MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The Journal of Film & Visual Narration

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MSJ

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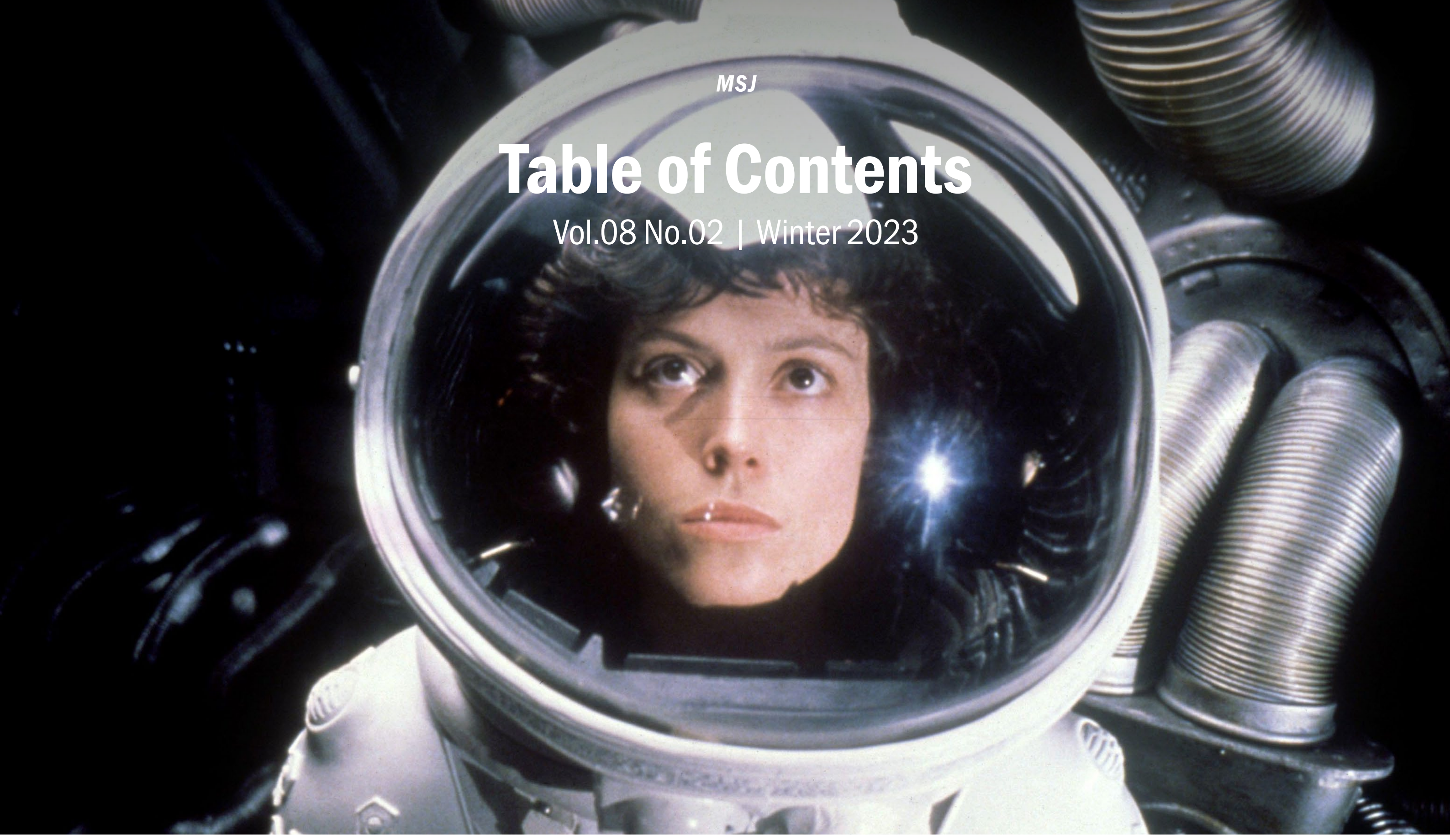

Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) from Ridley Scott's *Alien* (20th Century Studios, 1979). FlixPix / Alamy Stock Photo.

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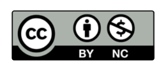

Situating itself in film's visual narrative, *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration* (ISSN 2369-5056) is the first of its kind: an international, peer-reviewed journal focused exclusively on the artistry of frame composition as a storytelling technique. With its open-access, open-review 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 in EBSCO's Film and Television Literature Index. ▪

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader:

Happy New Year from all of us at *MSJ,* where we continue to explore cinematic artistry supported by you and our contributors.

Since your 2024 reading list is likely starting to grow, may I recommend a few additions from Issue 8.2, the "First Blood" edition? Leading the issue is Dr. Nilakshi Goswami's article, "Cinematic Narrative of Disability in Post-Independent India: A Case Study of *Mother India,*" a must-read for those whose research interests include representations of disability and ableism in a socialist society. Even if you are familiar with Mehboob Khan's classic *Mother India* (1957) along with its extensive critical coverage, Dr. Goswami's article promises an unexpected entry point for discussion. As she notes about the nuances of colour,

> The film begins with the use of red hues: the *sindoor* (vermilion mark) along the parting line of Radha's hair, the *bindi* on her forehead and the bridal *chunari* (scarf) draped around her shoulder and head. [. . .] Meanwhile, once the canal is opened, the water that flows red, a metaphor for the bloody legacy of Indian independence. Thus, the scene involving Shamu wiping off Radha's *bindi* could also be interpreted as India's dismal failure in improving the life of its citizens, and more specifically, its subaltern disabled population. (Goswami 6)

The subtleties of red symbolism extend to Jordan Redekop-Jones's "The Empty Vessel Chronicles of the 'Unfed' Womb — Examining Symbolic Female Bodies and the Absence of Bodily Autonomy in *Alien 3,*" in which blood flows in two notable instances: down the drain during Newt's autopsy and from Ripley's nostril as she witnesses Newt's and Corporal Hicks's incineration. Jordan's undergraduate scholarship featurette captures the nuances of motherhood, womanhood, and death through a fascinating mise-en-scène analysis of the autopsy and nosebleed scenes. It is another must-read.

I have one final recommended reading for you to bookmark: Scott Szeljack's featurette, "The Pressure of Objects: Clutter and Class in Rian Johnson's *Knives Out*," an investigation of the maximalist set design of Johnson's 2019 feature film. This maximalism stands in stark contrast to Marta's pristine white Superga sneakers—the grounding force of her minimalist uniform—that are disrupted by that singular blood spot.

The blood-red of Radha's bindi, Ripley's noseblood, and Marta's incriminating sneakers unifies this issue. Please enjoy your *MSJ* reading.

Greg Chan
Editor-in-Chief

Our Contributors

CLINTON BARNEY

Clinton Barney is a student in film and media studies at Washington University in St. Louis and is the founder and editor-in-chief of *The Cinematograph* film journal. With a background in colonial studies, his research primarily investigates the intersection between film, colonial ideology and national identity, specifically how crises of national identity are embedded within a film's formal elements. He is also interested in spectatorship and cinematography in early silent films, cinematic representation of "otherized" groups, and narrative construction in professional wrestling. Currently applying for Ph.D. programs in Film and Media Studies, Clinton aims to curate exhibitions and other educational resources to educate a wider public on the continued impact of colonial ideology on peoples' understanding of national identity.

NILAKSHI GOSWAMI

Dr. Nilakshi Goswami is Head and Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Girijananda Chowdhury University, India. She has been a Fulbright Nehru-Postdoctoral Research Fellow 2020-2021 and a CURA Fellow (Institute of Culture, Religion, and World Affairs) from 2021-2022 at the Department of Anthropology, Boston University. She is also a recipient of the CARA (California Archival Research Award) 2022, Keene State College Fellowship for Genocide and Holocaust Studies 2022, and Sahapedia UNESCO Fellowship 2018. Dr. Goswami's research and teaching interests include visual and interart studies, gender and sexuality studies, and Southeast Asian literature and popular culture.

MATTHEW SELLERS JOHNSON

M. Sellers Johnson is an independent scholar whose research interests include French art cinema, transnationalism, historiography, and aesthetics. He received his master's from Te Herenga Waka (Victoria University of Wellington) in 2021 and his undergraduate degree at the University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2018. His work has appeared in *Afterimage*, *Film-Philosophy*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. He currently works as Citation Ethics Editor for *Film Matters* and in the Archives department at Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts. In early 2024, he will serve as the incoming Book Reviews Editor for *New Review of Film and Television Studies*.

JORDAN REDEKOP-JONES

Jordan Redekop-Jones is an undergraduate student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University majoring in English. When she is not focused on schoolwork, Jordan is working on her creative writing which has been published and is forthcoming in multiple Canadian literary magazines and journals. Currently, she is a student at SFU's the Writer's Studio where she is working on several full-length projects. Her main research interests include Diasporic Literature, Critical Mixed-Race Theory and Feminist Film Theory. In her further studies she hopes to examine cultural liminality and hybridity, specifically focusing on the intersections of diaspora and displacement in literature as it pertains to her own mixed ancestry.

PAUL RISKER

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

CAROLINA MESQUITA ROCHA

Carolina Rocha is fourth year undergraduate student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, where she will earn a BA in English and a Minor in Creative Writing. Her academic interests include queer and gender theory, fandom culture, and classical studies, and after graduation she hopes to pursue a graduate degree in Library and Archival Studies. Carolina 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 writing has been published by *pulpMAG* and was shortlisted for *Room Magazine's* 2023 Creative Non-Fiction Contest. This is her second academic publication with *MSJ*.

SCOTT SZELJACK

Scott Szeljack is pursuing a master's degree in English at Youngstown State University and is a full-time high school language arts teacher in northeastern Ohio, where he incorporates film and other visual media into his curriculum to promote a broader perspective of literary understanding. Scott was also recently nominated for Ohio's Teacher of the Year Award and has won other local recognition for the efficacy of his pedagogical methods. His interests in his graduate program concentrated on 18th-century literature, especially the sensation novel and the works of the Romantics, the echoes of which he hunts for in modern media, especially in film and graphica, with his visual arts research focusing on class disparity and the use of the oneiric.

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

ARTICLES

Cinematic Narrative of Disability in Post-Independent India

A Case Study of *Mother India*

BY NILAKSHI GOSWAMI
Girijananda Chowdhury University

ABSTRACT

Jenny Morris argues that cultural representations of disability mostly centre on the feelings of the non-disabled and their reactions to disability, instead of focusing on the disability itself. Addressing Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), a movie based on an agrarian society of Western Gujarat in the newly independent India, the paper examines the implied meaning of being disabled in a socialist society of India through its cinematic narrations. Post-independent Hindi popular cinema embraced farming life as its fundamental narrative trope to disseminate the idea of a self-sufficient independent nation, especially in the wake of Jawaharlal Nehru's Five-Year Plan for industrial development. Interspersed between nationalism and the myth of socialism, the subject of disability has, however, been overlooked over the years. This paper, thereby, examines the rural/peasant/agrarian nexus within the conflicting cinematic representations of the absent-disabled citizen as a lacuna in this newly emerging independent India.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns about disability have attracted the attention of filmmakers throughout the world, and Indian cinema is no exception. However, extant critical studies of disability in cinematic representation have portrayed the medium's perpetuation of repressive social attitudes geared towards the disabled. Addressing Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), a mega-hit movie based on newly independent India's misty socialism in agrarian society of Western Gujarat, this paper examines the implied meaning of being disabled. Written and directed by Mehboob Khan and starring Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Rajendra Kumar, and Raj Kumar, *Mother India* was inspired by the Italian neo-realism cinema of Europe. The movie, therefore, became more of a critical social commentary on the economic reforms implemented in Indian society rather than a mere reflection of the values and views of the agrarian society of the time. However, while *Mother India* remains one of the greatest examples of cinematic triumph for its socialist representation, how far does it reinforce the disabled body as an object of pity in terms of the disabled husband who walks to his own death after having lost his arms? Can we infer through such cinematic representations of disability that, the more disability is used to induce a sense of unease, the more cultural stereotypes are confirmed?

The cultural representations of disability mostly centre on the feelings of the non-disabled and their reactions to disability, instead of focusing on the disability itself. Disability, in turn, becomes "a metaphor . . . the message the non-disabled writer wishes to get across . . . In doing this, the writer draws on prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people" (Morris 93). In a similar vein, while the title of

the movie *Mother India* coalesces both "Mother" and "India," portraying women as the ultimate sacrificer, caregiver, and nurturer in Hindu society, the disabled husband, in comparison, is associated with terms like "*besharam*" (00:44:53) literally translating as shameless while denigrating him as a liability to his wife, a helpless victim, and an unproductive citizen and an unproductive citizen of this newly formed nation against which prowess of his wife or the "Mother India" is situated. The film's tendency to disincline the experience of the disabled (and later, absent) husband raises questions about disability more as a social phenomenon, and not merely as a medical one. Related to this concern is first, questions of stigma: people with disabilities are shown as being in desperate need of charity or help. Secondly, the public's thirst for disabled characters performed by popular actors perpetuates a cycle of disability discrimination, paradoxically creating able-bodied actors with disability drag. Throughout film history, disabled lead roles have been played by nondisabled actors with only rare exceptions. Since 1987, over twenty Oscar nominations for leading actors and actresses have gone to thespians portraying disabled characters (Crutchfield 284-289). In *Mother India*, the character of Shamu was played effectively by the abled-bodied Raj Kumar. The portrayal of the character's disability by this iconic actor and the reaction towards it is such that the societal norms and attitudes of the days get reaffirmed in the minds of the viewers, i.e., it is better to choose death over living the life of a crippled man, as represented in the film. The film, however, remained a trendsetter, and became the first Indian movie to be nominated at the Oscars in 1957. This paper, thereby, delves into how disability in *Mother India* becomes both a private and a public experience. Disability in the movie is represented through the personal catastrophe of the husband, Shamu. The amputation of both his arms in an accident while tilling the unproductive land is, in fact, portrayed as a humiliating experience–associating it with stigma, shame and blame, and not merely a medical injury. This association of disability with disgrace remains another pivotal point of analysis here.

It is noteworthy that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, administered the iconic ideas of socialism and employment of human resources in nation-building process immediately after independence. The concept of *aam admi* or common man was championed by him in facilitating equal priority for every citizen. Thus, in a country where the majority of people belonged to the agrarian community, a socialist theme of governance remained indispensable for future growth and development. This article thereby uncovers how both cinematic representations in the newly independent India as well as Nehruvian socialist ideals stood for the cause of developing a new nation through initiation of agricultural enterprises and equal participation of working-class citizens. Yet what remains problematic is, for instance, within the context of movies like *Mother India*, while the protagonist Radha (Nargis Dutt) is portrayed as the exemplary mother and wife through her irrefutable associations with the archetypes of mythical Hindu femininity, disability is a significant issue that is widely misunderstood–an issue continues to be observed even in the contemporary Indian movies like *Aadmi* (1968), *Koshish* (1972), *Netrikkan* (1981), *Kasam* (1988), *Koyla* (1997). The traditional association of disability with *karma*, where disability is often perceived as a punishment for misdeeds in past lives, renders these representations even more complex in this socialist representation of nation-building.

TRACING THE PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY IN INDIAN CINEMA

In movies of the 80s, we see how the cinematic representations of the disabled have quite evidently focused on the way they are ostracized from society. Not just compassion and sympathy, but emotions like pity and sadness are always associated with disability. A significant way of analyzing cinematic representations of disability would be to see it as a mirror reflecting society's outlook towards the subject. While examining the relationship of disability to cinema, Jenny Morris explains,

> Disability in film has become a metaphor for the message that the non-disabled writer wishes to get across in the same way that beauty is used. In doing this, movie makers draw on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed. (22)

Mass media's inducement of ideas of disease and related themes is significant, which in turn, blurs the line between the traditional social imagination of disability and what is induced by contemporary social belief influenced by screen portrayals. Since the beginning of Bollywood in the 1930s, filmmakers have attempted to portray diseases in varied thematic ways, and disability occupies a central place among all the diseases ever represented on the screen, primarily by showing the condition of the disabled either as a punishment or as a state of dependence.

There have been observably two extreme trends in Bollywood films as far as the portrayal of disability is concerned. While several filmmakers have represented disability in terms of comic interlude or to set into motion a series of dramatic action, there have been others who have used disability to spin a tale around the insensitivity of society and their reaction towards the disabled. Disability has also been widely portrayed as chastisement and as social taboos in Indian movies. In *Mother India*, the character's disability is used as a dramatic trope, and the reaction towards the disabled body is portrayed in such a way that the societal attitudes of the day get re-affirmed in the minds of the audience, i.e., it is better to die than to survive as a cripple. Thus, on one hand, the movie can be seen as an exploitation of the disabled in the mythologization of "Mother India"—the nation as untainted, pure, and self-sacrificing, but also as able-bodied and self-sufficient. On

the other hand, Shamu's escape from this seemingly burdened life unfortunately could be seen in alignment with the filmmaker's attempt at engaging with the minds of the audience and establishing a connection with them in a more intimate way by evoking emotions of pity and empathy in them, and in turn, strengthening the existing disability myths and stereotypes.

In *Mother India*, there is a tension between amputated Shamu living in this world and exiting the social order, and the manner in which those dialectics are carefully plotted. While Shamu is shown departing from the plot of the movie (Fig.1), insofar as the scene shows the figure of Shamu disappearing against the early sunrise, one is not sure if he committed suicide (Fig. 2). This ambiguity could be read as a deliberate plotting of the filmmaker, keeping in view the Hindu mythology—which this movie is replete with—that considers suicide as sinful and spiritually unacceptable.

According to Hindu philosophy, suicide is referred to as *atmahatya*, a Sanskrit word literally translating as soul-murder (where *atma* means soul and *hatya* means murder)— suicide as an action prevents the soul from obtaining liberation. Thus, while this narrative can be characteristic of Shamu's renunciation of the world, it is noteworthy that this renunciation is not self-induced but is, instead, imposed by society. Although we see Shamu leaving behind the social order at a time when India was going through a tremendous change in terms of development, once Shamu disappears from the village, whether he commits suicide or not, he goes out of the social order that controls village life. Since Shamu cannot fight the feudal order, especially since he is disabled and ousted from society, we see him renouncing its very structure. This, the filmmaker shows, is important for nation-building and for the hopeful world to usher in new possibilities in the future. Shamu leaves his family, and this departure is, hence, illustrated as a necessity so that the revolution to destroy the feudal system can take place effectively. Thus, while *Mother India* continues to be celebrated as the struggle against the tyranny of feudal colonialism, what remains overlooked is the ostensible struggle of the disabled that escaped the governance of Indian society. Thus, another aspect of the revolution, since its very inception, has been seen in eliminating the participation of the disabled lot in society, as symbolically reflected in the renunciation of the world by Shamu, which remains a subplot in this epic narrative. This subplot, which has been given inconsequential value to the underlying revolutionary impulse of the main text, has in reality played the role of a trigger in the cinematic narrative involving the terrible crisis of agrarian revolution in a postcolonial world.

POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN CINEMA AND BEING DISABLED IN NEHRU'S SOCIALIST SOCIETY

The idea of *nation* has remained a contested reference, for it is "an imagined community" (Anderson), constructed, debated, and recreated in socio-cultural representations across the world. In the Indian context, *nation* is inherently intertwined with the idea of land relations and peasant life as a cultural policy.

Fig. 1 | Shamu leaves behind his village and family in *Mother India*, 00:53:46. Mehboob Productions, 2018.

The film's tendency to disincline the experience of the disabled (and later, absent) husband raises questions about disability more as a social phenomenon, and not merely as a medical one.

Fig. 2 | Shamu disappears into the sunrise in *Mother India*, 00:54:39. Mehboob Productions, 2018.

Consequently, post-independence Hindi popular cinema embraced the subject of land as its central narrative trope while disseminating the idea of India as a self-sufficient independent nation. Effectively, *Mother India* became an influential cinematic venture for constructing the idea of *Indianness* based on the metaphor of land as the mother.

Director Khan was a socialist, and thereby, stood for endorsing Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist ambitions in India. Behind the glamour and chutzpah of the rather melodramatic plot, *Mother India* seems to have a clear political agenda: to promote and further the cause of farming, farmers, and agriculture, in keeping with view Nehru's ideal in India's First Five-Year Plan. Jawaharlal Nehru has been criticized for his faulty implementation of socialism at many levels. When India became independent, almost one-third of the population worked in low-productivity agriculture, and hence, creating jobs was Nehru's primary agenda. He understood that the levels of literacy and education were highly

lagging behind and college graduates were unemployable due to problems in the education system, a glaring example of which could be observed in Raj Kapoor's movie *Shree 420* (1955). In *Shree 420*, the protagonist, who lived in Nehruvian times, is more than a tramp—he is a bachelor degree holder but unemployed, an issue that continues to plague India even in contemporary times. While Nehru made the proper diagnosis of the newly independent India's rising economic problem, it remained more of a rhetoric than effective implementation. Nehru intended to increase agricultural productivity and revive labour-intensive manufacturing while providing mass education. Primarily influenced by the Japanese model, India invested in textile mills and small and medium-sized factories that could absorb labour. For instance, Ludhiana has been the hub of hosiery manufacturing industry, Surat has been known for the textile craft of *zari* (thread work with silver wire or fine gold), and Coimbatore for its textiles and light engineering industry. However, instead of giving a boost to these kinds of small and medium-sized industries, Nehru pushed heavy industry and followed other leaders in global industry. As a result, neither land reforms nor agricultural extension services were initiated in the independent India for the seventeen years Nehru remained Prime Minister and unemployment persisted (Purandare 2023).

Nehru's socialist reconstruction of India owes its foundation to his contacts with the peasantry. The marginalized peasants of Oudh recounted to Nehru their economic depravity, poverty, high rents, and illegal expulsion from their land, alongside extreme oppression by the exploitative land-owning Zamindars, moneylenders, and police, amongst others. Nehru was perceptive enough to observe the impending farmer's revolution, alongside the political movement in the newly independent India. Although disparate, both seemed to converge and reinforce each other. Especially when the Great Depression (1929-1939) descended as a disastrous blight on India's countryside, Nehru realized the ultimate remedy to curb the revolutionary potential of the agrarian discontent of the Indian peasants was the abolition of landlordism, the removal of intermediaries, and the dissolution of the feudal socio-economic structure. Due to the global crisis, there was a severe fall in agricultural prices—the backbone of the Indian economy. While the value of farm produce dropped by half, the land rent to be paid by the peasants remained unchanged. During the Great Depression, when prices decreased, the farmers tried to produce even more to pay off their debts, taxes and living expenses. However, in the early 1930s, prices dropped so low that many farmers went bankrupt and lost their farms. Thus, the feudal mode of production further denigrated the basic human dignity of millions of agrarian populations while also serving as an impediment in the primary development of the

Fig. 3 | Nehru's imagined India in *Mother India*, 00: 01:12. Mehboob Productions, 2018.

nation. Though the supposed beneficiaries of the reform were the peasants, this was not possible now due to the exploitative landlords who extracted higher rents. This remains consequential to Nehru's concept of constructing socialist India. Once he grasped the fundamental issues regarding the pauperization of the Indian peasantry, his quest for a basic socialistic remedy also began (Ganguli 1213-15).

This agrarian crisis has been fittingly portrayed in *Mother India*, which is based on rural India as a metaphor for the newly independent nation rising after the collapse of the British Empire. The movie centres on Radha, an abandoned woman from a poor rural village, trapped in the debt imposed by the predatory moneylender of the village. The movie shows how the slump in agricultural prices debilitated the entire peasantry. The opening scene of the movie, is, however, at odds with the hardship experienced by Radha, the "Mother India" of the movie. *Mother India* commences with old Radha, played by Nargis, sitting in a field—a trope which is woven throughout the film. The scene moves forward by shifting the focus of the camera to a dam being constructed and ends with a group of villagers persuading Radha to inaugurate the newly constructed water canal. Tractors and other advanced agricultural implements are framed in the background along with a song praising "Mother India." Evidently the viewers are introduced to the protagonist Radha as "the mother of the village" (00:03:39). Khan uses the opening scene as a device in supporting and establishing Nehru's ambitions in fortifying the Indian economy, creating food security, and making India self-reliant during its early years of independence. The scene, replete with agricultural advancements, tractors, irrigation projects, and so on, that unfolds as "memorial reconstruction" (Mishra 127), is suggestive of Nehru's imagined India. The generous use of red in both the foreground (Radha's saree) and background (tractor) in the scene (Fig. 3) functions as a window to the farmer's blood that went into making India independent.

In the movie, while Radha's family is trapped into destitution owing to the debt and its increasing interests, the situation

In movies of the 80s, we see how the cinematic representations of the disabled have quite evidently focused on the way they are ostracized from society.

worsens after Shamu meets with an accident while working on the barren land and loses both his arms. Shamu later abandons his family and disappears due to the everyday humiliation he faces because of his disability. What follows thereafter are the trials and tribulations of a single mother who continues to be tormented by repeated misfortunes until she emerges heroic at the end. However, what remains overlooked in this heroic narrative of suffering and survival is that the physically disabled Shamu has barely been given any role by the filmmaker in his depiction of this newly independent socialist India. In fact, what remains largely unaddressed is how Radha's quest for self-sufficiency is placed against the unfortunate departure of the disabled husband, where even the village money lender tries to take advantage of Radha's situation by offering her food and money in exchange for sexual favors.

It remains largely overlooked how society transmutes the disabled husband into a mere footstool in the process of putting Radha on a pedestal. The movie bears no history of Radha's past and makes no mention of her maiden home or previous life before her matrimonial alliance with Shamu, and her identity is etched out only in relation to her husband Shamu. In her first meeting with her husband Shamu, the newly married Radha—bedecked with jewels, red clothes, and most significantly, red *bindi*, a symbol of lifelong commitment and well-being of the husband—is shown throwing herself at the feet of her husband. This act symbolizes the adulation and respect married women are supposed to have for their husbands—a visual cue to how husbands are considered *pati-parmeshwar*, literally translating as husband-God to be worshipped and revered, a theory propagated by ancient Hindu mythologies and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The wife, happy at the feet of the husband, content to eat the left-over morsel of food, becomes a recurring scene both before and after misfortune befalls Shamu. Thus, while Radha's portrayal is that of an archetypal mother, her altruistic behaviour and selfless nature are of the utmost significance in the creation of this self-sufficient socialist India. Her magnanimous role could further be contrasted with her disabled husband who is now unable to economically sustain his family anymore. Although Shamu's condition evokes compassion in the viewers, there is a simultaneous sense of pity prompted as well. The scene where the moneylender Sukhilala (Kanhaiya Lal) makes fun of Shamu's disability results in his climactic abandonment of the society, away from any kind of social and familial bonding. Thus, it could be observed how *Mother India* continues to be a representative of the era of the 1950s land reforms, playing an instrumental role in understanding the way Hindi films have addressed the subject of land post-independence.

MOTHER INDIA AND PERCEPTION OF DISABILITY IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND IN SOCIAL HISTORY

In tracing the Hindu doctrine, Disability Studies expert G. N. Karna observes how disability is often considered as the result of *karma phala* or the retribution for the sins committed in the past. He further states, in a developing country such as India, where the majority population is illiterate, and superstitions are a significant part of the social cultural milieu, even disease is considered to have been associated with disobedience surrounding the principles of nature and religion (23-24). According to the Hindu philosophy which believes in reincarnation of souls, it is often believed that disability occurs when one leads a sinful life, because of which he/she is subjected to the wrath and vengeance of gods or goddesses based on the deeds and activities performed in one's life. The *Charaka Samhita* (the ancient treatise on Ayurveda) considers any kind of physical deformity as a result of misdeeds or action done in a previous life or *karma phala* (literally translating *karma* as work and *phala* as a result), and this continues to be believed in Indian society (Mukherji and Waheli 25). In this context, the disabled person is, thereby, looked upon as convicted of some wrongdoings or as going through a penalty for mischief.

A significant way of analyzing cinematic representations of disability would be to see it as a mirror reflecting society's outlook towards the subject.

Disability expert Usha Bhatt notes how in primitive societies, the tribes would often abandon their physically disabled children, and the tribal chief would support the killings of these unfortunate children. However, it may be worthwhile to mention that the concept of "disability" or handicap was different from what is often perceived today. Mere illness or any deviation from the expected normal behaviour of an individual was assumed to be disability (85). Conversely, it remains a matter of grave concern to see how such discrimination continued to persist in the twentieth century when such intolerances are justified on the grounds of religious and social bases. This is possibly where the character of the disabled Shamu from *Mother India* can be located. His growing conscience about his disabled body, which seemed more like a societal malady than a medical fatality, accentuated his inability to meet the requirements of his family or contribute to the developing *Bharat* (India).

Hindu mythology is replete with characters with disability like the blinded king Dhritarashtra, the deformed-hip Shakuni, and the hunched-back Manthara portraying them in an extremely negative light, which could also be seen in the discriminatory attitude against Shamu the amputee. The Indian classical epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* quite overtly maltreat people with disabilities by usually considering them in a negative light with mala fide intensions. The condition of King Dhritarashtra from *Mahabharata*, who was born blind, seems relevant when compared to Shamu. While Dhritarashtra's physical disability is not associated with evil spirits unlike Shakuni and Manthara, it was a common belief that he was solely responsible for the Kurukshetra War. His physical blindness has been considered as an indication of his

moral blindness, for he could not perform his duties as a just king. Similarly, Shamu's agonizing experience as a disabled adult led to his symbolic diminution and social exclusion, and hence is unproductive for his family or for the nation. Shamu, thereby, decides to shun society before society can humiliate him further, while exiting from the movie. While Gandhari, Dhritarashtra's queen, blind-folded her eyes as a mark of sacrifice for her impaired husband and decided not to see the world again, Radha continued wearing the red *bindi*–the mark of a married woman, visibly noticeable on her forehead until the end of the movie, even after Shamu's disappearance. While this could be read as a high ideal in women to be revered, reflecting Radha's pure love for her husband, paradoxically, it could also be perceived as Radha's protest at Shamu's merciless abandonment of her during times of adversity. Disability is here not merely associated the individual, but rather with every member of the family.

In *Mother India*, the character's disability is used as a dramatic trope, and the reaction towards the disabled body is portrayed in such a way that the societal attitudes of the day get re-affirmed in the minds of the audience, i.e., it is better to die than to survive as a cripple.

Shamu's act of removing Radha's red *bindi* from her forehead before disappearing from her life attains a symbolic status of breakage of patriarchal bondage, considering she has been wearing one (as per Hindu religious customs) ever since her marriage to Shamu. The pivotal moment is when Radha realizes Shamu's disappearance has been reflected for the spectators through the visual medium of the mirror. Radha rushes to the mirror in the morning after she wakes up to realize Shamu is not around anymore. While Radha's gaze at the mirror covers its entire frame, her *bindi* and *sindoor* have been effaced. This reflection signifies a crucial turning point in her life, indicating the end of her marriage and the loss of a male authority figure. The film begins with the use of red hues: the *sindoor* (vermilion mark) along the parting line of Radha's hair, the *bindi* on her forehead and the bridal *chunari* (scarf) draped around her shoulder and head. Gradually, we see how the perspective moves from the newly wed Radha to the red of the earth, and quite immediately, to the bronze tone of the landscape. Meanwhile, once the canal is opened, the water that flows red, a metaphor for the bloody legacy of Indian independence. Thus, the scene involving Shamu wiping off Radha's *bindi* could also be interpreted as India's dismal failure in improving the life of its citizens, and more specifically, its subaltern disabled population.

Radha's anguished motherhood in the movie is strengthened not merely by her daunting courage but rather by the rage of a disabled husband's abandoned wife, who did not deter from her survival goals. The absent presence of this disabled husband could be located in the latter half of *Mother India*, symbolically portrayed through the red *bindi* that Radha continues to wear from her first entry into the movie until its climactic end. In this vein, the absent husband becomes the semantic field *of Mother India*, which then indicates the marginal status of the disabled body manifested through Shamu's symbolic diminution and social exclusion. It is noteworthy that Shamu is portrayed through a number of conflicting representations: a caring husband, a supplicating patriarch, and an abusive wife-beater during moments of crisis. This foils Radha's portrayal as an archetypal female figure, whose abilities seem to be further strengthened in the light of her husband's disabilities.

Disability continues to be seen as an act of fate dictated by myths and misconceptions surrounding the idea of disability, causing the disabled to be marginalized, ostracized, and isolated from society, rather than treating it as a lasting medical condition. Situating *Mother India* within this socio-cultural background, it could be suggested that the movie, and in fact, the character Mother India or Radha, projects a complex blend of historical and mythological aspects or symbols of a culture enmeshed in Nehru's moderate socialist economic reform.

SOCIALIST REALISM AND *MOTHER INDIA* AS A TEXT EXCLUDING THE DISABLED BODY

While *Mother India* is considered crucial for its cinematic representation of socialist realism in India, it also serves as a case study of metonymical exclusion of the disabled from the process of nation building. In the first half of the movie, one could notice "Maa" or Mother is established as a significant trope by referring to Radha as "mother of the entire village" in the opening scene. The film poster portrays the iconic scene of the movie where Radha ploughs a field, simultaneously representing Mother India and Mother Earth (Fig. 4).

These visuals reinforce the epic proportions of the film's scope, foregrounding the ideological impetus of the filmmaker in a discrete manner, emphasizing his socialist alignment with the ideals of Nehruvian socialism. The fact that this movie was endorsed by Nehru reflected the ten-year progress India had made ever since its independence in 1947.

While *Mother India* portrays the cultural expressions of the Indian society of the time, it also reflects on those dialectical processes in the deep structure which holds Indian society together—which is, of course, at one level, is the conflict between living in the world or *pravitti* and renunciation or *nivitti*, and the other, is the ambiguity regarding whether *nivitti* is a choice or is forced upon by the society. This is, however, later mirrored by Shamu's own son Birju, who renounces the world and then becomes a bandit, and thereby, stands outside the control of the village social order just like his father,

Fig. 4 | Hand painted poster of the *Mother India*. *Mother India*, Mehboob Productions, 2018.

Disability continues to be seen as an act of fate dictated by myths and misconceptions surrounding the idea of disability, causing the disabled to be marginalized, ostracized, and isolated from society, rather than treating it as a lasting medical condition.

and later kills the moneylender Sukhilala, who once tried to disrobe his mother of her *dharma*. This development seems to be carefully plotted by the filmmaker to end the vicious cycle of exploitation of the Zamindari system which started with Shamu's dismal condition and ended with Shukhilala's assassination by Birju (Sunil Dutt). To destroy a feudal system, a person first must renounce its structure from within. Since Shamu could not possibly do that out of choice, he had to leave the cinematic frame after his arms were amputated. "Onslaught," as Vijay Mishra duly notes, "is possible only by someone who has no real 'familial' constraints" (133). While disabled Shamu leaves his wife, Birju leaves his mother—the former due to his physical inability, and the latter so that he is free from any kind of affectionate bonds—and these departures were crucial for the revolution to take place. While in the beginning of the film, Shamu seems to be the protagonist, we see how the onus of the revolutionary zeal lies with Birju, a duty which Shamu was unable to fulfill owing to his disability. It is in this definitive conjunction between the absent father, the mutinous son, and the heroic mother that the socio-political context of the movie can be located. *Mother India* does not include the real history of India or the details of the struggle against an outmoded system of feudalism, or how the Indian peasant could have triumphed over that kind of economic exploitation, or how to fit the disabled body in the socialist dreams of that time. On the contrary, it depicts an imaginary India with all its hopes and aspirations. Although these issues are tantalizingly present in the movie and they surface over and over again, Khan does not attempt at resolving them. Instead, he projects an illusory and utopian India as a model of national development with its agrarian and land reforms, abolition of the Zamindari system, establishment of feudal landownership, and self-sufficient villages.

CONCLUSION

India in the 1950s was an era of optimism, as embodied by Prime Minister Nehru, and it saw a revitalization of cinema as well. Manifesting the spirit of the newly independent India, Indian cinema was yearning to shed the old time and enter the epoch of growth and development while balancing entertainment with education and social commentary. The paper has attempted to understand the position of the disabled in this newly independent country, pregnant with hopes and aspirations of socialist economic reform, while taking *Mother India* as a primary cinematic text in examining rural India's attempt at carving a new identity for itself and simultaneously discarding its colonial past. However, what remains invincible is its partial and marginal representation of the disabled husband, whose absence influences the cinematic text—an agonizing reminder of the marginal existence of the disabled who had no or little participation in the nation-building process. Although *Mother India* tried to capture the spirit of the age while trying to portray the imagined India liberated from the clutches of the exploitative Zamindari system, the period seemed to mar the condition of the disabled people, and they seemed to have a very negligible role to play in this new social awakening of India.

It could be observed how *Mother India* is couched in a contradictory scenario: while the movie is defiantly subversive in terms of its representation of women in rural India as heroic, *Mother India* is outrageously conforming when it comes to the representation of the disabled. On one hand, the movie celebrated an imagined India, capturing the spirit of the age and revolutionary fervor. On the other hand, the concept of disability has been presented in the movie in a stereotypically conventional light as dependents and vulnerable characters—capturing society's outlook towards them and, at the same time, shaping the attitudes and perceptions of the disabled. The paper, in this vein, has attempted to examine the reductionist portrayal of disability as either being overwhelmingly negative or having traits that are other worldly – images that many Bollywood movies seem to be inspired from, and in turn, depicting the experiences of the disabled, depriving them of fundamental human traits. While Mehboob Khan has attempted to place his movies in the tensions arising from the nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, with *Mother India* circulating as both a critical discourse of the socialist Indian and as an emerging popular culture, it remains awfully detached from a just representation of the disabled. ▪

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The Pressure of Objects

Clutter and Class in Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019)

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In *Knives Out* (2019), Rian Johnson returns to the murder-mystery genre of his first feature film *Brick* (2002), and like that work, *Knives Out* is illustrative of an evocative visual style. The film centres around the death of Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer), a wealthy author living in a bizarrely cluttered house, who names housekeeper Marta (Ana de Armas) as the sole inheritor of his estate instead of his family, setting in motion the film's winding plot and casting Marta as the prime suspect in the investigation into Harlan's death. In the film, Johnson utilizes contrast through visual density instead of light, separating it from *Brick*, which utilizes high-contrast light in the style of *film noir*. In this article, I suggest that the maximalist nature of the decor of the house, cluttered with an otherwise unaffiliated display of miscellany, is simultaneously satirical of the materialist mindset America propagates as a display of wealth and a visual element employed like high-contrast lighting to build suspense. Johnson elects to manipulate the mise-en-scène through the density of objects by contrasting the working-class figures of the film in relative visual sparsity, highlighting the class tension present in the film. This tension has the effect of reinforcing Marta and Fran (Edi Patterson) with notions of objectification, and their characters are treated by the wealthy Thrombey family as materials to be exploited and discarded, rather than given the value inherent in their humanity.

The cluttered interior is correctly identified by critics as an important symbol of the movie's satirical effect, notably in Adam Nayman's review in *The Ringer*: "the Thrombey mansion is a marvel of macabre production design, and in its way, as symbolically and socioeconomically suggestive as the mansion in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*" (par. 6). Beyond this socio-economic impact, however, the visual impact of Harlan's manor is overwhelming and disorienting to the viewer, creating uncertainty regarding which objects contain meaning (Fig. 1). The viewer has a reflex to examine the elements of the film closely, an instinct which Johnson must disable through excess. This visual overload is further intensified by the presence of numerous sources of diegetic lighting which provide only enough light to muddle the visual image and make objects visible but not identifiable. The establishing shots of the interior are interspaced between smash cuts of closeups on various items which provide little context for the purpose of the room as a whole and give the viewer no time to focus. As a result, the viewer begins to filter out small details, a visual adaptation Johnson will later exploit.

Fig. 1 | The Thrombey manor's maximalist décor in *Knives Out*, 00:01:19. Lionsgate, 2019.

Fig. 2 | Marta's aloof introduction highlights the film's class divide in *Knives Out*, 00:06:23. Lionsgate, 2019.

These opening shots, meanwhile, establish a sense of place cluttered by consumption and possession. Yet, when Fran, the housekeeper, emerges carrying breakfast for Harlan, she is not wrapped in garish costume, but rather in perfectly pedestrian attire, making her stand out against the overloaded set (00:01:19). This visual juxtaposition creates a pattern of effect that Johnson will refer to repeatedly throughout the film, but also establishes the barrier of class present between the Thrombey family and the housekeepers.

This visual pattern is also utilized at Marta's introduction (Fig. 2) but with a critical difference in that, despite the visual density of this shot, Johnson anchors the viewer's gaze through Marta's plain sneakers, which seem illuminated against the otherwise dark background of this scene (00:06:23). Marta, an immigrant, and member of the working-class, wears suitably simple clothing, which underscores her separation from the wealthy place and wealthy people surrounding her. The visual highlight on her shoes reinforces this separation and acts as a subtle clue for the viewer as the plot of the film unfolds. The single speck of Harlan's blood on these shoes eventually becomes evidence of Marta's innocence, revealed by Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig) during the film's denouement. Marta's clothing comes full circle, and the anchoring of her plain white shoes in this scene is ultimately symbolic her innocence and by extension, her good character. However, the clutter of the scene prevents the viewer from seeing clues correctly, and Marta's position as the deuteragonist, and her good heart, are obscured by the clutter.

The dynamic of wealth and power is also prominent during the reading of the will, where visual clutter also clues to the importance of class divide (Fig. 3). In this scene, visual lines separate Marta, who lingers at the door all but forgotten during the reading, from the family, who create a strong horizontal line of facing the attorney (Frank Oz) (01:10:59). Yet, a strong vertical element cuts through the clutter, visualizing Marta's connection to the will and the inheritance of Harlan's estate. The scene retains its sense of visual density, with the members of the family themselves providing additional visual clutter, but a link is also established in a way that arouses the suspicion of the audience, who sees Marta as alone and suspicious, deepening the tension of the film.

Fig. 3 | Marta in framed isolation at the will reading, amid the clutter in *Knives Out*, 01:10:59. Lionsgate, 2019.

These sequences of clutter and contrast also work as a way in which Johnson subverts the viewer's desire in mystery films to look for clues by overloading the frame and making such observations extremely difficult. The effect is not unlike the use of high-contrast light, which, especially in works inspired by *film noir*, exaggerates and conceals. While lighting in these

Fig. 4 | The interior of the laundromat, in obscuring high-contrast light, falsely heightens the tension in *Knives Out*, 01:36:59. Lionsgate, 2019.

Fig. 5 | Marta, at the laundromat, not observing the critical ash pile on the right in *Knives Out*, 01:36:34. Lionsgate, 2019.

Fig. 6 | The cluttered guard house also reflects notions of possession and wealth in *Knives Out*, 00:55:12. Lionsgate, 2019.

internal scenes has been subtly working to disorient the viewer with the aid of the visual clutter, sparsity is a key instrument in the film's visual vocabulary. Thus, when the setting of the film shifts pivotally to the empty laundromat (Fig. 4), Johnson substitutes clutter for high-contrast lighting to maintain the viewer's disorientation (01:36:59). The use of light and shadow as a means of obscuring the truth is a long-standing part of film, indicated by [add a job description: critic?] Robert Arnett as the defining visual element of *film noir* (12). Its employment at this critical moment maintains the tension of apparent confrontation this scene provides. Yet, here the lighting is a false clue, as there is no antagonist present to confront. Cleverly, Johnson's earlier maximalist approach to visual density has encouraged viewers to filter out small details rather than focus on them, such that the viewer, along with Marta, miss the small detail of the ash pile (Fig. 5), a clue that would have cleared Marta's name (01:36:34). I contend that Johnson utilizes the visual contrast of clutter and sparsity to embed a clue in plain sight and have it ignored both by Marta and the viewer, subverting the expectations presented by a stark visual shift to high-contrast lighting.

The laundromat scene is also notable for its connection to the idea of class as generated in the maximalist aspect of the other interior shots of the film. While both the Thrombey manor and the security house (Fig. 6) are overflowing with clutter, reflecting the excess of wealth required to obtain and keep such numerous possessions, the laundromat's interior space is visually open and empty.

Fran's death in the laundromat, at the hands of Harlan's grandson Ransom (Chris Evans), is a device intended to frame Marta and invalidate Harlan's will. That this pivotal moment occurs in a laundromat is no accidental detail; laundromats are used almost exclusively by the working-class, for whom the

Fig. 7 | Marta finding Harlan's approval in a less-cluttered frame in *Knives Out*, 02:04:08. Lionsgate, 2019.

film is advocating, a reading signaled by the absence of clutter which has indicated wealth and status in the visual vocabulary of this film. Both Marta and Fran are objects to Ransom's goal of enfranchisement, and it is in this lower-class space, starkly different from the other interior spaces, that Ransom seeks to discard both women, having used them to further his own goals. This callous abuse of the lower-class by the upper-class speaks to the heart of the film's thematic assertions, further acknowledged by the various failings of the other members of the Thrombey family, which caused Harlan to remove them all from his will. The visual style of the laundromat is juxtaposed against the Thrombey manor in a way that is reflective of the dichotomous nature of the haves and the have-nots via clutter and sparsity, but also as a signifier of those who take advantage of others, and those who do not.

The conclusion reinforces the satirical effect of the film, as Blanc implies that Marta earned Harlan's inheritance through her good heart, and not through acting as a heartless consumer, like the rest of Harlan's family. The divide between those who consume and those who do not, drawn by class lines and filled in by clutter and space respectively, comes full circle in the final interior shot of the house (Fig. 7) in which Marta is displayed in a room in the manor, but absent is the pressure of objects. Instead, the focus is clearly on Marta, without tension, and a great deal of space is given to her presence. The visible clutter, symbolic of rampant materialism, has been displaced to the edges, and some of the sparsity of the laundromat has become present in the manor, reflective of the virtue of those who do not see others to their own end, and the change Marta will bring to her new home. ▪

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Chekhov's Gun that Never Goes Off

Femininity and Castration in *Jackie Brown* (1997)

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Seeking to dissect the political and gender undertones of Quentin Tarantino's films, film scholars have long evaluated the extent of feminine agency in Tarantino's hypermasculine storyworlds. This agency has rooted itself in oppositional terms, namely the feminine's desire for revenge against her male counterparts. In her analysis of Shoshana (Mélanie Laurent) from Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), film scholar Heidi Schlipphacke determines feminine revenge to be "mythic and self-destructive" (Schlipphacke 114). In order to obtain revenge against the patriarchy, she must, as a result, destroy herself, and by extension, her feminine influence. The political ramifications of this are clear in *Inglorious Basterds*. The power and politics of revenge are stripped from the feminine figure of Shoshana, who seeks to infiltrate and destroy the patriarchal power of the Nazis, and are instead extended to the male crew of the Basterds, who successfully eliminate the Nazis and their patriarchal control. The woman becomes a victim of her own desires, unable to destroy the patriarchy on her own accords. It is, instead, the men who enjoy the benefits of revenge. As iterated by Willis, "Tarantino's films display a masculinity whose worst enemy" is not femininity, but rather "itself" (Willis 290). In their appropriation of the feminine's revengeful desire to destroy the patriarchy, the men (unknowingly) reinforce their own patriarchal influence.

This same reading can be applied to Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997), primarily as seen in Jackie's (Pam Grier) tumultuous relationship with Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson), and her desire to kill him in the film's climax (02:22:05–02:24:28). While much scholarship and debate surrounding the film has sought to answer the ambiguous actions of Jackie in said climactic moment, I believe Schlipphacke's notion of feminine, self-destructive revenge can serve as a proper lens to evaluate Jackie's actions and underlying motivations.

Prior to the climax of *Jackie Brown*, Jackie prepares for conflict against Ordell, the masculine antagonist who seeks to harm Jackie, by practicing her quickdraw in Max Cherry's (Robert Forster) office. This sequence of Jackie's preparation is constructed in a visual pattern that is embedded with suggestions about gender/power dynamics and the politics of revenge. This essay examines the visual pattern created by Tarantino during the quickdraw sequence in *Jackie Brown*, and how the eventual delineation from said pattern demarcates the lack of true feminine power within Tarantino's storyworld.

The power dynamics within *Jackie Brown* must be adequately contextualized prior to a visual analysis of the sequence. Like Shoshana, Jackie seeks revenge over Ordell and, by extension, seeks to topple his patriarchal oversight. The root of Jackie's power lies in what theorist Sigmund Freud labels castration, which he defines as the lack of a possession of a penis (or the destruction of phallic power), which the woman embodies (Freud 152-157). Within *Jackie Brown* (like *Inglorious Basterds*), castration results from the ability of the feminine to infiltrate said overarching patriarchal structures, either threatening to destroy it outright, or rendering it incompatible by promoting feminine power. Thus, in her desire to kill (and thus symbolically castrate) Ordell, Jackie's revenge serves as a means to liberate herself from his patriarchal oversight.

As Ordell and Max drive back to Max's office for the film's climactic moment, Jackie draws a gun three times in a sequence that establishes a pattern embedded with notions of revenge and

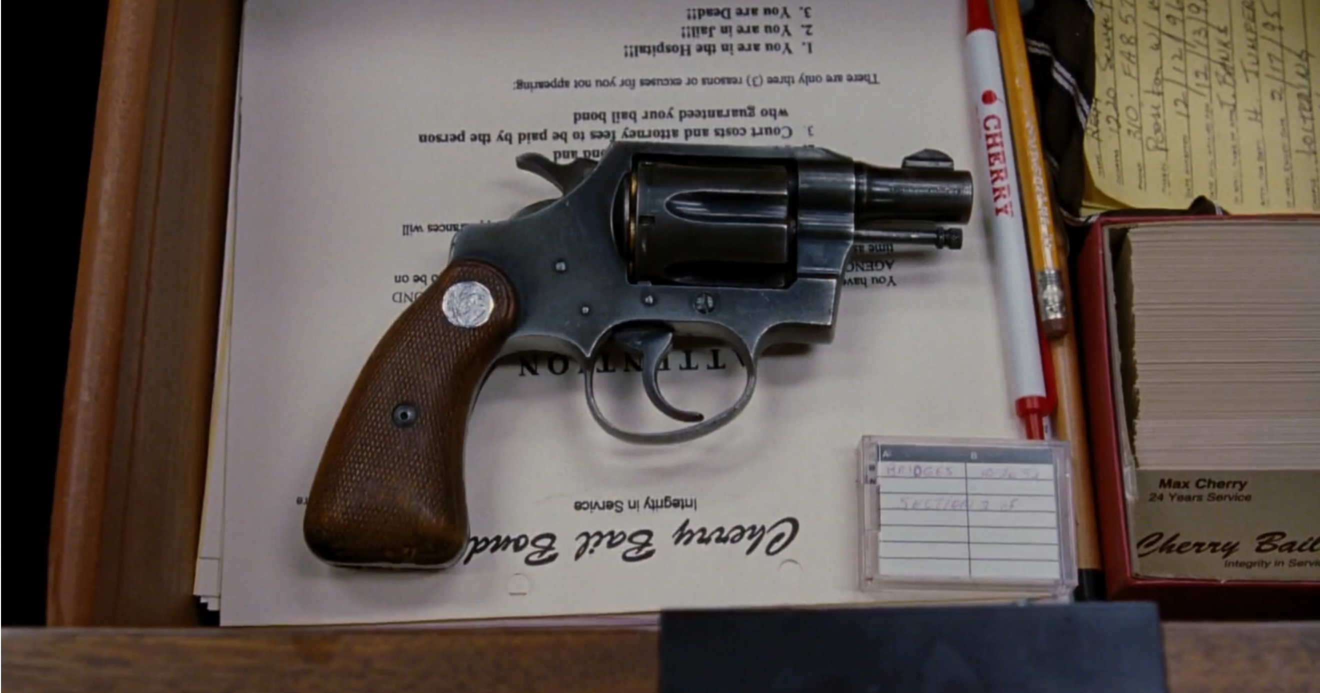

Fig. 1 | A revolver residing in the drawer of Max Cherry's desk in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:28. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 2a | Jackie examines and loads the revolver in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:31. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 2b | Jackie stoically gauges her hypothetical target in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:39. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 2c | Jackie draws the revolver from the drawer in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:40. Miramax, 1997.

power (2:18:27–2:19:04). The sequence begins with a close-up of the gun as it is pulled out of a drawer by Jackie (Fig. 1).

The next shot shows Jackie in a medium close-up checking the barrel before placing the gun back in the drawer and practicing her quickdraw (Figs. 2a-2c).

As Jackie points the gun off-screen, the film cuts to a reverse shot of what she is aiming at: the door she expects Ordell to walk through (Fig. 3).

Regarding the notion of liberation, the foundational three shots can be thus differentiated as such: the object of liberation (gun), the perpetrator or agent of liberation (Jackie), and the expected victim of liberative violence (Ordell).

Jackie practices her quickdraw routine again, and she adheres to the same pattern as before: close-up of the gun as she places it back in the drawer (Fig. 4), then the medium shot of Jackie practicing her aim (Fig. 5), then a reverse shot of the door Ordell is expected to enter (Fig. 6).

The sequential placement of the close-ups of the gun (Figs. 1 & 4) and Jackie (Figs. 2a-2c and 5a) suggests an intrinsic bond between Jackie and the gun. The gun serves as the means

Fig. 3 | A POV reverse shot from Jackie's perspective, showing the area where her target is expected to enter in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:41. Miramax, 1997.

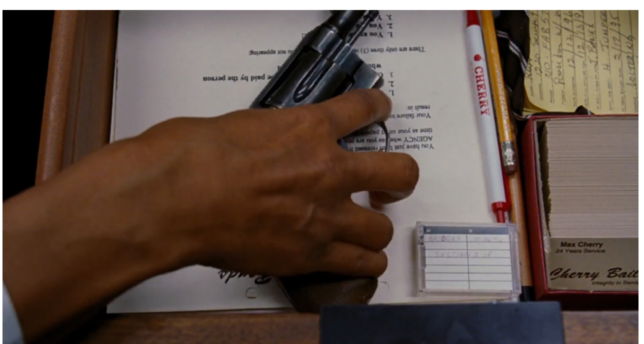

Fig. 4 | Jackie places the revolver back into the drawer, restarting the visual pattern in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:44. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 5 | Jackie redraws the revolver in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:50. Miramax, 1997.

of her liberation, and it is by her pull of the trigger that she achieves liberation and by extension, castrative power over Ordell. As she practices her quickdraw, she maintains a sense of collectiveness and bravado. She appears at this moment "bold…and methodical" (Wager 144). Jackie stoically looks off-camera towards the door, her jawline accentuated, which is culturally associated with masculine power and dominance. Jackie is also dressed in a black suit, a traditionally masculine outfit and symbol of masculine strength and confidence. Her performance and dress are coded in masculine projections of control, thus painting her entire character in masculinity. As a result, this notion of liberation is intertwined with masculine forms.

However, as quickly as Tarantino creates the pattern, he deviates from it as Jackie draws the gun for a third time. The close-up of the revolver is omitted, and the third pattern begins with a medium shot of Jackie preparing and pulling the gun (Fig. 7). The object of liberation is no longer visually associated with or connected to Jackie in terms of the cinematography.

Jackie attempts to maintain the same degree of bravado as she points the gun for a third time, but she starts to crack. She struggles to grasp the gun from the drawer, and forcefully sets it back down, visibly uncomfortable and even "fearful" (144). Rather than returning to the reverse shot of the door, the film cuts to a shot of Ordell in the car with Max (Fig. 8), reinforcing his placement as the source of Jackie's discomfort.

The same degree of masculinity that Jackie employs in the first two segments of her quickdraw practice is slowly stripped during the third attempt. Not only is the revolver omitted, thus disrupting the intrinsic link between the gun and Jackie (as well as the politics of liberation that the gun signifies), but so, too, are the layers of her masculine bravado as exemplified by her discomfort.

Fig. 6 | Returning to Jackie's POV of the door in *Jackie Brown*, 02:18:53. Miramax, 1997.

As Ordell enters Max's office (Fig. 9), Tarantino frames him in a way that emulates the reverse shot of the door from the quickdraw sequence (Figs. 3 and 6).

Ordell also notes the darkness of the space, which calls back to his first encounter with Jackie in her apartment, when Ordell kept turning the lights off in preparation to kill Jackie. Thus, all signs in the climactic moment, from the cinematography to the mise-en-scène, suggest that Jackie will be the one to pull the trigger and free herself from Ordell's patriarchal control.

However, as soon as the audience expects Jackie to shoot, federal agent Ray Nicolette (Michael Keaton) steps out of a back room (Fig. 10). Immediately, Jackie yells, "Ray, he's got a gun," calling for help (which is culturally perceived as a feminine trait), to which Ray responds by killing Ordell. Jackie is framed in a dimly-lit close-up, which obscures most of her face and masculine-coded suit. The only definable characteristic of Jackie's head is her long brown hair highlighted via backlight (Fig. 11). Thus, Jackie is visually defined solely by markers of her femininity, opposed to the masculine-coded bravado of the quickdraw sequence.

The climactic sequence also reverses the pattern of the quickdraw sequence. Ordell enters Max's office (Fig. 9) in a similar medium long-shot to the reverse shot of the door. As Ray emerges from the other room (Fig. 10), he is framed in a medium shot similarly to Jackie at the desk. As Jackie calls for Ray's help, she is shot in a close-up akin to the revolver (Fig. 11). Given the similarities in framing, Tarantino depicts Ray as the agent of liberation and Jackie as the means/object. The gun that she practiced with, the expected object of liberation, never appears. It is the Chekhov's gun that never goes off. She

Fig. 7 | Jackie's masculine bravado starts to crack in *Jackie Brown*, 02:19:03. Miramax, 1997.

does not reach for the gun, much less pull the trigger. Jackie denies herself the climactic, liberative moment of killing Ordell, instead transferring the castrative abilities to the masculine figure of Ray, who performs the liberative act. Wager understands this moment to be a result of her manipulation of Ray (52), and thus an extension of her feminine power. However, given her eventual discomfort during the quickdraw sequence noted previously, her willingness to give Ray the agency to pull the trigger against Ordell seems to be less out of a state of power. The reason for Jackie's transference of her castrative power is notably left ambiguous, but given Schlipphacke's notion of feminine self-destruction, I suggest that Jackie did so as a means to save herself from harm. Whereas Shoshana dies because she is unwilling to diverge from her revengeful desires, Jackie survives primarily in that she is willing to expel them. She does not fall to her own self-destructive tendencies, and seemingly acknowledges the self-destructive nature of feminine

Fig. 8 | Ordell, the source of Jackie's woes, driving with Max in *Jackie Brown*, 02:19:05. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 9 | Ordell enters the darkened office through the door, shown over Jackie's shoulder, 02:22:56. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 10 | Ray enters the office through a back room in *Jackie Brown*, 02:23:03. Miramax, 1997.

Fig. 11 | Jackie, cast in shadow, calls Ray for help in *Jackie Brown*, 02:23:04. Miramax, 1997.

revenge by granting Ray the climactic castration of Ordell, and thus, maintenance of patriarchal control. Yet, like Shoshana, in transferring her castrative power and granting agency to Ray, she reduces her own feminine influence. The threat of castration no longer resides with the woman, but comes from within the patriarchy itself. In diluting the power and influence of the feminine, the patriarchy continues to "reign unchecked," (154) all the while it "reinvent[s]"/reinforces itself (hooks 50). The feminine is thus reduced to a state of inferiority. The visual pattern created during the quickdraw sequence visualizes a moment where femininity *can* and does have liberative power, but the fact that the castrative climax of Brown's revenge arc ultimately does not occur by her own hands suggests the lack of resonant and lasting feminine power within Tarantino's hypermasculine storyworld. ■

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Identity, Authorship and Consumerism

An Interview with Moviemaker Jacob Gentry on the State of Cinema

BY PAUL RISKER
Independent Film Scholar

In the science-fiction road movie, *Night Sky* (2022), American filmmaker Jacob Gentry follows a petty thief (AJ Bowen) and a celestial vagabond (Brea Grant), on a trek across the American southwest, with a ruthless killer (Scott Poythress) in pursuit.

Gentry's feature debut, *Last Goodbye* (2004), explored the unexpected connections between a disparate group of characters: a vampire-slayer actress (Clementine Ford), a runaway teenage girl (Sara Stanton), and a preacher partial to whiskey (David Carradine), amongst others. He followed with a contribution to the three-part anthology film, *The Signal* (2007), whose plot revolved around the effects of a mysterious transmission that turns people homicidal.

Fourteen years after the time travel sci-fi drama, *Synchronicity* (2015), Gentry returned to the premise of mysterious signals, with the historical fiction *Broadcast Signal Intrusion* (2021), written by Phil Drinkwater and Tim Woodall. The film was inspired by the 1987 Max Headroom signal hijacking of two Chicago television stations. In their historical fiction, video archivist (Harry Shum Jr.) discovers what he believes to be a broadcast signal hacking. Finding similar signal intrusions, he slips down an obsessive rabbit hole when he realizes that they may be clues that will reveal what happened to his missing wife.

A subtle and ambiguous work, *Night Sky* will divide audiences. On the surface, nothing much seems to happen in *Night Sky*, but the film is nonetheless captivating. It honours Gentry's belief in spectatorship as an active rather than passive experience— what he describes to be a "literal physiological" process, where the audience creates the motion on-screen and gives the images personal meaning.

After *Night Sky's* world premiere at the August 2022 edition of FrightFest in London, Gentry spoke with *MSJ* about themes and ideas of identity and authorship in cinema, as well as the influence of consumerism on the medium.

PR: 'What we are' versus 'who we feel we are' can often be out of synch. I've spoken with directors who say that it took a number of films before they felt they could call themselves a filmmaker. When did you feel you could first call yourself a filmmaker, and what are your thoughts on what the word means?

JG: I say it just because it's easier to understand—it's a catch all thing. I also say filmmaker because I'm not just a director. I do other aspects. But if I were to really have my druthers about it, I'd say moviemaker because I've never been fortunate enough to make a movie on film. I don't use film, and even in the abstract terms of movie and film, outside of the format of what you shoot on, I feel like I make movies.

I've been doing this for so long that I don't ever remember a time when I didn't . . . Maybe when I was thirteen and I wanted to be a comic book artist, but I started making movies and showing them to people at such a young age.

The term filmmaker is so much of my identity that I don't interrogate that notion much, because I haven't wanted to do anything else—it's the only thing I know how to do. It wasn't like I was getting to an age where I had to figure out what I was going to do with my life.

Growing up people were always surprised: 'Wait, it's cool that you know what you want to do.' I was, 'Wait, you don't!' I'm a little envious of that open-ended curiosity: 'What is my

life going to be?' On the other side, filmmaking is something that encompasses so many aspects of not just the arts, but so many different jobs. It's everything from science to music, craft to technological know-how, to literature and philosophy. It has these endless tangents and side-streets you can go down, and so it doesn't feel like [it would] if I'm just going to play the violin.

If I have a violin solo on the score, that's just one small, but important aspect of the entire project. As much as it's amazing, I can't imagine doing only one thing like that. I admire people who do it because they get to level with their thing that I could never achieve with mine.

Filmmaking is more abstract because it doesn't even function the way that you'd write a novel—you type those words and they came from your brain. Even if you write the script, direct, and edit the movie, there are still so many other collaborations and outside influences—just the weather has so much of an influence on your movie.

PR: Do you regard the auteur theory, that emphasises the role of the director, as being valid, or does it need to be revised?

JG: … We need to educate people on what the auteur theory actually is, because when people use the term, and especially when they're disparaging of the idea, I don't think they're talking about the original notion of the auteur theory.

As far as I understand it, the auteur theory is a way to follow a filmmaker and to see things that are recognisable, or have a carryover from movie-to-movie—that have a signature. It's fascinating to me that there's this notion that it somehow means that movies aren't a collaboration, or literally only one person makes it, and we celebrate the idea. Even anybody who would trash the auteur theory, still talks about movies in terms of directors, which I totally understand.

It's a collaborative medium and we put so much emphasis on the director that it does feel disproportional. However, when you're learning about movies, or exploring movies, most people, no matter how they feel about the auteur theory, if they're serious about cinema, they're going through the channel of following a director. They discuss movies in terms of directors, and they dismiss movies in terms of directors. So as much as there seems to be a current [feeling that] the auteur theory is bullshit, we still constantly talk about movies as if they're made by one person.

So my take on it is we just all need to come to an consensus on what we're talking about when we say that. If we do mean that it's just one person that makes a movie and there's no collaboration, then of course, no one would disagree with that being a nonsense idea.

PR: So if we can reach a consensus on what the auteur theory means, it remains a valuable means of critiquing and understanding cinema?

JG: As far as I understand it, and I could be totally wrong, it was a way for the *Cahiers du cinéma* to look at what was Hollywood in the 40s and 50s. It was a factory and nameless in terms of artisanal aspects. It was just about the actors, the leads of the movie, and it was a way for them to say, 'Here's all these people that actually had signatures, and used styles and filmmaking grammar that was carried over from movie-to-movie.' Without that happening, there's no notion of something being Hitchcockian or Fellini-esque. It's just a nice way to understand something, and even genre to a certain extent is the same thing. You're saying [here are] these signifiers that make it a thing.

… I do feel it also varies from movie-to-movie, from director-to-director and from filmmaker-to-filmmaker, because somebody like David O. Selznick would be the auteur. There are these interesting ideas that [Arnold] Schwarzenegger was an auteur in the 80s, or Tom Cruise is an auteur, or Kevin Feige.

It's fascinating, and my long way of answering your question is to say let's all decide what we're talking about when we say that, because I don't think most of the conversation about the auteur theory is actually talking about Andrew Sarris's initial proposition for how [François] Truffaut, [André] Bazin, Jean-Luc Godard, and all of those guys were writing about movies. They were basically saying, 'Look, Howard Hawkes's movies have a thing.' Most people up until that point didn't know there was a guy named Howard Hawkes who made these movies, that all seemed to connect.

PR: I've had conversations with filmmakers that have left me with the impression that their reverence for literature, places cinema in its shadow. Talking to Director Jane Magnusson, she spoke about how cinema needs more time, and her belief that '… the history of cinema will eventually get the same status as the history of literature.' If cinema is still young and we're discovering what it is meant to be, or can be, do we need to blow up the art form?

JG: Well, it's interesting because it's an expensive medium and that's the defining thing. That's why it's predominantly about narrative, storytelling, and generating emotions. It's basically about entertainment and that has to do with the fact that it's an extremely expensive art form, and so you have to pay for it.

There are amazing and incredibly expansive film industries all over the world, and some are nipping at the toes of Hollywood. But for the most part, the last hundred years has principally been defined by Hollywood cinema. It's the only cinema I can think of, correct me if I'm wrong, that doesn't have any sort of state sponsorship. It's not paid for by taxpayers, it's an industry that's a complete capitalistic endeavour, but that also means we've now corporations taking over. I mean, corporations were taking over in the 60s and 70s when Paramount became Gulf and Western, and then Disney and Warner Brothers became AT&T. Those are going to have stock holders, and tech companies are going to have a different influence on what cinema is.

So the idea of Stan Brakhage, or what Godard was doing, even in his old age with video essays, you have to ask, 'What encompasses cinema? Are these essays on YouTube made by a young person the same thing as *F For Fake* by Orson Welles?' Perhaps it is—I don't know.

Fig. 1 | Monica Vitti in L'Avventura. Cino Del Duca, 1960.

Cinema is very young and we haven't scratched the surface of its potential, but I do think there's a little bit of a stalling because of the consumerist imperative to make it about narrative. Ultimately, if you're going to blow it up, you have to divorce yourself from the idea that all cinema has to tell a story, that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And functionally, it has to be able to be experimental.

PR: The consumerist imperative of cinema means that any attempt to redefine cinema will require a collaboration with the audience. They occupy an intricate role in the discussion of what cinema is, and what cinema can be.

JG: I know there's a lot of experimental and abstract films, but they don't proffer in the same way—they don't infiltrate the consciousness of people. I think because of television being so good, and being explicit and literal, lacking in ambiguity, the desires of the audience have become a lot more like the idea of metaphor.

This has been the most interesting functional element of cinema as far as I'm concerned. But the idea that something can be a metaphor for something has dissipated, and because a lot of people watch movies while also doing other things, they are thinking, 'Okay, I just need the facts of the plot.' How it's presented and how the images are unveiled, and how the onion layers are pulled back, is of much less importance than literally, 'How did they get to that place? What are the twists and the turns? What are the surprises? I just need the *Wikipedia* entry on the plot of this thing.' As opposed to something like Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), where Antonioni movies are almost all metaphor—they're ambiguous and they function on that (Fig. 1).

I've always thought the most interesting aspect of it, is there's the literal physiological thing that we fill in the blanks. So before cinema became completely digitally projected, you were sitting in the cinema where it's dark half the time, and your mind is creating the illusion of motion. It's an active process. It's not passive. Your mind has to actually turn these images that are flickering in front of you into movement, and give them meaning.

By [that] token, with storytelling having a sense of metaphor, and what a lot of great cinema does is, people can have different takes on what it means. It's like a really good pop song will mean something different—it's never going to mean the exact same thing to every single person, and yet it can be just as powerful with all those different meanings.

PR: In the 60s and 70s, cinema enjoyed a cultural relevancy that is lacking today. I've often wondered whether audiences were more engaged and passionate about films and movies then, and whether now, cinema and art matter less?

JG: I just don't think it's as much [about] art; I think it's a lot more [about] consumer products. I'm not passing judgement on that. I'm just saying that's what it is, and it has always been: 'What do you understand cinema to be?' My experience and what I've spent most of my life understanding it to be is changing dramatically, and it's up to me to decide whether or not

that's daunting and harrowing, or is it exciting? Maybe it's a mixture of both, but I don't think the way I understood cinema most of my life is the same, or will ever be again.

At least in my perception of it, it just happened to be that way. The real cosmic truth of it all could have been different, but the way I understood it is that it seemed the same from when I was a kid to when I was an adult, but now I'm a little bit older, it's not the same thing. It just doesn't function as a monocultural, shared experience by everyone—everything is … different.

At the same time, there can be pure cinema the way that I always understood it, and the way that I like it, which is cool. I don't disparage anybody else's take. If their idea of cinema is *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), then God bless them.

Living in Los Angeles is great because there's still a cinema culture that's perpetuated by people like Quentin Tarantino, with the New Beverley cinema. You can go and watch a movie projected on film, that was shot on film, and the experience is a little bit closer to the idea of [going to] church.

But look, my idea of cinema is completely different than someone who was raised in the 50s, where it was you just show up in the middle of the movie, and you're half paying attention to it. You're making out with your significant other, your date and there's a different energy. Going back to the World War Two era, in the 30s and 40s, there wasn't television, so people went to the cinema to get their news. That was where their news, cartoons and movies were, and they'd sometimes sit in there and watch three or four movies.

It's just changing, and for me it just means that perhaps the budgets get smaller for things that wouldn't exist in a cinematic way. I can mix and match and that's kind of the fun thing. I can use some of the tools of digital filmmaking in those things to make something that's trying to give an analogue cinematic experience. *Night Sky* would be an example of that, where it's trying to approach wandering into a small cinema and not really knowing what you're going to watch. It's like an exploitation movie that maybe has more to it, but you wouldn't know that from the poster. I like those kinds of movies— I like the movies that are sold like they're a biker flick or a surf movie, or a barbarian picture, but [have] some interesting things going on in it that you can recognize . ▪

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An Interview with Steven DeLay, Editor of *Life Above the Clouds*

Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick

BY MATTHEW JOHNSON
Independent Scholar

Terrence Malick is a filmmaker often regarded through philosophical perspectives. While scholarship on Malick has focused on philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein as important figures in gauging his artistic aesthetics and distinctive narrative structures, the intersecting scholarship of film studies and philosophy has continued to provide new perspectives of philosophical analysis. Philosophy has thus been a critical fixture in approaching Malick, but it has yet to be proven exhaustible in terms of exploring the complex themes, aesthetics, and ethics of his work.

Steven DeLay further privileges this strong interdisciplinary approach in his new edited collection *Life Above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (SUNY, 2023). As a philosophy scholar merging into film studies discourse, DeLay's current anthology on Malick uniquely continues the philosophical discussions of Malick's films with fresh perspectives, while also fostering a bevy of new Malick scholars who primarily come from philosophy backgrounds. While these contributors extend critical conversations of Malick's philosophically imbued style of filmmaking, they also give noticeable attention to his more contemporary films (which Robert Sinnerbrink refers to as the "Weightless trilogy") and offer renewed insights toward his critically disregarded trio of films: *To the Wonder* (2012), *Knight of Cups* (2015), and *Song to Song* (2017). In the following discussion, DeLay summarizes his recent volume on Malick scholarship and further explores philosophy as a crucial continuing perspective in addressing Malick's films as complex, challenging, and rich philosophical film texts.

MJ: Steven, as editor of this recent book on Terrence Malick, what can you say of your early experiences in viewing and studying this filmmaker?

SD: The first Malick film I ever saw was *The Thin Red Line* (1998), when I was twelve. This was the same year as the release of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and I remember quite clearly people at the time not knowing what to make of Malick's film (Fig. 1). It wasn't at all a conventional Hollywood war film—it certainly didn't idolize war nor was it designed to drum up patriotism. In those respects, it was very different from Spielberg's treatment of the Second World War. At the same time, neither was it a conventional Hollywood anti-war film. It wasn't a film offering a political or ideological critique of war. There was something much more primal, metaphysical, or existentialist about it. It undercut any grandiose narratives about the meaning of war by underscoring the personal, indeed private and interior, struggles of the soldiers, while simultaneously placing these human events in a cosmic perspective. I was incredibly interested in military history as a boy, so I had already read the James Jones novel on which the film was based. The film, consequently, captivated me immediately. It was only many years later, upon the release of *The Tree of Life* (2011), that I came to realize Malick was considered to be a highly unique and important filmmaker. I went and watched all of his other movies, which I immediately became quite fond of as well.

By this point, I was a philosophy graduate student, so I recognized and appreciated the various philosophical and theological threads laced through *Tree*. I looked into Malick's biography, and read that he had a background in philosophy

Fig. 1 | Light shines through the Pasifika foliage. A still from *The Thin Red Line*, 00:30:51. 20th Century Fox, 1998.

that particularly focused on the phenomenological tradition, especially figures such as Edmund Husserl and Heidegger, whom he had written a thesis about at Harvard. I assumed there must be substantial extant philosophical literature on Malick, so I went searching out what had been written on him and took my initial bearings from there. Scholars Simon Critchley and Hannah Patterson had written pieces on the Heideggerian influences on Malick. I found those informative. Not long after *Tree* was released, I ended up heading off to Oxford to complete my doctoral studies. Having read about his biography, I was aware of his own time as a philosophy student at Oxford, so I felt a personal connection between us in that regard. While overseas, *Knight of Cups* was released just as I was finishing up my dissertation, and that film, along with *To the Wonder* (Fig. 2) before it and then *Song to Song* (Fig. 3) shortly thereafter, solidified my conviction that Malick was up to something worthy of careful philosophical scrutiny. He was using film as a medium of philosophy in the phenomenological sense, in effect showing us essential features of life, while at the same time harnessing the mechanisms of film that make it the uniquely expressive art form it is: the language of the image, the manipulation of time and space, the employment of voiceover and music, all these things bring life into focus in a way that it would otherwise not be. In doing so, his films also lead naturally to questions about the relation between aesthetics and philosophy and theology, about what it means for something to be a work of art, or of philosophy.

Fig. 2 | Olga Kurylenko's Marina yearns for her soul to take flight in *To the Wonder*, 01:42:50. Magnolia, 2012.

Fig. 1 | Romantic memory rendered in the final moments of *Song to Song*, 02:03:40. Broad Green, 2017.

My view at the time, and still now, is that Malick is attempting to express the inexpressible, to recover and display the most fundamental, basic, and crucial of life's features that make the human experience human, dimensions of life that are ineffable, if you like, things that cannot be adequately conveyed by literature, or painting, or others modes of expression, things which are, despite their considerable elusiveness, nevertheless common and familiar to us all, because they are the very fabric of what it is to be human. I think this interest of his in the ineffable—his preoccupation with the mysterious—sheds legitimate light on why he would have gone in the direction he has as a filmmaker after having abandoned academic philosophy: unlike his teacher Gilbert Ryle, the ordinary language philosopher, Malick is a thinker of interiority. He's interested in revealing and exploring the basic dimensions of human life that are often covered over by our everyday linguistic and social practices, the quiet things that we all wrestle with alone in solitude.

MJ: What did you intend to readdress, in terms of philosophy in Malick's oeuvre? Is there a main theme throughout his work that you found missing from earlier Malick writings?

SD: It was standard among the earliest philosophical interpreters of Malick to classify his films as "Heideggerian cinema." There is something undeniably correct about that, though as time went on and the philosophical discussion deepened, others noted that this is a bit of an oversimplification, given the fact that there are other philosophical figures essential to assessing his films: Gilles Deleuze, Kierkegaard, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and so on. When Malick releases a new film, it allows viewers, critics, and interpreters the opportunity to reassess the whole of his previous body of work in light of the new addition. It's very much an hermeneutic circle. That's been the case with *A Hidden Life* (2019), because it's pretty apparent that part of what's going on in the film is Malick's own self-reckoning as a director over Heidegger's influence on his work, given Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi party. If there were a single word that comes to mind when describing his films, it is "beautiful." And yet, interestingly, the role of beauty is relatively neglected when analyzing his films. It could be that beauty has received less attention than it deserves in the philosophical reception of Malick simply because his work has been heavily interpreted through the lens of Heidegger. This takes us back, in a way, to the Romantics and German Idealists. Beauty for them is central to philosophy, to life in general, and certainly to art. A number of the volume's contributors delve extensively into the nature of beauty.

MJ: Currently, *Life Above the Clouds* harbours the largest collection of contributors within a single text on Malick. The book also introduces many new scholarly voices on this subject. How did how you source your writers for the volume?

SD: Initially, I had been envisioning a volume that would be a large handbook, something with dozens of brief entries from contributors addressing different topics and themes in Malick's films. The idea was to create a Malick lexicon, if you like. But that proved to be infeasible for a number of practical reasons, which made it necessary to adopt a different approach. I think in the end that was for the best. In a traditional volume of collected chapters, contributors have adequate space to write substantial essays, without having to worry about the constraints of a word count. As for finding the contributors, thankfully that ended up being easy. The first thing to do, I decided, was to solicit interest from well-established Malick commentators. After that, I reached out to those who have done work in the philosophy of film. To find new scholarly voices, one thing I did was contact those who I suspected might have a personal interest in Malick having read their work, given their philosophical sensibilities and interests. Very often, it turned out that they indeed love Malick's films as I had thought might be the case, and they were very eager to write about him, as they had not done so before. Along the way, of course, you receive pointers about who else might be worth contacting, so a number of the contributors came on board as a result of other contributors having suggested I contact them.

MJ: It is also evident that the book discusses Malick's contemporary "Weightless trilogy" films more than previous collections. Given that these three films are generally disregarded in many critical circles, what do you find to be important in readdressing these films?

SD: Malick's work has always been divisive. There are distinct camps of reception. Some highly esteem *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978), but dislike the rest of it. Others adore all of his films up to and including *The Tree of Life*, a film which they consider to be his magnum opus, but then they dislike everything that follows, with the possible exception of *A Hidden Life*, which they see as a return to form. There is a third group, those who see *The Tree of Life* as Malick's first misfire, the point at which he goes wrong, and the moment from which all that follows becomes a lesser exercise in what was already bad about *Tree*. And finally, you have those, such as myself, who like all of Malick's films. Those who dislike his work will often call it "pretentious." I'm not sure what that means exactly. But when people do try to clarify precisely what they dislike about his movies, they will frequently note two things: first, that his films lack character development, and second, that they lack plot, or at least conventional narrative. *To the Wonder*, *Knight of Cups*, and *Song to Song* have widely been accused of those two shortcomings. It is worth revisiting them, it seems to me, to see whether they, in fact, do tell a story. I think there is a compelling, genuine depth to the characters.

I should, though, admit that my fondness for these films may be due partly to the biographical fact that, living in Houston at the time as a graduate student, I happened to be at Austin City Limits when *Song to Song* was being shot. So, I have a personal connection to the mood of Austin it captures, and the sort of experiences it depicts. But as for those who don't like these films, it may be that in order to appreciate the way in which they tell the stories they do, it is necessary to be receptive to the way Malick employs voiceover and the use of the film image itself in them. I would say these films are among his richest philosophically and theologically: the character of Cook in *Song to Song*, of course, is a straightforward adaptation of Milton's Satan, *Knight of Cups* draws heavily on Plato, and the whole trilogy can be profitably interpreted with reference to Kierkegaard. The fact, for instance, that *Song to Song* was originally titled *Lawless* is quite telling. Among other things, I think it explores how love and sexual desire inevitably lead to calamity, heartache, and destruction, when love fails to be harnessed ethically, or even religiously, when, in other words, love remains essentially aimless, subject to whim and the empty pursuit of novelty and pleasure for their own sake. Malick, I take it, is showing us what happens when lovers remain at the level of Kierkegaard's first sphere of existence: the "aesthetic."

Fig. 4 | The birth of the universe in *The Tree of Life*, 00:20:49. Fox Searchlight, 2011.

MJ: Do you find yourself drawn to a particular Malick film, as it relates to your specific areas of research?

SD: In the Bible, it says that God is revealed through creation. As a phenomenologist, I'm interested in the question of God's appearing. Of all his films, I think *The Tree of Life* is the one that most deals with that phenomenon. This theological question about how God is manifest in the visible world lends itself naturally to the medium of film, since there are questions surrounding the status of the film image itself, and how it is able to capture reality.

MJ: What might viewers and Malick enthusiasts come to expect with his upcoming biblical project *The Way of the Wind*?

SD: Many philosophers, theologians, and artists have pondered the relationship between religion and art. Can art adequately represent the content of religious faith, or is there something about the religious life that renders it fundamentally inaccessible to artistic representation? If, for example, one thinks that art ultimately is in the business of disclosing beauty, this poses a potential problem when it comes to depictions of certain religious truths or events. The torture and death by crucifixion of Christ, after all, is ugly and horrific, not at all beautiful. What, then, are we to make of artistic depictions of it? Has any such artistic representation of it truly captured its horror? Could it? If so, would not the work in question no longer be beautiful, in which case it would seem to follow that art is not really essentially defined by its relation to beauty? But if that is the case, then what is art bound by? A related but different worry here is that art inevitably sanitizes the hard truths of religion, by rendering them aesthetically palatable. I know Malick himself is very sensitive to this danger.

In *A Hidden Life*, Franz meets with the village church's painter, who tells Franz that all the painting he has done in the church depicting the life of Christ only produces admirers of Christ, but not followers. The elderly painter's work shows everyone an exalted Christ, not the suffering Christ. It is worth noting that the painter's lines are virtually direct quotations of passages from Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity*. Kierkegaard's point is that people consider themselves to be Christians simply because they admire Christ, and yet they do not follow him, suffering as a result. When seeing the film, my hunch was that this scene between Franz and the painter was in part functioning autobiographically: Malick, in the figure of the painter, is confronting his own relation to Christ as an artist, wondering whether his films are truly capable of adequately representing the truth of Christ, in short, whether they merely encourage audiences to admire Christ, or whether they somehow inspire people actually to follow him.

The Way of the Wind, then, seems to be the film that will attempt to resolve these aesthetic and existential quandaries. This will be Malick's attempt to represent faithfully the life of Christ cinematically. How will he do so? Will he present the various episodes of Christ's life in their chronological succession? Or, will he arrange the images differently? If so, what will be the principle of their organization? In showing various scenes from Christ's life, we no doubt will hear the words of Christ. Given Malick's use of voiceover, will we also be given access to Christ's private thoughts? If we take seriously the words of the painter from the scene in *A Hidden Life*, it seems that Malick's stated measure of success for *The Way of the Wind* is a film that does not only produce admiration for Christ, but inspires us (or convicts us) into following him. This will be a film, I think, that does not just represent Christ with the intention that we admire what we are shown. I don't think Malick wants us to admire a representation of Christ, but to be as Christ is. It's a film that would convert. That challenges the very limits of cinema as an art. ▪

The Empty Vessel

Chronicles of the ‘Unfed’ Womb — Examining Symbolic Female Bodies and the Absence of Bodily Autonomy in *Alien 3*

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ABSTRACT

Alien 3 (1992) explores what it means to be a woman in horror as defined solely by motherhood and womanhood. Following the devastating loss of maternal relationship between Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and Newt (Carrie Henn) during a crash landing, the protagonist Ripley must navigate the prisoner planet Fiorina 161 as the sole survivor and woman amongst violent convicts placed in isolation from society for their heinous acts against women. Director David Fincher uses a dark, isolated setting to explore the patriarchy’s definition of bodily autonomy through the abjection of an unwanted alien pregnancy, the void-like environment of the prison, and the uncontrolled, fast paced violence of the prisoners and ‘rogue’ alien. This essay seeks to examine the concept of Barbara Creed’s ‘Monstrous Feminine’ as seen through the patriarchy’s fear of the parthenogenetic alien queen and the abject womb of Fiorina 161.

Rosemary Betterton argues that “Barbara Creed identified the birthing monster in the *Alien* series as the ‘archaic mother’ whose alien materiality threatens to engulf human subjects” (81). The alien mother incites great fear in the fictional world of the *Alien* series because of her threat to devastate and destroy humankind through numerous unfertilized pregnancies. Likewise, women who choose to reproduce in American society are treated with similar animosity. Their ability to carry children and the looming fear of parthenogenetic pregnancies, defined as “reproduction from an ovum without fertilization” (*Oxford Languages*), make the patriarchy feel virtually obsolete in childbearing. Thus, their insecurities have driven scholars such as Creed to coin and study the term ‘the monstrous feminine’ or what refers to “what it is about women that is terrifying, horrific, abject” (27). Under the male gaze, women are feared because of the abject, which Kristeva terms [as] that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’; that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’” (Kristeva qtd. in Creed 8). Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the womb, and monstrous motherhood defy ‘the system’ because the female body/uterus is something which cannot be controlled even by women themselves. David Fincher’s *Alien 3* (1992) reveals the patriarchy’s anxiety surrounding women’s power, and men’s inability to achieve reproduction in the same way. In this film, Ripley’s unwanted pregnancy leads her to her own death and destruction not only as a mother figure, but as a woman as well. By looking at the way the female body is appropriated in horror, we can see how bodily autonomy is a source of power for women, and in turn, a source of fear for those who cannot control it. Most importantly, this film depicts patriarchal vexation and disgust as illustrated through the symbolic womb of the prisoner planet and symbolic bodies in general.

The symbolic womb first appears in the destruction and entrapment of the pod’s occupants including Newt (Carrie

Fig. 1 | One of the pods is shattered and Ripley drapes herself over Newt's Pod in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:13:00 and 00:13:17. Brandywine Productions, 20th Century Studios, 1992.

Henn) in Ripley's ship. After Ripley's attempt to save herself and Newt in the previous film *Aliens* (1986), their pod/ship crash lands on the prison planet Fiorina 161. The first of many painful realities of Ripley's motherhood is Newt's death, even whilst Ripley attempts to keep her safe both in the womb of the pod and during autopsy. Throughout the film, Ripley must face the grief of losing her 'adopted' daughter, as well as the loss of her own bodily autonomy. In Figure 1, one of the pods is shattered, which suggests trauma to the pod as symbolic womb as well as foreshadowing Ripley's own lost 'pregnancy'. The low key lighting presents an interruption to the sacred space of Newt's enclosed pod, which Ripley drapes herself over as if it were a pregnant belly outside of herself, forever stuck in time. Here, the pod is a symbolic womb that was supposed to keep Newt safe from the aliens, even though it ultimately causes her to drown.

Besides the symbolic womb, attention is drawn to Newt's death through an autopsy table's drain, which is symbolic of Newt's rib cage (Fig. 2). Figures 2, 3, and 4 reveal how early on women's bodily autonomy is removed and controlled. Significantly, Newt's autopsy is conducted by a man, Clemens (Charles Dance) though it is closely supervised by Ripley. Newt is being autopsied to check for traces of an alien, though because she is a child, the director does not rely on graphic shots of her bare body and open rib cage to demonstrate the pain of being witness to such a loss. Instead, the drain runs clear one moment in Figure 1, then the camera pans to a knife and returns to a drain that runs red with her blood in Figure 2. It is through this removal of visual horror that viewers are subjected to the auditory cracking of Newt's bones. In Figure 4, Ripley is highlighted in low key lighting with half her face bruised and shadowed in between life and death, as she watches over her adopted daughter, still working to protect her body even in the afterlife. She is evidently in pain at having to remove Newt's bodily autonomy in order to ensure that her corpse has not and will not be used as a vessel for alien life, which is seen later when Ripley demands Newt's cremation in the void.

Furthermore, "*Alien 3* opens upon a scene that displays a new possibility for horror, that of the complete failure of essential motherhood" (Waldrop 37). Arguably, this could be translated to the failure of womanhood itself, as even though Ripley does not give birth to Newt, she cannot save her from the patriarchy as her dead body is surrounded by what Andrews (Brian

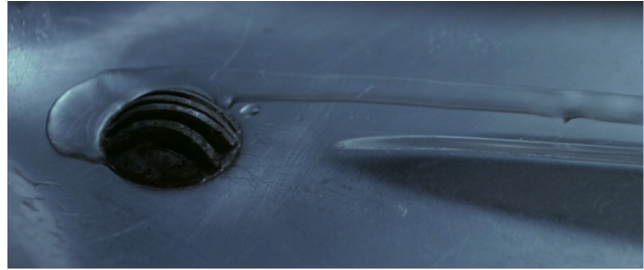

Fig. 2 | Water runs down the drain during Newt's Autopsy in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:16:33. Brandywine Productions/ 20th Century Studios, 1992.

Fig. 3 | Blood enters the drain during Newt's Autopsy in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:16:45. Brandywine Productions/ 20th Century Studios, 1992.

Glover) defines as "thieves, rapists, murderers, child molesters" (00:21:04/1:54:00) in an all-male prison. Thus, she demands Newt be cremated so that her corpse is safe from the alien as well as the violent offenders. Figures 2, 3 and 4 are suggestive of menstruation or abortion where a life is symbolically washed down the drain. Even if Newt were alive, she would become a target of the patriarchy as a young girl with reproductive promise in the same way Ripley has reproductive promise for the alien. Later in the film when viewers are reminded that the alien births happen from the chest cavity, it brings attention to the risk pregnancy puts on the female body and the chest as a figurative womb. Symbolically, the cryo tube that Newt is stored in represents the containers where fetuses are stored in science labs, which suggests that Newt was just a fetus herself; her potential lost. In the womb of the cryo tube, Newt was doomed to die due to complications that were beyond her control. Newts are "small slender-bodied [amphibians]" that "typically [spend] [their] adult [lives] on land and [return] to water to breed" (*Oxford Languages*). Her death by drowning (00:16:46/1:54:00) and isolation within her pod represents the

Fig. 4 | Ripley supervises Newt's autopsy in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:17:31. Brandywine Productions/ 20th Century Studios, 1992.

Fig. 5 | Ripley's nose bleeding in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:24:32. Brandywine Productions/ 20th Century Studios, 1992.

control the patriarchy has over young female life. As well, the helplessness that Ripley feels demonstrates this symbolic loss of her child as well as her own bodily autonomy as she later realizes her own role in carrying an alien child. Moreover, it is a reflection on how the 'man-made' synthetic womb will always pale in comparison to a real one.

Notably, references to flowering in the film also contend with motherhood, womanhood and even death. In Figure 5, Ripley's nose bleeds as she watches the bodies of Newt and Corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn) fall into the incinerator. Her nosebleed illustrates a symbolic miscarriage and the isolation of her face in this frame emphasizes how lonely this instance can be. Dillon's (Charles S. Dutton) birth related monologue in this scene incites a contrasting and harrowing image of motherhood. At (00:24:43-00:24:58/1:54:00) when he says "For within each seed, there is a promise of a flower. And within each death, no matter how small, there's always a new life," he foreshadows her pregnancy as Ripley's nose bleeds. This signals first blood: it runs down as menstrual blood might, or a rejected egg implantation, or the painful birth of a newborn baby.

The setting of the film on the planet Fiorina 161 is the first foreshadowing of Ripley's doomed pregnancy. "Fior" means flower in Italian, and by nature refers to springtime: a time of reproduction and blooming of the earth in all forms. Dillon's positioning of women's reproductivity (seeds) as probable mothers (flowers) assumes that birth and motherhood is natural, expected and beautiful which is divorced from the often painful and abject embodiment of the experience. Thus, suggesting that even Ripley's forced pregnancy and symbolic miscarriage of Newt are acceptable because the patriarchy deems these circumstances as an expected result of womanhood. In the Hebrew dictionary, the number 161 means "to be united" (2023). This is another example of curious foreshadowing in the film considering the clear divide of the prisoners and Ripley at the beginning and their inevitable though fragmented union by the end of the film. The flowering references contrast the image of the prison and the prisoners, in the same way the prisoners' reformed Christianity contrasts the prisoners' heinous acts against women. Dillon as the 'religious' leader of the cult talks of the balance of life in such a way that places him in a godlike position as the ultimate patriarch, watching as the bodies are thrown into "the void." Ripley's presence on the edge of the incinerator as the bodies are dropped into the void as well as Newt's autopsy draw attention to Ripley's role as guardian and supervisor of her adopted child. Even though she is outnumbered by the prisoner occupants of Fiorina 161, she claims her place among them early on in the film in her safekeeping of Newt's body: the one she could save from the aliens but not from death itself.

In this film, the all-male prison serves as a void or dark womb; "a form of "abjection"" (Kristeva qtd. Silver 409). As Kristeva says, the womb is abject because it is uncontrollable, defying societal 'rules' and 'systems' which is mirrored by the violent offenders. The prison hosts Ripley (a woman) and an alien, which are two things the patriarchy is incapable of controlling. In this light, both the alien and Ripley bear witness to each other's isolation, especially when Ripley becomes pregnant with the alien child and is shockingly preserved. As a symbolic womb, the prison serves as a place of development in terms of Ripley's alien pregnancy and in the rehabilitation of its prisoners. Despite their practise of reformed 'Christianity', the fear and hatred of the womb becomes directed towards the only woman present: Ripley. Even "[Miles] points out that in Christian art, hell was often represented as a womb, 'a lurid and rotting uterus' where sinners were perpetually tortured for their crimes (qtd. in Creed 43).

As first incited by the alien queen and exacerbated by Ripley, their fear of women is present "in the film's images of blood, darkness and death," as well as "in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, [and] the womb-like imagery" (Creed 19). In Figure 6, the wind tunnel and worker are highlighted in soft, low key lighting symbolizing their "stasis" in the symbolic womb, yet they are attacked by an alien moments later. The fast-paced mutilation of the worker demonstrates the juxtaposition of the "abject" womb as giver of life and even in some cases the cause of death. Therefore, it displays the inherent lack of ostensible safety.

In the symbolic womb of the prison, the high-risk prisoners are held as a result of molesting and killing women. The womb "in Christianity [was] a place of sin where evil was located" (Douglas qtd. in Silver 410). Additionally, it "[is]

Fig. 6 | A worker gets attacked by an alien and explodes in the fan in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 00:30:24 and 00:31:34. Brandywine Productions/ 20th Century Studios, 1992.

a menace to the social order" (Mitchell qtd. in Silver 411), because it departs from Freud's idea of a "melancholic attachment to an idealized wholeness and well-being (stasis)" (Silver 415). This lingering dread persists because of "[the] archaic mother," otherwise known "[as] the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end" (Creed 17). Ripley's existence in the prison is mirrored by the alien who is simultaneously feared and incites violence and pain in the lives of the prisoners. Abstaining in her 'tempting' presence symbolizes their first imprisonment through pregnancy (in the womb) and their current imprisonment on a planet that starves them of all their desires, including assaulting her. Because they are violent offenders who have almost exclusively preyed on women, viewers can imagine how Ripley's presence on the planet greatly endangers her bodily autonomy. The prisoners' experienced rejection on a desolate planet is paralleled by Ripley's own experienced rejection as a woman and as a symbolic mother to Newt. Ripley and the prisoners are alike in their 'alien' states and the latter are 'rejected 'by the alien itself, which leads to their demise.

Ripley's introduction to Fiorina 161 reveals the true nature of the prisoners and in conjunction with the alien, wreaks havoc on a dysfunctional system long enforced and ignored because of its benefit for men. In other words, "Ripley, herself, threatens the sanctity of the cloister on the planet where her ship crash-lands" (Waldrop 37). Furthermore, as Laura Mulvey elaborates, "[the] presence of women is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 809). Ripley, while not traditionally framed for the erotic gaze, is still considered a spectacle as a woman because of the abject. She is fetishized by the prisoners, even while "[she] attempts to blend in by shaving her head and donning baggy, masculine clothes similar to those worn by the cloistered men" (Waldrop 38). In her final act of self-destruction, "Ripley turns her back on the corrupt [alien] child within her and potential future children by jumping to her death, arms first out in a horrible, upside-down parody of crucifixion, and then gently and maternally wrapped around the "child" that bursts from her chest" (39). As seen in Figure 7, Ripley's decision to jump into the incinerator is a way to escape her life both as a woman and a mother. As the flames engulf her body, she is no longer a vessel for the patriarchy. Her journey into the void marks her acceptance that as a woman, she will always be "simultaneously looked at and displayed" (Mulvey 272) for the male gaze as well as constantly criticized for not doing enough in her 'role' as a woman. The loss of Newt and her 'abandonment' of her 'duties' as a woman carrying an alien child paint her as "no longer the good mother" but "a monster" (Waldrop 37). Even though it was not her choice to survive the crash that killed Newt and Corporal Hicks, she defies the odds by being a woman in a prison surrounded by men "who can't keep themselves from wanting to [assault] her" (39) and being motherless by choice until that choice is taken away from her. Because of her agency, "Ripley's femininity is both unshakable and dangerous for her and the men around her" (38), which frightens the company men and prisoners who wish to control her bodily autonomy.

Moreover, the pregnant female body and Fiorina 161 are both othered by the company men; the existence of both the female body and the planet displays "the illegibility of the materiality of a pregnant body within a visual economy that everywhere marks the boundary between the self and other" (Phelan 171). Just like the company men desire to occupy and control territory (the planet itself, Ripley, and the alien), "[the] hidden quality of the womb supports men's blindness and denial that in turn encourage their sexualized phantasies of capturing and controlling the womb" (Silver 413). Despite the tension between the occupants of Fiorina 161, the relationship between the alien and Ripley is one of understanding, not only because she is carrying an alien baby inside of her, but also because pregnancy in all forms is considerably dangerous and grotesque under the male gaze in its relation to bodily function and the maternal versus paternal symbolic. As Linda Williams elucidates, there is "[a] surprising affinity (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and woman, the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (62). *Alien 3* remains pivotal to the idea of monstrous motherhood as a sci fi/ horror film.

Furthermore, as a female character in horror film who fully undergoes the throes of womanhood and motherhood, Ripley's complexity and resilience cannot be underestimated. ▪

Fig. 7 | Ripley falling into the incinerator in Fincher's *Alien 3*, 01:47:32. Brandywine Productions/ 20th Century Studios, 1992.

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UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP

House of the Living Dolls

Set Design, the Gaze, and Miniaturization in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*

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ABSTRACT

Perhaps no film has allegorized the filmgoing experience as succinctly—or as perversely—as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*; at least in the eyes of film critics and Hitchcockian scholars, for whom the 1954 film synthesizes the director's enduring fascination with voyeurism by turning windows into movie screens and forcing us, the moviegoers, to see ourselves reflected in James Stewart's less-than-flattering portrayal of a Peeping Tom. And yet, while it has become the most common interpretation of the gaze and set design in *Rear Window*, prompting the creation of a rich body of scholarship since the film's release, the movie screen analogy offers only a fragmentary understanding of Hitchcock's mise-en-scène and fails to account for the dehumanizing miniaturization that befalls the objects of Jeff's (and our) gaze. A new reading—one which considers the single-set world of *Rear Window* as dollhouse-like—serves to resolve said critical gaps.

Joining *Lifeboat* (1944), *Rope* (1948), and *Dial M for Murder* (1954) in the tradition of single-set Alfred Hitchcock films, *Rear Window* (1954) cannot be separated from its setting: an elaborate, $100,000 set piece of a Greenwich Village apartment block, constructed at Paramount Studios under the art direction of Hal Pereira and Joseph MacMillan Johnson. A former art director himself, Hitchcock frequently spoke of the pre-eminent role of set design in his films, stating he would often "pick [his] backgrounds first and then think about the action of the story." Rather than "use a setting simply as a background," he made it a rule to "make [it] work dramatically" (Gottlieb 247; 313). In this regard, *Rear Window* is certainly a triumph—the apartment block is a character in itself with its purposeful construction and centrality to the plot, thus acting as a memorable vessel for a host of eccentric but largely unknowable inhabitants. Even before we meet our protagonist, from whose subjective perspective nearly all of the movie is told, a combination of dolly and crane shots, pans, and tilts sweep across his neighbours' open windows (Fig. 1), capturing their apartments as parallel microcosms. It is easy to see, then, why *Rear Window* is most often discussed in terms of its reflexivity, in that it captures the director's fascination with voyeurism through L. B. "Jeff" Jefferies (James Stewart), a wheelchair-bound photojournalist whose newfound role as a Peeping Tom analogizes the film-viewing experience. But said analogy, however incisive an interpretation of the gaze in *Rear Window*, is rather fragmentary in its understanding of the set piece, failing to explain Jeff's relative emotional detachment from the objects of his gaze or the dehumanizing miniaturization encoded in the film's visual language—these are critical gaps that a dollhouse metaphor more readily resolves.

In *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*, art historian Steven Jacobs asserts that, when coupled with the "theme of voyeurism," the unified "architectural construction

Fig. 1 | View of the apartment block from Jeff's window in *Rear Window*, 00:01:45. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

of *Rear Window*" becomes "an instrument of the gaze, a kind of *camera obscura* on an urban scale" (Jacobs 286). The open windows that dot the brownstones, while uncommonly large for such buildings, "match perfectly the aspect ratio (1.66:1) of the film," leading countless scholars to interpret them as metaphorical movie screens before which Jeff's neighbours parade as if conscious of themselves as performers, each enacting their own genre and storyline. Film scholar John Belton summarizes the resulting audience identification in "Dexterity in a Void: The Formalist Esthetics of Alfred Hitchcock," noting that "[w]hen Hitchcock's voyeuristic heroes and heroines look and react, they function as audience surrogates, as spectators within the text" (11); to the same effect, Belton has observed *Rear Window*'s set in terms of its "theatrical constraints," approximating it to the stage as well as the screen ("The Space of" 1124). Both metaphors, however, imply that by gazing into the neighbours' windows, the observer is privy to a complete, self-contained narrative—and yet, what we get instead are mere fragments; "snatched moments of observation" that emphasize Jeff's "complete inability to see all of the picture" (Pomerance 78). As a result, Jeff is left to "strain" for the full truth beyond the borders of their windows, the so-called movie screens, leaving him—and the viewer—awash with the frustration of "partial perception" (81). The brickwork surrounding the windows, which act as obstacles to Jeff's intrusive gaze, is thus as significant to an analysis of set design as the frames themselves, prompting a reading that takes the whole set piece into account. This is where the dollhouse comes in.

While we now think of dollhouses as objects of child's play, their original purpose lays in exhibition. The German word *dockenhaus*, collector Faith Eaton notes in *The Ultimate Doll's House Book*, meant "miniature house" (14), and a popular iteration of the structure was "a small replica of a house with a realistic façade—one that may have been loosely based on, or even deliberately designed to replicate, their own home" (9-10). As such, the façade across from Jeff acts as a closed dollhouse (Fig. 2a), which Jeff desperately tries, through his voyeuristic investigation, to pry open (Fig. 2b). The dollhouse quality of the building, which also stems from the "flat[ness]" and lack of depth of the neighbouring apartments in relation to Jeff's fully-realized space (Jacobs 288), is in fact described in Cornell Woolrich's text, "It Had To Be Murder," which serves as the source material for Hitchcock's *Rear Window*: "I [Jeff] could see into it, from the rounded projection of my bay window, as freely as into a *doll house* with its rear wall sliced away. And *scaled down* to about the same size" (Woolrich, emphasis mine). In short, although Jeff is also trapped behind the façade of his own building, rendered immobile by an accident, his physical powerlessness is offset by the miniaturization of the ones he observes, a process enforced by the camera's fairly constant presence within his apartment—which in turn establishes a clear subject-object dynamic wherein Jeff wields the power of the gaze.

Said miniaturization is also informed by Hitchcock's precise use of camera angles and shots, through which the physical and social distance between the observers—the characters in Jeff's apartment, as well as the viewer—and the observed are

Figs. 2a & 2b | Open and closed dollhouse façade from *Tate Baby House*, 1760. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

repeatedly asserted. Instrumental in establishing this distance are the introductory shots of Jeff's girlfriend, Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly), whose close-ups—a rarity in the film, likely to preserve the impact of those few moments of physical closeness Jeff experiences, first romantically with Lisa, and later violently with Thorwald (Raymond Burr)—"provide us with an optical measure against which the views into the courtyard can be appreciated for their challenging remoteness" (Pomerance 78). Once Jeff's dominant POV is established, our approach toward the apartments facing him is gradual and measured, moving from limited, distant shots to "something approximating a close-up," just as Jeff moves from using his eyes, to the binoculars, to his telephoto lens. In this way, Hitchcock "build[s] up an intimacy with the apartments over the course of the film," allowing us a closer view of some more than other as "we get to know them better" (Fawell 36). But the intimacy of subsequent medium shots and medium close-ups is paradoxically diluted by their persistent and perverse subjectivity, as we always perceive them literally through the filter of Jeff's lens, creating iris shots that give the scenes a dioramic quality—as if we are looking through a peephole into the details of a three-dimensional yet fabricated miniature world. In these frames, we are placed squarely in Jeff's point of view, wherein what matters are not the neighbours themselves, but Jeff's reaction to what he sees.

Here lies another shortcoming of the movie screen analogy: a well-made film is expected to capture more than our gazes; it must evoke from us an emotional response, seeking to build an attachment between the audience and the characters, so that the outcome of their stories *matters*. But Jeff does not readily display empathy for his neighbours. Critic Lawrence

Fig. 3 | Jeff and Lisa react to Miss Lonelyhearts in *Rear Window*, 00:23:31. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

Howe identifies his emotional detachment in "Through the Looking Glass: Reflexivity, Reciprocality, and Defenestration in Hitchcock's 'Rear Window'":

> … [Jeff's] fear of being seen by Thorwald indicates his uneasiness about the reciprocality it entails. The formation of his identity through the direction of his own gaze, while granting him power, obstructs his relationships with others—relationships that reciprocally acknowledge more than just his own desires, interests, and concerns—and entraps him in [an] isolated position … (18)

Is it that the narratives he observes are incomplete, and so the characters lack the depth necessary to elicit an emotional response from their faithful spectator? Or is it that the spectator

Figs. 4a, 4b, 4c, & 4d | The dog is discovered in *Rear Window*, 01:23:27-01:24:09. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

himself, accustomed to the psychological distance afforded by his camera, fails to see them as more than entertainment? The latter seems to ring true. Take, for example, Jeff's cold amusement as Miss Lonelyhearts' (Judith Evelyn) pretend-play comes to a tearful end, contrasted against Lisa's evident compassion for the woman's loneliness (Fig. 3). With far less time to observe them, Lisa easily empathizes with Jeff's neighbours—from the pitiful Miss Lonelyhearts to the over-run Miss Torso (Georgine Darcy)—and it is Stella (Thelma Ritter) who urges Jeff to call the police before Miss Lonelyhearts can commit suicide. Meanwhile, while Jeff obsesses over the murder of Mrs. Thorwald (Irene Winston), his primary motivations lie not in a humane need for justice, but in the journalistic thrill of uncovering the truth. Indeed, Lisa herself points to the "ghoul[lish]" nature of their shared disappointment upon discovering Mrs. Thorwald may in fact be "alive and well" (01:21:18-01:21:37).

At the same time, Jeff wonders aloud to Lisa about a moral justification for his actions: "I wonder if it's ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens. Of course, they can do the same thing to me. *Watch me like a bug under a glass, if they want to*" (01:20:55-00:21:17, emphasis mine). This line—Jeff's assessment of his own behaviour toward his neighbours—is frequently linked to the threat of subject-object role reversal which will eventually come to fruition; but it also reveals a more perverse aspect of his viewing: the dehumanizing power of his gaze. Considering how carefully camera angles and movements are laid out throughout the movie, it is no accident that when we finally break out of Jeff's filtered gaze to move closer to the others, it is prompted by the dog owner chastising her fellow neighbours for their indifference toward each other, after her beloved pet is found strangled. In this sequence, we frantically cut from the extreme and subjective long shots that permeate the film (Fig. 4a), depicting the neighbours in their doll-like minuteness, to objective medium shots of Miss Torso (Fig. 4b) and Miss Lonelyhearts (Fig. 4d), two of the principal victims of Jeff's objectifying gaze and misogynistic jabs, especially in their perceived "reflection (and miniaturization)" of Lisa (Pomerance 78), interspersed by a similarly framed shot of Jeff's apartment (Fig. 4c). The courtyard thus realizes its purpose as a communal space, temporarily forcing Jeff's neighbours out of their parallel existences and bringing their humanity into sharp focus. The voyeur—Jeff, and we with him—are thus forced to consider them as more than distant miniatures.

This narrative and visual switch culminates in Thorwald's invasion of Jeff's apartment, which, by shattering the subject-object dynamic that allowed Jeff a sense of safety and control, "violently resolves the obstacles to Jeff's developing identity, enabling him to move beyond the separation from others that he attempts to maintain" (Howe 18). Instantly, the amount of space each character takes up on-screen communicates a reversal of power; Thorwald (Fig. 5), whom Jeff has thus far observed, deceptively miniatured, only from the safety of his window, now towers over his impotent form (Fig. 6). Furthermore, as

Fig. 5 | Thorwald enters Jeff's apartment in *Rear Window*, 01:47:31. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

Jeff fails to blind Thorwald and a struggle ensues, we see what Hitchcock's up-to-now restrained use of close-ups has led up to: a "fifty-shot montage" of "sped-up action" in which "glimpses of neighbours" are "intercut with the close-up grappling between Thorwald and Jeff" (30). Ultimately forced onto the courtyard, Jeff now exists in the same space as his neighbours, who cast their own voyeuristic gazes as he lies in Lisa's arms, powerless to stop them.

And where does Lisa fit in this bifurcation? While Thorwald moves out of the miniature to break into Jeff's apartment, Lisa moves in *and* out, inhabiting both sides in *Rear Window*'s final act. It is this movement, Howe claims, that allows Jeff's rocky relationship with Lisa to be "renegotiated and ultimately fulfilled by a reciprocal exchange of subject and object positions conceptually and spatially in the film's narrative" (18). Subject to the same superficial, dehumanizing treatment Jeff bestows upon his neighbours, Lisa is conversely reborn in Jeff's eyes *after* placing herself before his lens. In a way, he is unable to cast aside his one-dimensional view of her until he sees her cross into and then emerge from his miniature world.

The dollhouse analogy ultimately speaks to *Rear Window*'s subjective cinematography, which maintains a consistent pattern of proxemics and blocking for the majority of the film that miniaturizes Jeff's neighbours and their environments, a visual process compatible with Hitchcock's formalist auteurship. In the early days of his career, Hitchcock's extensive use of miniature effects allowed him to bring extravagant sets and

Fig. 6 | Jeff cowers in the shadows in *Rear Window*, 01:47:32. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

action into his movies while adhering to the strict confines of a limited budget: take the mountainous scenery of *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), for example, or the combination of intricate model-work and flat backgrounds in *Young and Innocent* (1937). With *Rear Window*, however, money was hardly an issue. Yet, the constructed set retains an artificial quality while also sustaining realism. In his own words, Hitchcock "deal[t] in *fantasy*," and his suspense demanded verisimilitude to function (Gottlieb 313); at the same time, Jacobs writes, "some commentators" find a level of artificiality to be part of the Hitchcockian "essence" (21). The subtle unreality of *Rear Window*'s set is

even built into its fictitious address—125 West 10th Street, Greenwich Village, New York City—in adherence with the American law which prevented "a film crime [from being] situated at an existing place":

> … [Jeff's] location can be deduced from the address mentioned of the apartment on the other side of the courtyard: 125 West 9th Street. [. . .] [I]n reality, 9th Street changes into Christopher Street west from 6th Avenue. However, at 125 Christopher Street, the building was situated that inspired Hitchcock, who, according to a Paramount Advance Campaign document, 'dispatched four photographers . . . with instructions to shoot the Village from all angles, in all weather and under all lighting conditions, from dawn to midnight. (282)

Hitchcock's decision to recreate this environment in a soundstage rather than film on location, which in turn allowed him to maintain his "legendary" control over the production (19), suggests the dollhouse-esque construction of the set analogy as not only metaphorical, as we consider it when filtered through Jeff's objectifying gaze, but as a physical product of Hitchcock's authorial vision.

Despite holding the dominant gaze for most of the film, Jeff is also a prisoner of *Rear Window*'s dollhouse set piece, forced into the monotony of domesticity and physically unable to escape the narrow confines of his room. Consequently, the miniaturizing of his neighbours that is enacted through his voyeuristic point of view is reactionary, a way to cope with his own impotence and confinement by crafting a false sense of control over the objects of his gaze. To attempt to replace the film-viewing analogy through which this dynamic is most commonly understood in Hitchcockian scholarship would be an impossible feat. However, an alternative—or even complementary—reading of the set design as dollhouse-like, which seeks a new critical approach to Hitchcock as auteur, considers the layered role of gazing and voyeurism in the movie while also considering the unity of setting and narrative that makes *Rear Window* what it is, both as cinematic artifact and as the subject of continuous critical interest . ▪

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