence as women cannot be silenced so easily. Hate and oppression are acts of anxiety and power—misogyny originates in the insecurity in one's own identity.

After *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age,* Winter, Todd, and Maroist were joined by Harvard School of Education PhD candidate Avriel Epps-Darling for a 50-minute Q&A/panel discussion, moderated by Morris. The panelists discussed their films and how they relate to each other—how online circles (re)produce the misogyny and hate depicted in the films. The panelists discussed what the future of online spaces looks like,

Fig. 6 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Joint Panel Alex Winter, Carol Todd, Guylaine Maroist, and Avriel Epps-Darling

and they conclude that, despite the fear, despite the violence, there is hope to be found. With more free online resources and other educational texts becoming increasingly available to the public, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. The job now is to continue the fight against oppressive systems and continue raising awareness around the world (Fig. 6).

Finally, to finish up the festival's opening night, KDocsFF hosted a stand-up reception in the Vancity Theatre atrium. Having succeeded in kicking off another great year of stories worth telling, KDocsFF 2023's opening night came to an end. With now twelve years of experience, the film festival undoubtedly will continue to grow for years to come, with plans for KDocsFF 2024 now well underway. ▪

People, Places, Power

A Review of the KDocsFF 2023 Social Justice Film Festival

BY DAN LETT
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Returning to a fully in-person program after a two-year pandemic-induced pivot online, KDocsFF 2023 marked twelve years and an eighth annual festival by delivering its most ambitious program of social justice-oriented documentary films to date. Vancouver's VIFF Centre played host to the diverse yet cohesively curated official selection of 25 films screened in two theatres over five chilly days (22–26 February). Festival-goers who braved the snow were rewarded with a generous roster of keynote speakers, film-makers, and other notable guests attending in person or streaming in from locations as remote as Berlin and Kansas. This year's welcome introduction of double-feature pairings allowed for deeper explorations of shared themes and some riveting and lively joint panel discussions (Fig. 1).

The theme of this year's festival was "People. Places. Power.," which KDocsFF Founder and Festival Director Janice Morris explains, "[d]erives from the ways in which speaking back to injustice is always rooted in the power of individuals and their unbreakable ties to place and space." For such a potentially all-encompassing theme, the KDocsFF team put together a commendably focused program of films that—in this reviewer's eyes—offers vital and complementary perspectives on some key political issues of our times, including how digital technology challenges yet also reinforces age-old power structures; how the colonial exploitation of land and natural resources alienates and sickens the human body and spirit; and the complex ways that communities transform, contest, and give meaning to the places they inhabit.

The opening night double feature explored how virtual spaces of the internet increasingly distort—and intrude into—the political and embodied spaces of people's lived realities. Introducing *The YouTube Effect* (2022), director Alex Winter recounts his utopian optimism during the early days of the internet, describing how he found "legitimate community" in new social spaces carved out by users of peer-to-peer music-sharing services like Napster. Two decades on, the wild, liberating potential of the internet has given way to an attention economy that monetizes distraction and divisiveness, corralling our social interactions through the advertising-clogged domains of a handful of corporate tech behemoths, such as Google, Meta, and Twitter, whose massive fortunes allow them to evade meaningful regulation. With an

Fig. 1 | KDocsFF 2023 showcased 25 films over five days at the Vancouver International Film Centre. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

Fig. 2 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Joint Panelists Alex Winter, Carol Todd, Guylaine Maroist, and Avriel Epps-Darling discuss *The YouTube Effect* and *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

entertaining blend of outrage and wry humour, *The YouTube Effect* documents how the video-hosting giant progressed from cat videos to social engineering. The "effect" in question ranges from the steady erosion of usability in pursuit of profits—what cultural critic and science-fiction author Cory Doctorow terms the "enshittification" of the internet—to the fostering of toxic online echo-chambers and the worst of our antisocial impulses.

Maroist and Clermont-Dion's *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2022) zooms in on a particularly worrisome part of this phenomenon: the ways social media facilitate and even encourage the age-old scourge of misogyny. The film chronicles online misogyny through a series of vignettes—a woman of colour harassed out of home and political office by targeted bigotry, culminating in physical threats; teenage girls driven to self-harm by sexploitation and revenge porn; a cohort of medical students stalked online with threats and abuse by a male peer using social media "sock puppet" accounts. The internet poses a specific challenge to the documentarian: how to bring visual interest and drama to subject matter that often plays out in lines of text on touch-screens. *Backlash* rises to the challenge, deploying a recurring device where real-life victims of online misogyny gaze for sustained periods directly into the camera, with the words of abuse and threats they suffered superimposed on the screen, printed on objects and signs within the shot, or even scrawled directly on the women's skin. The powerfully confrontational tone of the film carried over into an intense and moving joint-panel discussion featuring Carol Todd—mother of Amanda Todd, the BC teenager who brought cyberbullying's devastating toll to national attention after her death by suicide in 2012 (Fig. 2).

The opening night's films almost convinced me to log off from the internet for good, but three documentaries later in the week make the case for staying online. Drawing on smartphone camera footage of incredibly bloody clashes between police and public during the 2018 "yellow vest" protests in France, David Dufresne's captivating *The Monopoly of Violence* (2020) questions whether the heavy-handed tactics that authorities used against the *gilets jaunes* (not to mention bystanders caught up in the fracas) violate the very principles of democracy they are supposed to defend. Dufresne's approach is to assemble panels of citizens—including police representatives, injured protestors, journalists, and public intellectuals—and let the cameras roll as they debate the legitimacy of various police tactics captured on amateur video. The footage is grim stuff: people blinded and mutilated by "non-lethal" riot-control weapons, vicious beatings delivered by (and occasionally upon) police, youths rounded up en masse and forced to kneel in stress positions for hours on end. This material solicits some tense and revealing confrontations between impassioned panel members, interspersed with insightful academic analyses delivered by sociologists, invoking philosophers of power such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Max Weber. The film conspicuously omits any details about the political context of the yellow jackets protest—a shrewd decision that Dufresne confirmed in the post-screening discussion is intended to prevent the audience's

Fig. 3 | KDocsFF 2023 Keynote Speaker and Joint Panelist David Dufresne introduces his film *The Monopoly of Violence.* Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

sympathies for one side or the other from swaying their judgment on the abstract question of the "correct" role of violence in democracy (Fig. 3).

The panel discussion for *The Monopoly of Violence* delved into the question of *sousveillance*, the idea that technology such as smartphones and the internet allows citizens to turn the gaze of surveillance back on the powerful, holding them to account and exposing abuses of authority. Sousveillance is a central concern for two other films in the program, including the festival's informal headliner, the Oscar-winning *Navalny* (2022). Daniel Roher's HBO/CNN-produced documentary about the poisoning of Russian dissident and would-be political rival of Vladimir Putin, Alexei Navalny, has the pacing and plot of a nail-biting political thriller, featuring a charismatic anti-corruption activist, attempted murder via poisoned underwear, and an audacious online investigation that implicates Russian security operatives, setting up an unbearably tense confrontation at the film's climax. The drama is almost enough to distract from some important questions that the film only touches upon: the character study focuses on Navalny's everyman credentials (charming, devoted husband and father, video gamer), but reveals little about his actual political beliefs or objectives, permitting the subject himself to address and deflect legitimate concerns about his documented involvement with nationalist movements in Russia. *Navalny* portrays Bellingcat—the online investigative journalism collective that pulled off the remarkable investigation into Navalny's poisoning—as "data nerds with laptops," without exploring the presumably significant fact that they are funded by NATO-aligned organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy. There's little doubt that Alexei Navalny is an incredibly brave person whose ongoing persecution is an unjust suppression of dissent, and my hope is that future documentaries about him prioritize analysis over spectacle. Throughout the week, the KDocsFF panel discussions provided an invaluable opportunity for the audience to pick up conversations that documentaries started; that there wasn't a panel for *Navalny*, with its clear relevance to a war in Ukraine that is at the forefront of public concern, seems like a missed opportunity.

The second film to engage with sousveillance is Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas's *Writing with Fire* (2022), which follows a group of journalists who work for *Khabar Lahariya*, an all-women newspaper in India. As Dalit women living in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the journalists inhabit the most precarious intersection of gender and caste discrimination. Traditionally considered "untouchables" in India's caste system, Dalits typically live in impoverished conditions, restricted to the lowest-paying and least prestigious jobs, with—as the documentary reveals in harrowing detail—crimes against them as severe as sexual violence and murder routinely going unpunished (if even investigated in the first place). Provided training and smartphones by a UN-funded New Delhi non-profit organization dedicated to women's literacy, the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists face huge risks to investigate and publish news stories that matter to their communities and to expose crimes and injustices in such stark terms that authorities and politicians are forced

Fig. 4 | KDocsFF 2023 Panelists Jennifer Baichwal, Melissa Lem, and Hans Forstbauer (with Carey Gillam on-screen) discuss *Into the Weeds: Dewayne "Lee" Johnson vs. Monsanto Company*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

to respond. Ghosh and Thomas's extraordinarily moving debut feature provides a humbling reminder that the smartphones that many of us take for granted—or even decry as a source of distraction and social disengagement—can be life-transforming tools of sousveillance and empowerment in the hands of some of the world's most oppressed people.

Speaking truth to power is an increasingly dangerous profession: the Committee to Protect Journalism report that at least 67 journalists were killed in 2022—many in direct retaliation for their work—an increase of 50% from the previous year (Archie). *The Cost of Freedom: Refugee Journalists in Canada* (2021) profiles three journalists who were granted refugee status in Canada after their lives came under threat for works published in their home countries of Mexico, Syria, and Turkey. James Cullingham's film gives each journalist time to tell their own stories, each one unique but with common traumatic beats: the frantic blur of fear and flight, the wrenching pain of leaving homes and loved ones behind, and then the arduous and often depressing struggle to rebuild a life in a place where—no matter how welcoming or safe—their knowledge, language, and life's work are not recognized. Listening to the journalists describe relocation as a form of existential rupture recalls Edward Said's description of exile as "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (173).

The same traumatic rift—it seems to me—looms large in Luke Gleeson's *DƏNE YI'INJETL: The Scattering of Man* (2022) and Heather Hatch's *Wochiigii lo: End of the Peace* (2022), a pair of documentaries by First Nations filmmakers about the damage to land, water, and peoples wrought by two hydroelectric dam projects in British Columbia. In the joint panel discussion, Hatch, of the Haida Nation, and Gleeson, a member of the Tsay Keh Dene Nation, make compelling points about the true costs of a colonial attitude that views the earth as a resource to exploit rather than a home to respect and sustain: people are one with the land, and if we poison and disfigure it, we inevitably do the same to ourselves. This point is exemplified in Jennifer Baichwal's outstanding *Into the Weeds: Dewayne "Lee" Johnson vs. Monsanto Company*, which documents the investigation and court battle to prove that the biggest chemicals firm in the world has suppressed evidence that its "miracle" glyphosate-based herbicide (marketed as Roundup) causes cancer in humans. The film explores the human cost of unchecked agricultural chemical usage through an intimate and painful portrait of plaintiff Dwayne "Lee" Johnson, who developed non-Hodgkin's lymphoma after being doused in Roundup in a groundskeeping accident. The informative and entertaining panel discussion—featuring a passionate contribution from Chilliwack-based organic farmer, Hans Forstbauer—explored strategies to fight the financial and political might of the chemical industry and the ways that sustainable farming practices can be adapted to meet the global population's growing agricultural needs (Fig. 4).

The epitome of colonialism's exploitative evils is found in slavery. *A Story of Bones* is a deeply sad documentary about the discovery of the remains of thousands of "freed slaves" during

Fig. 5 | KDocsFF 2023 Panelist Moira Wyton (moderator), Sarah Blyth, Trey Helten, Norma Vaillancourt, and Colin Askey discuss *Love in the Time of Fentanyl.* Faiz Alriaz/ Vandem Media, 2023.

an airport construction project on Saint Helena, part of the British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic Ocean that served as a waypoint during the transatlantic slave trade. The documentary follows Namibian-born environmental officer Annina van Neel's campaign to identify the bodies, provide them a respectful final resting place, and memorialize their place in Saint Helena's history. Though van Neel's efforts garner support from locals and international solidarity with supporters of the African Burial Ground memorial in New York, sufficient funding from the British government is delayed and never fully materializes. van Neel's despair becomes palpable as she seems to realize that, for many people, the remains of enslaved Africans are part of a shameful past they'd rather forget than take responsibility for. Parallels can be found in Colin Askey's *Love in the Time of Fentanyl*, a documentary about a safe and welcoming drug-use facility for the marginalized inhabitants of Vancouver's Downtown East Side. Millions of dollars pour into gentrifying developments in Vancouver each year, but barely a trickle is spent on the city's scandalous public health crisis of overdose deaths caused by a criminalized drug supply adulterated with benzodiazepines and powerful narcotics like fentanyl, paired with a lack of sanitary, monitored places where people can safely use. The Overdose Prevention Society (OPS) was born of the compassion and desperation of community members who saw their friends and neighbours dying and understood that nobody else would do what needed to be done. Askey's film shadows OPS workers as they care for their clients, offering glimpses into the life events that brought them to the community and conveying the immense toll it takes when each day is a Sisyphean struggle to ward off death. Some of the most poignant scenes feature the growing numbers of memorials that cover the walls and alleyways—graffiti artworks, personal messages to lost loved ones, simple lists of names. A few streets away, affluent clientele browse the boutiques of luxury retailers, oblivious to their proximity to such a sacred site (Fig. 5).

The cumulative effect of over two dozen social justice documentaries—even ones as consistently excellent as these—can test an audience's emotional resilience! It was therefore most welcome that the final day of KDocsFF 2023 celebrated the endurance of the activist spirit and the defining role of the creative arts in communities, bringing the festival to an upbeat, energizing conclusion. A late addition to the program, Carmen Pollard's punchy short, *Militant Mother* (2021), pits a group of women from Vancouver's Raymur neighbourhood against the Canadian National trains that routinely blocked the school commute of neighbourhood kids in 1970. The locomotives proved no match for Carolyn Jerome's band of mothers whose determined track blockades forced the company to concede. Teresa Alfeld's *Jean Swanson: We Need a New Map* (2021), a study in tenacity about Vancouver's most well-known anti-poverty political activist, was a repeat showing from KDocsFF 2022. Jean's presence on the panel was justification enough for the reprise, and it was moving to witness so many in attendance pay tribute to her inspiring example of public service. Finally, a second repeat from last year,

Spencer Wilkinson's *Alice Street* (2020) chronicles the saga of the Alice Street mural—a vast work of street art designed to honour and represent the diverse and storied communities of one of North America's most artistically fertile neighbourhoods in Oakland, California. Alice Street mural artists Desi Mundo and Pancho Pescador—who were in town collaborating on a Vancouver mural with KPU Artist- and Writer-in-Residence Brandon Gabriel—joined the panel to detail how their Alice Street mural project sparked a philosophical exploration of what it means to represent a community through art and helped spark a larger mobilization in Oakland against gentrification (Fig. 6).

A message I took from *Alice Street*—that art is a conversation within community rather than a representation standing outside it—is one I took from KDocsFF 2023 as a whole. The program of films felt like a revealing conversation, one I'm looking forward to rejoining in 2024. ▪

Fig. 6 | KDocsFF 2023 Closing Night Joint Panelists Teresa Alfeld, Carmen Pollard, Brandon Gabriel, Desi Mundo, Pancho Pescador, Jean Swanson, and Spencer Wilkinson discuss *Militant Mother, Jean Swanson: We Need a New Map,* and *Alice Street*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

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ONE FRAME AT A TIME

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Open Call For Papers

Vol.09 No.01 | Spring 2024

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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 featurettes (1,000-1,500 words); reviews of films, DVDs, Blu-rays, or conferences (1,500-2,500 words); M.A. or PhD 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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