MISE-EN-SCÈNE

The Journal of Film & Visual Narration

Vol. 09 No.02 | Winter 2024

MSJ

Table of Contents

Vol.09 No.02 | Winter 2024

Charley Gallay. Getty Images, 2024.

About *MSJ*

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

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

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

Situating itself in film's visual narrative, *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration* (ISSN 2369-5056) is the first of its kind: an international, peer-reviewed journal focused exclusively on the artistry of frame composition as a storytelling technique. With its open-access, open-review publishing model, *MSJ* strives to be a synergitic, community-oriented hub for discourse that begins at the level of the frame. Scholarly analysis of lighting, set design, costuming, camera angles, camera proximities, depth of field, and character placement are just some of the topics that the journal covers. While primarily concerned with discourse in and around the film frame, *MSJ* also includes narratological analysis at the scene and sequence level of related media (television and online) within its scope. Particularly welcome are articles that dovetail current debates, research, and theories as they deepen the understanding of filmic storytelling. The journal's contributing writers are an eclectic, interdisciplinary mixture of graduate students, academics, filmmakers, film scholars, and cineastes, a demographic that also reflects the journal's readership. Published annually in the spring and winter, *MSJ* is the official film studies journal of Kwantlen Polytechnic University, where it is sponsored by the Faculty of Arts, the KDocsFF Documentary Film Festival, the KPU Library, and KPU's English Department. In print, it can be found in KPU's and Cinemateca Portuguesa-Museu do Cinema's libraries. *MSJ* appears in EBSCO's Film and Television Literature Index. ▪

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader:

Let's say you were preparing to teach an introduction to film studies course: What films would be featured on your syllabus? Numbering no more than a dozen films, your curated picks must represent cinema's history, movements, genres, and artistry. I faced this universal challenge last semester in developing my "Critical Studies in Film" course. Despite the allure of endless possibilities, reality sets in when you realize the number of films you can teach in the space of thirteen weeks is much more constrained.

Eventually, I settled on a playlist of classic and contemporary films: Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Michael Lehmann's *Heathers* (1989), Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995), Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). While these eight filmic texts would fulfill the survey requirement, I wanted to include a neo-noir film to complement *Double Indemnity*. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014) were the frontrunners until I screened Steven Zaillian's limited series, *Ripley* (2024), a chilling adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley.* A master class in cinematography, Zaillian's black and white film was begging to be analzyed shot-by-shot for its mesmerizing visual storytelling and neo-noir stylings. My students enjoyed recreating and writing about frames from *Ripley* as a mise-en-scène assignment; some created film noir selfies inspired by *Ripley*, which proved to be one of their most discussed films. Unfortunately, we never had the opportunity to study the musical score—an unexpected combination of Sicilian folk music and jazzy instrumentals—that lends such emotional resonance to the story of a homicidal grifter. I recall thinking that a study of *Ripley*'s soundtrack and its composer could be its own topic in the course next time; until then, perhaps it could somehow feature in *Mise-en-scène* if we had a writer ready to take it on.

By sheer coincidence, our mind-reading correspondent Paul Risker submitted an interview with composer Jeff Russo, which you will find within the pages of Issue 9.2. His wide-ranging interview with Russo, the composer behind productions like *Ripley* and *Fargo,* explores the artistry of his trademark sound design. Unifying the theme of the transgressive is the issue's featured article on homoeroticism in *Ben-Hur* by Anne Marie Scholz and a featurette concerning the self-reflexivity of breaking the fourth wall in *Fleabag* by Dora Dombai.

I hope you discover something new in the sights and sounds of our Winter edition.

Greg Chan
Editor-in-Chief

Our Contributors

DORA DOMBAI

Dora Dombai is a film journalist and independent scholar who graduated from Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest. After receiving her Bachelor's degree in Hungarian Literature and Linguistics, she graduated with an MA in Film Studies and Aesthetics. Publishing film criticism and aesthetic studies for fifteen years, Dora's areas of interest include contemporary European cinema, feminist criticism and environmental aesthetics in a broader perspective. She recently published her first book, *Cinema Can Be Dangerous*, which analyses the early works of ten young Hungarian female directors in the twenty-first century, while providing an overview of recent aesthetic and thematic tendencies in contemporary Hungarian cinema.

LYDIA FRASER

Lydia Fraser is a senior at Harvard University pursuing a BA in Film and Visual Studies and Government with a language citation in French. Her current honors thesis explores spatiotemporal disjunctions in Los Angeles through horror films, employing gothic studies, urban history, and postcolonial theory. In school, she is a staff writer for *The Crimson*, where she often covers film and campus arts, a curator for the *Undergraduate Cinematheque*, and has previously done research for the documentary film initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School. Her scholarly work can also be found in *Film Matters and Bright Lights Film Journal.*

COLIN HUNTER

Colin Hunter is a Kwantlen Polytechnic University student from Langley, BC. He is in his second year of his undergraduate to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in English. Colin hopes to use this to transition into teaching English at a secondary level with special focus on critical theory through film. His interest in film theory stems from his passion for 1980s-90s horror films with a specific interest in the slasher sub-genre and practical effects. Other research interests include the influence of comic books on recent cinema and film serialization. In his personal time, Colin enjoys attending metal concerts, camping, or reading comic books.

KIRAN JOHAL

Kiran Johal is an undergraduate student at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, currently pursuing a History major with a minor in Counselling. Through her practicum placement with KDocsFF, she worked with the Community Outreach Program to organize documentary screenings and panel discussions. Through this placement experience, she learned how films can be used to promote social justice advocacy and change. Outside of her academic life, Kiran enjoys watching films as a way to relax and can be found bingeing Bollywood and Hollywood romantic comedies. When she isn't spending time with her friends and family, she enjoys spending time in the kitchen creating new recipes, immersing herself in a book, or taking long walks.

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.

ANNE-MARIE SCHOLZ

Anne-Marie Scholz was born in Chicago, IL in 1964 of German parents, grew up in Southern California and moved to Germany in 1994. In 1993, she received her Ph.D. in U.S. cultural history from the University of California, Irvine, and since then has taught at many universities, including UCI, Tübingen, Bremen, Konstanz, Bonn, Vechta and Hamburg. Currently, Anne-Marie freelances as a language teacher and translator and hold an affiliation as a "Privatdozentin" for English-Speaking Cultures in Bremen. Her second book, From Fidelity to History: Film Adaptations as Cultural Events in the Twentieth Century (Berghahn, 2013), focuses upon the transnational reception of Anglo-American popular culture in Europe and historical approaches to film adaptation. She published on Doris Day's German reception and on reconceptualizations of transnational film history through fan labour via new media such as YouTube.

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

ONE FRAME AT A TIME

...a More Sympathetic Reunion...

Ben-Hur (1959), Subtextual Adaptation, Sexual Politics, and the Art of Homoerotic Performance

ANNE-MARIE SCHOLZ
UNIVERSITY OF BREMEN, GERMANY

ABSTRACT

In this essay I will take a closer look at a legendary 'gay subplot' in the history of mainstream Hollywood film production—the unrequited love story between the Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur and the Roman tribune Messala in the 1959 Hollywood "sword and sandle" blockbuster *Ben-Hur*. I will focus on three heretofore neglected dimensions. First, the extent to which the subplot makes it possible to understand Ben-Hur as a subtextual adaptation of Gore Vidal's controversial 1948 novel, *The City and the Pillar*; secondly, how the link between the film and the novel by Vidal sheds light upon the sexual politics of homosexual rights as they were being conceptualized and developed after World War II; and, thirdly, how this subplot, far from having been 'slipped in', was fully integrated into the production not only through subtextual adaptation, but also via cinematography, music, and especially dramatic performance.

INTRODUCTION

During the filming of the epic 1959 "sword and sandal" blockbuster *Ben-Hur*, screenwriter Gore Vidal suggested to director William Wyler and producer Sam Zimbalist that the key to making the conflict between the Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) and the Roman tribune Messala (Stephen Boyd) dramatically sustainable was to imply an unrequited love story between the two men. Wyler, Zimbalist, and the up-and-coming northern Irish actor Boyd would take him up on it. Charlton Heston was not informed. Since the publication of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* in 1981, this "gay subtext" has become rather legendary, mostly because of the rhetorical efforts of Vidal, who would discuss its existence as something of an inside joke aimed at Charlton Heston, ostensibly for his straight masculine cluelessness. Heston responded in kind, leading to a "storm in a teacup" controversy that did a superb job drawing attention away from the element that made the subtext of *Ben-Hur* so effective and successful: the way it had been thoroughly integrated into the entire film by way of adaptation, cinematography, music and especially dramatic performance (Fig. 1).[1]

Fig. 1 | Messala and Judah Ben-Hur, 00:27:32. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Scholars who have since paid more careful attention to the gay subtext contextualize it in relationship to issues of Cold War homophobia and anti-communism in 1950s America (Tuszynski 119), or as a depiction of "the tendency of male desire to fuel erotics of power and domination among men" (Hark 170-71). These contextualizations are based upon a reading of the subplot as in

1 I wish to thank Leila Zenderland, John Ibson, and David Gerstner for their comments, suggestions and criticism in the writing of this essay, and Zoran Sinobad at the Library of Congress for assistance with locating sources.

absolute opposition to the Judeo-Christian values of the main plot: the return of Judah Ben-Hur to the world of women and heterosexuality associated with his conversion to Christianity. Ultimately, such readings implicitly favour a binary interpretation of the film that negates its homoerotic subtext. "As the film presents masculine desire," Ina Rae Hark concludes, "it is incompatible with salvation" (177).

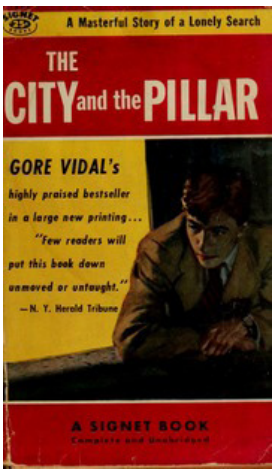
A closer look at the film and its production history, however, reveals a more complex picture. Scholars now tend to agree upon the consistency of the homoerotic dimension between Judah Ben-Hur and Messala (Altmann 150; Barrios 268-72; Hark 170; Devore 129-30; Tuszynski 119), not just its role in the "establishing" opening "look" at the beginning of this nearly three and a half hour film. Therefore, it is time to analyze the cultural and literary context out of which this homoerotic subplot emerged and how it was integrated into the film by way of darkness, light, and colour in its visual and audio components, thus lending to it emotional and aesthetic legitimacy as an actively and consciously developed dimension of the film.

ADAPTATION, TEXT, SUB-TEXT: *BEN-HUR* (1959) AS CULTURAL *PALIMPSEST*

Why is a more systematic reading of this gay subplot historically interesting and worthwhile? Notably, because Gore Vidal states in his 1996 memoir, *Palimpsest*, that the key dramatic subtextual leitmotif of unrequited love in *Ben-Hur* was derived from his own controversial 1948 novel, *The City and the Pillar*:

> Sam [Zimbalist] was behind his desk; …. Willy [Wyler] … sat in a chair with his back to the window, the good ear turned disapprovingly in my direction. I had just told them that Ben Hur and Messala had been boyhood lovers. But Ben Hur, under the fierce Palestinian sun and its jealous god, had turned straight as a die while Messala, the decadent gentile, had remained in love with Ben and wanted to take up where they had left off. Yes, it was *The City and the Pillar* all over again; fortunately, neither Sam nor Willy had read it. When Ben Hur rebuffs Messala's advances, a deep and abiding hatred fills Messala to the brim. If not love (Rome spelled backward is "Amor"), then death. (*Palimpsest* 304-305)

The City and the Pillar is considered one of the first important literary works dealing directly with homosexuality following World War Two, and its controversial publication led to both a spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list and a major conflict between Vidal and the mainstream book reviewing establishment at *The New York Times*, who refused to advertise the novel and threatened to blacklist him. Concerned that now he would not be able to make a living solely as a novelist (though he continued to publish them), Vidal expanded into other media (*Palimpsest* 122). He went to work writing for television and was under contract to MGM as a screenwriter. By the late fifties, he had also written a successful Broadway play and was busy conceptualizing his future novel, *Julian*.



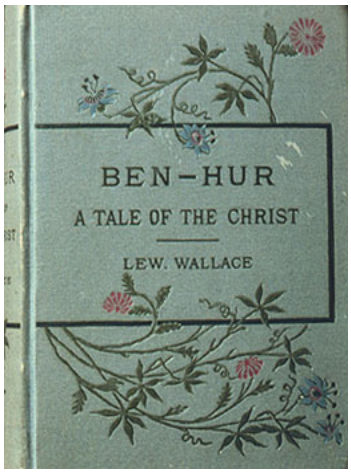


Fig. 2 (left) | *The City and the Pillar* (Paperback ed., 1950)[3]
Fig. 3 (right) | *Ben Hur* (First ed., 1880)[4]

When he began contributing to writing the *Ben-Hur* screenplay, he already had some knowledge of ancient Roman history. While Vidal would not write another novel about an overt love affair between two men, the subtext in *Ben-Hur* strongly suggests that he remained very interested in, and committed to, legitimating the existence of same-sex relationships in popular culture. Thus it was that this 1959 production became, in key ways, as much an adaptation of *The City and the Pillar* as of General Lew Wallace's famous 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Scholz, *From Fidelity*, 3). Or, perhaps better, Wallace provided the "text" for the plot and Vidal provided, via *The City and the Pillar,* the text for the subplot.[2] This link makes it possible to actively read *Ben-Hur* within the cultural and historical context of gay identity and sexual politics following World War Two (Figs. 2 and 3).

Briefly, the first edition of *The City and the Pillar* centres on Jim Willard, a young white Southerner trying to figure out his identity as a man who loves other men.[5] His early love affair with a high school friend, Bob Ford, which involved a series of

2 I will be working with the terms "subtext" or "subplot" in the sense of Ernest Hemingway's well-known theory of omission in short fiction: "you could omit anything if you knew what you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel more than they understood" (Hemingway 75). While no great fan of Hemingway, Vidal's use of *The City and the Pillar* to give to the 1959 production of *Ben-Hur* its unspoken—if not unseen and not unheard—subplot would be an ingenious application of this principle to screenwriting and to filmmaking under the duress of potential censorship.

3 Source: https://archive.org/details/citypillar00vida

4 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben-Hur:_A_Tale_of_the_Christ#/media/File:Wallace_Ben-Hur_cover.jpg

5 It is the original edition (1948) of *The City and the Pillar*, not the more well-known revised edition (1965), that informs the subtext of *Ben-Hur*. The uncredited co-authors of the screenplay for *Ben-Hur* were Gore Vidal and Christopher Fry. The author given credit for the screenplay was Karl Tunberg.

sexual encounters at a log cabin on a weekend, becomes the basis for Jim Willard's conception of himself as a man and homosexual. After these first encounters, he leaves home and goes to sea; he then goes to Hollywood, joins the military, and travels to Mexico and New York, having a series of affairs with men, none of whom can compare with his early experience. His desire to get together with Bob again leads to a meeting that ends tragically: Bob rejects Jim's renewed advances and Jim, in a fury, strangles him. The essence of the novel is thus Jim's inner life and his tragedy; like Lot's wife gazing back at Sodom, Jim cannot free himself from a past ideal.

Jew. Clearly, Vidal's interest in this particular theme was anything but aesthetically or politically "neutral." Rather, his interest in "the motivation for all that hate" in a three and a half hour film was closely linked to his own literary interests in "the boundaries and meanings of male attachment" (135). While *Ben-Hur* could well have gone on and on without such a motivator, its inclusion made the film into a meditation upon the definition of masculinity. Vidal was a queer man, but in the context of post-World War Two America, he refused that label on grounds that it would be used against him—as it had been upon the publication of *The City and the Pillar*. What Vidal sought was not a "homosexual"

[I]t is time to analyze the cultural and literary context out of which this homoerotic subplot emerged and how it was integrated into the film by way of darkness, light, and colour in its visual and audio components....

Throughout the novel, it is clear that Jim's developing homosexual identity is closely tied to a conception of what several scholars have called a "straight masculinity," that is a male rather than a female ('fairy,' 'queen,' 'queer,' 'gay') identified conception of homosexuality. Jim thus idealizes his sexual encounter with Bob as an encounter with his other masculine half. Indeed, in his experiences with the homosexual subcultures in New York and elsewhere, Jim vehemently rejects the then current definition of the homosexual as a "woman" identified man, meaning, in the mid-twentieth century, a man who plays the "passive" role in the sex act to the "active" role of his male lover, and dresses and behaves in a manner defined as "feminine" (Chauncy 99-100). He is thus sexually attracted to men who can "pass" as heterosexual and prides himself upon his ability to pass as such as well.

Scholars of the "homophile" movement who focus on gay sexual politics after World War II and prior to the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 are taking a closer look at *The City and the Pillar* as an example of a work very much in confluence with the goals set by homophile gay rights organizations that saw straight masculine performance as the preferred way for homosexual men to gain entry to civil rights in mainstream society (O'Donnell 50; Thomas 599; Meeker 115-16; Hansen 82). But to come out and speak of homosexuality directly, as Vidal had done in the novel, was not acceptable to the mainstream press in the United States. Despite this, Vidal's novel did create a literary source of empathy and solidarity with many gay male readers (Ibson 113-18), and was in line with the findings of the recent landmark Kinsey study on male sexuality (1948) that sought to cast a more "neutral" eye upon male homosexual behaviour.

After the vexed, though quite lucrative, reception of his novel, however, Vidal remained interested in finding a form of expressing his ideas that could reach a mainstream audience; for this purpose, the gay subtext in *Ben-Hur* would prove to be inspired. What the scripts he had been called in to revise essentially lacked, he convinced Wyler and Zimbalist, was a motivation for Messala's hatred toward Judah Ben-Hur. Vidal found that motivation in the hatred born of spurned love that underlay his own novel, and he brought it into the relationship between the Roman and the identity, but the right to a masculine identity as a man who desires other men. If it were possible to create a representation of male homoeroticism that would move audiences, Vidal would have proven (if only to himself) that the "love that dare not screech its name" (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 305) was not a deviant inclination, but a variant of human love.

"To be truly commercial is to do well that which shouldn't be done at all" (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 253). This would be Gore Vidal's implicit definition of the gay subplot in *Ben-Hur* in the first volume of his memoirs, *Palimpsest*—and a variation on the title of its longest chapter: "To Do Well What Should Not Be Done At All" (271). It begins with a film still of Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur, accepting water from the hand of Jesus Christ; a bare-legged Roman soldier is seen in the background, wielding a whip. The caption reads

> Charlton (or "Chuck," as we called him) Heston acting most powerfully in *Ben-Hur*, for which I wrote a script at Cinecittà in Rome, down the hall from Fellini, who was working on *La Dolce Vita*. Plainly, there is nothing in the acting line that Chuck cannot do. Note the expression on his face as he holds the gourd with phallus attached, a weapon of choice in Roman times. The whip in the background is a bit of S&M calculated to delight those audiences that revel in films about our Lord. (272)

While Vidal is enjoying framing a still depicting Ben-Hur accepting kindness from a stranger as a piece of gay pornography, he offers a venomous lesson in how the text/subtext dynamic of his plot functioned. It is the typical rendition of his own subplot that attacks Heston as a clueless pawn of a clever conspiracy. Such an angle may have been appropriate for a memoir like *Palimpsest,* dead-set on becoming a bestseller in the mid-1990s. But it is completely insufficient for understanding how the subplot actually gave to the film its central emotional life. When Vidal decided to draw from his novel *The City and the Pillar* in the late fifties, he was much more interested in legitimizing and mainstreaming a humane conception of homosexuality for American society, one

that sought to make it visible, central, and beautiful to behold, rather than depraved, marginal, or merely titillating. This he would ultimately do far more successfully and influentially with *Ben-Hur* than he did with his own novel, which remained, like all literature dealing explicitly with homosexuality, on the margins of the mainstream.[6]

What had contributed to making a gay subplot more potentially commercial, so commercial that even a director like William Wyler and a producer like Sam Zimbalist would risk its inclusion in what would be one of the most expensive filmic ventures in Hollywood history? In *The City and the Pillar*, Vidal developed an important theme that drew attention to the increasing centrality of homosexuality in mainstream society: he depicted not only the presence of, but also the conflicted interaction between, homosexual men during their military service in World War Two. This arena, as Vidal intimated in his novel and as Allan Bérubé persuasively argued in *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II,* proved to be something of a cultural game-changer:

> The massive mobilization for WWII propelled gay men and lesbians into the mainstream of American life. Ironically the screening and discharge policies, together with the drafting of millions of men, weakened the barriers that had kept gay people trapped and hidden at the margins of society. Discovering that they shared a common cause, they were more willing and able to defend themselves, as their ability to work, congregate and lead sexual lives came under escalating attack in the postwar decade. (255)

Despite its unprecedented success, *Ben-Hur's* well-done subtext was done well, in 1959, but at quite a cost. Vidal went completely uncredited for his contribution as co-author of the screenplay, and Boyd, inexplicably, did not receive an Academy Award nomination for his performance in this most Oscar-awarded of films, eleven in all. Indeed, it was Boyd's career, not Vidal's, that may have been "thwarted" (Cietaut 43) in crucial ways for his unabashed homoerotic performance, for he had finally brought to a 1950s Hollywood blockbuster a figure that had not been actively developed in Hollywood film since silent film superstar Rudolph Valentino: the "homme-fatale," counterpart of the "femme-fatale," a morally ambiguous male figure with bisexual audience appeal. If this figure was entertained at all, it was considered a more "European" entity, and unsurprisingly, most of Boyd's future films would repeatedly take him back to the continent he thought he had left behind him, "living out of a suitcase" despite having a homebase in Southern California, where he preferred to be, making westerns and playing golf ("Boyd Gets…"/Stephen Boyd Blog[7]). Henceforth, his Hollywood film career would be

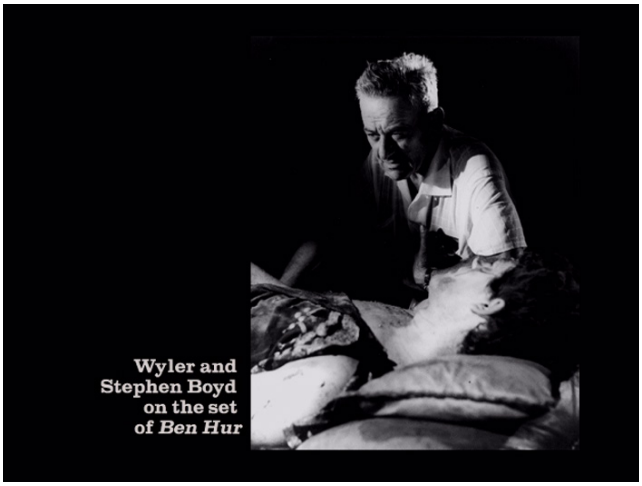


Fig. 4 | Source: Photo Gallery [Extras], *Counsellor at Law* (1933), The William Wyler Collection, Kino Video/Universal, 2002.

something of a thankless effort to keep him in costume epics in the hope of duplicating *Ben-Hur*'s success, rather than offering him a broader range of roles, such as those he had already excelled in prior to *Ben-Hur* (Cushnan 59-90/ Stephen Boyd Blog).

The case of Heston as not privy to the subplot, which his vehement denial of its existence in the mid-1990s reinforces, is significant in terms of the question of the subplot's production. By all accounts, the decision not to inform Heston lay with William Wyler. What did he mean when he suggested to Gore Vidal that Chuck would "fall apart" if he knew of the subplot? Wyler's skill in pursuing the subplot and sustaining Heston's heterosexual star persona testifies to his considerable empathy, which, in 1959, would have been less the norm than Heston's assumed resistance had he known about it. In other words, to gain more insight into the production history of *Ben-Hur*, attention ought to be focused more on Wyler's constructive role in bringing Vidal's subplot to life (Szczerbakiewicz 1, 13-17) (Fig. 4).

"Chuck hasn't got much charm, has he?" Vidal recounts asking Wyler after they both observed Heston and Boyd reading Vidal's homoerotic variations of key scenes. "No he doesn't," was his reply, "and you can direct your ass off and he still won't have any" (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 306). What was a source of amusement to Vidal would be Wyler's key directorial challenge with the gay subplot: countering Stephen Boyd's subversively charming Messala with a performance from Heston that offered just enough emotiveness to make the subplot plausible and authentic without jeopardizing Heston's status as a straight masculine icon of epic films.

Though Wyler later denied all association with Vidal's account of the gay subplot, his background as a filmmaker and

6 This is a more plausible reason for the "missing gay dynamic" in the most recent adaptation of *Ben-Hur* (2016) (Child). Explicitly gay themes may no longer "need" to be "hidden" as subplot, but on the whole, they are considered more appropriate for niche productions than for big money films striving for a mainstream audience. Another, even more plausible, reason is that the latest adaptation was not working with any other literary text akin to Gore Vidal's *City*, nor with a screenwriter intent on circumventing homophobic censors.

7 Where indicated, contemporary newspaper and fan magazine articles are archived and available on the Stephen Boyd fan tribute page.

director included and would include other projects that dealt with gay themes, notably, not one but two modified versions of Lillian Hellmann's play *The Children's Hour*: first in 1936, as a heterosexualized version entitled *These Three*, then later in 1961, with a restored gay theme as *The Children's Hour*, with Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine. Well known as a superb director of women, Wyler was also known for advocating politically progressive plotting and going to battle for more forthright treatment of sensitive issues in Hollywood films (Kozloff 470; Szczerbakiewicz 1). Further, his willingness to accept the subplot would have demanded its thorough integration by way of performance, cinematography, and dramatic development. Based on Vidal's account, Wyler's hesitation seemed less to involve the theme of homosexuality and homoeroticism itself than the implications of developing it within an overtly Judeo-Christian plot: "Gore, this is *Ben-Hur*, ***Ben-Hur*: *A Tale of the Christ*** or whatever that subtitle is. You can't do this with *Ben-Hur*..." (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 305). Certainly not coincidentally, the subtitle would be visually reduced to tiny background text in the publicity for the film upon its release (Fig. 5).

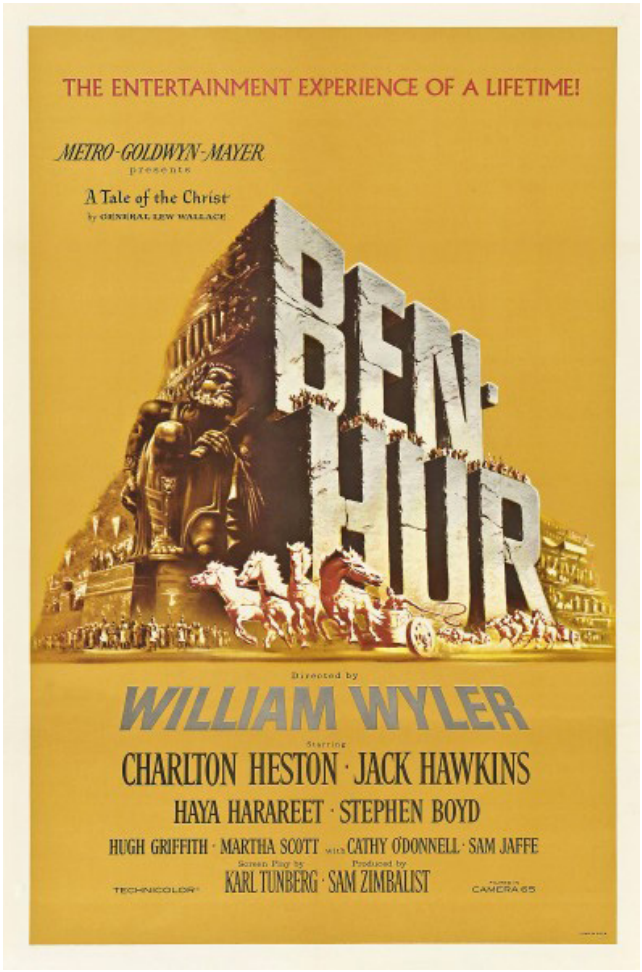


Fig. 5 | The subtitle "A Tale of the Christ" is reduced to marginal text. Reynold Brown, 1959.

BROWN VS. BLUE: COLOUR, ETHNICITY, AND PASSION

The key dimension of the central gay subplot (for there are several) was how it was to be performed by the actors involved. According to Vidal, the northern Irish actor Stephen Boyd was actively in on the subplotting and was "fascinated" by it (qtd. in Russo 77); his performance would be its centre, consisting of a series of intensely emotionally and erotically charged responses (reaction shots) to Judah. The most well-known dimension of this is the famous "look" he gave to Judah when they are reunited at the beginning of the film (Fig. 6).

One of the aspects of the production that made this particular "look" possible was a change of Stephen Boyd's natural eye colour from blue (Fig. 7) to intensely brown contact lenses, which caused him a lot of physical grief during the filming and for which he was put under medical supervision (Cushnan 94-95, 100; Heffernan/Stephen Boyd Blog). Thus "Romanized," he would share this brown eye colour with his female nemesis for Ben-Hur's affections, Esther, played by the Israeli actress Haya Harareet (Fig. 8).

In addition to its function as a marker of ethnicity, the dark brown eye colour can function as a trope for emotional and erotic passion at the level of the subplot; at the plot level, it can be also be registered as evil or maliciousness, particularly when Messala goes into his vindictive phases (Fig. 9).

Wyler insisted upon the change of eye colour from the outset, ostensibly because Charleton Heston already had blue eyes. Nothing in the dramatic development, however, supports a unidimensional reading of the contrast between a blue-eyed hero and a dark-eyed villain.

But this "look" cannot be separated from other aspects of what the French film historian Michel Cieutat has called Stephen Boyd's "sublime" performance (50): the delivery and intonation of dialogue, as well as physical movements and gestures, dimensions which I will discuss at greater length later. Charlton Heston's blue-eyed—and Oscar-winning—performance as Judah Ben-Hur,

Fig. 6 | Stephen Boyd, "brown-eyed" as Messala, 00:21:10. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig.7 | Publicity photo, *Photoplay*, mid-1960s, green light for blue eyes.

Fig. 8 | Esther (Haya Harareet) with her father Simonides (Sam Jaffe), 00:55:46. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

within the parameters of the subplot, would consist in his far more sensually remote responses to Messala. The origin of this dynamic could well be attributed to Heston's "not being in on" the subplot. However, strategically, it is actually an adaptation of the unrequited love theme between the main character, Jim, and his adolescent lover, Bob Ford, in *The City and the Pillar*; hence, Heston did not need to be in on the subplot to assure an authentic performance, as Wyler would well have known.

RELYING ON "ROMOSEXUALITY"[8] AS CAMOUFLAGE

While the subplot as performed by Boyd was anything but hidden, the key to the camouflage of the homoerotic plot was the historical setting. Transposed into the first century Roman world, the subplot dovetails neatly into the depiction of nearly all the Roman soldiers in *Ben-Hur* as utterly male-defined and homoerotically oriented. This is not a coincidence, as Roman notions of homosexual desire (both imagined and real) have long been a part of a search for alternative models of same-sex desire in history and have informed Hollywood depictions of the ancient world from the outset (Ingleheart 2; Blanshard 252-53, 256). Chief among the characteristics of Roman (as opposed to Greek) conceptions of homosexuality included models of adult, long-term homosexual relationships with erotic, rather than idealistic or pedagogic, orientations (Endres 162-63; Ingleheart 6). The gay Roman military world as depicted in *Ben-Hur* calls attention to these varying and more complex patterns, including the suggested relationships between Judah Ben-Hur and the Roman Counsel Quintus Arrias (Jack Hawkins) (Hark 172), as well as between Judah and Messala and Messala and his "second in command," Drusus (Terence Longdon) (Devore 129-30; Prock 383). Indeed, the relationship between Messala and Drusus echoes the relationship between Jim and one of his interim lovers, Paul Sullivan, in *The City and the Pillar*, who, like Drusus, acts as something of an admiring observer and witness to Jim's (Messala's) lack of emotional—though not sexual—interest in him.

Further, obvious hints of sadomasochistic erotic practices between Messala and Drusus, and a good deal of well-oiled male semi-nudity, all paint a clearly homoerotic portrait, thoroughly decadent in the context of the overt plot, for Roman "decadence"—central to the main plot—was assumed. But because it also fascinated (Blanshard 255), it was unusually sensuous, unapologetic, and self-contained in its cinematic presentation, appealing, of course, to both male and female audiences. What with all the pomp and circumstance of Roman soldiers dressed in gorgeous black, gold, and red variations of a "cocktail dress," as Paul Newman once quipped to Vidal (*Palimpsest* 302), the shift to a queer sexual register was reinforced at every visual turn.[9] Without

8 The term is from Ingleheart.

9 According to Vidal, Paul Newman was up for the role of *Ben-Hur*, but turned it down because of dissatisfaction with his previous experience in the costume epic *The Silver Chalice*, hence the quip that he would never act in a "cocktail dress" again. Pressed by Vidal to elaborate, Newman—who was a friend of Vidal's—responded with "I didn't have the legs for it."

Fig. 9 | Messala after the second confrontation with Judah, 00:55:03. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

mentioning that both were essentially "dresses," syndicated columnist Erskine Johnson described the dynamic in 1959 as follows: "A brass hat and the armor of a Roman warrior in 'Ben-Hur' does for Stephen Boyd what a tight dress does for Marilyn Monroe" (Johnson/Stephen Boyd Blog).

Indeed, what distinguishes Judah Ben-Hur's emotional and ethical priorities are his devotion to his family, which consists solely of women: his mother Miriam (Martha Scott), and his sister, Tirzah (Cathy O'Donnell), as well as his clearly erotic attraction to Esther, captured in Judah's intriguing "heteroerotic" look at Esther that parallels Messala's earlier look at Judah. Tirzah's romantic crush on Messala and his response to her are depicted as an utterly hopeless cause for her and a polite social distraction for him, so unalterably so that his every gesture toward and exchange with Tirzah makes it abundantly clear to the viewer that there can never be anything even remotely erotic between them.

Later, Christianity is dramatized as a force that is prioritized and insisted upon by Esther, Judah's female love interest, who sees to it that Judah sides emotionally with Christianity and women, rather than with Rome and Messala (Hark 177; Tuszynski 122). Within the overall homoerotic dynamic of the subplot, the roles of the unjustly condemned Miriam and Tirzah are passive and thankless until the point where Miriam insists to Esther that neither she nor Tirzah wants to see Judah again in her leprous form. Esther respects this wholly counterintuitive last wish, unique to the 1959 production, which leads to the final conflict between her and Judah that needs to be overcome following Messala's death.

In *Ben-Hur*, then, the heterosexual female and all she stood for in Cold War America was a completely marginalized figure. Most widely popular Hollywood films had heterosexual females and their search for heterosexual males at their centre. Stars such as

When Vidal decided to draw from his novel *The City and the Pillar* in the late fifties, he was much more interested in legitimizing and mainstreaming a humane conception of homosexuality for American society, one that sought to make it visible, central, and beautiful to behold, rather than depraved, marginal, or merely titillating.

Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day defined the heterosexual feminine in popular films of the day. On the other hand, equally popular were filmic adaptations of plays by Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). In essence, both plots in their original staged versions focused on a tragic female figure who is confronted with the homosexuality of her romantic partner and the illusion of her own sexual centrality in the life of her spouse. In *Ben-Hur*, by way of Vidal's subplot, it is the gay man, Messala, who achieves the status of a tragic figure. The women, cured of their ailment through their conversion to Christianity, are restored to Judah Ben-Hur in the end on their own terms, but it is Messala who dominates the emotional life of Ben-Hur and monopolizes the audiences' attention, and whose fate is most moving.

DARKNESS, LIGHT, AND HOMOEROTIC PASSION

What the homoerotic plot thus succeeds in doing is not to cement a hero vs. villain logic, but to expand the possible meanings of the contrast between the Jew and the Roman (Radford 126-27). We are not in a world of pure good and pure evil, virtue and betrayal, as in the main plot. Rather, we are immersed in a series of emotional contrasts that are highlighted throughout the film cinematographically with light and dark hews, firelight, and shadow. I wish to demonstrate that in order to appreciate this dynamic, it is important to consider key scenes from Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*. [10]

Let me focus now on two scenes in *Ben-Hur* that can, on the level of subplotting, be linked to scenes in Vidal's novel that emphasize the link between darkness, light, and homoerotic passion. The first, the reunion of Messala and Judah Ben-Hur (Figs. 10 and 11), recalls the ideal romantic encounter between Jim and Bob at the cabin in the woods: a dark space, wherein they are alone, illuminated by firelight. Here is a passage from the novel's unrevised edition: "Their bodies, warm in the warm night, met with a primal violence: to be one, to be one not two, to be whole not halves, that was the rage that held them together: like to like, metal to magnet, joined in

10 A persuasive way to see this unique dynamic in *Ben-Hur* is to compare scenes in the film with scenes done with other actors auditioning for the main roles. Another sharp contrast can be seen in the later film *Spartacus* (1960), where the female players are much more central and the homoerotic ("oysters vs snails") subtext did not pass go with censors.

Fig. 10 | The reunion of Judah Ben-Hur and Messala, 00:20:47. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 11 | Reunion of Ben-Hur and Messala, 00:21:02. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 12 | "the look," 00:21:10. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

the true world whose fire is the only fire not the sun's, whose dominion alone among dream kingdoms is free of heavy earth and bending sky" (Vidal, *City* 28).

Then—in the film—follows: "the look" (Fig. 12).

Henceforth, we are in a world of competing emotional and erotic registers that reverberate with dark and light—precisely the register of Vidal's erotic scenes in the novel.

The scene where Ben-Hur and Messala reunite is the most widely discussed dimension of the homoerotic dynamic in *Ben-Hur*, though it has never been systematically evaluated in relationship to the first edition of Vidal's later, significantly revised novel. Not yet considered has been the link between the final fatal encounter between Jim and Bob in the novel and Messala's famous "death scene" in *Ben-Hur*, a scene not to be found in the original novel nor in other filmic adaptations. Here again, we are privy to an intense reuniting of physical forces which, darkened by the setting, recall the initial erotic encounter that will now end in death (Figs. 13-15). Here the charge of light, darkness, close physical interaction, passion, rage, and regret are, quite simply, dazzling, much like Jim's idealized memory of his first sexual encounter with Bob:

> Bob sat up. He turned instinctively to the fire, to that dim surrogate. Jim watched him. Their eyes met again and Jim, still dazzled, remembering, did not suspect Bob's sudden grim withdrawal and fear. (Vidal, *City* 28)

When a metaphorical "meeting with a primal violence" (28)—Messala's clutching Judah's vest and refusing to let go even in death—occurs, we are left with Messala's final words: "the race is not over" (Fig. 15). Like Jim Willard, he refuses to let go of the past: "Then, quite suddenly, he … saw again the firelight and he knew he could not change, that no dream ever ended except in a larger one and there was no larger one" (191-92).

After removing Messala's hand, Ben-Hur returns to the scene of his "triumph": the sunlit arena (Figs. 16 and 17). Deeply troubled by Messala's death, he becomes like Messala: vengeful and angry, especially at Esther, who he discovers has lied to him about the fate of his mother and sister—at Miriam's, his mother's, request. Now the subplot recedes and the main plot, returning Ben-Hur to Esther through the intervention of Christ's resurrection, concludes the film. Forty of 210 minutes remain.

Compelling here in this visual sequence is the complete inversion of the meaning of darkness and light in the context of the transition from subplot to overt developing plot. We go from the darkened operating table, which is dramatically lit with firelight that we never see (unlike in the initial scene), to the bright sunlit space of the arena, where we see the marks and bloodstains of the accident that killed Messala. Here, light is coded harsh, cold, and merciless, whereas the immediately preceding intimate death scene was coded warm and intensely erotic.

Linking these scenes in *Ben-Hur* to scenes in the first edition of *The City and the Pillar*, it is possible to understand how Gore Vidal's emotional and moral investment in the plot dynamic of his third novel takes on a unique and innovative form in the film. If *City* was Vidal's plea for a "masculine" understanding of

Fig. 13 | Death Scene, Drusus (Terence Longdon), Messala, and Judah Ben-Hur, 00:35:13. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 14 | Death Scene, 00:35:55. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 15 | Judah removes Messala's grip, 00:36:06. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

... it was essentially Stephen Boyd's performance that demonstrated that it was possible to present homoerotic passion to audiences in a way that would make it blend into the centre of a story about other things.

Fig. 16 | Judah returns to the arena, 00:36:43. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 17 | Judah at the scene of the chariot race, 00:36:52. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

the homosexual man, this was meant, paradoxically, to normalize his emotional existence and demonstrate that he belonged at the centre, rather than the margins, of Cold War America. The novel, however, and its thesis, was rejected by the American cultural mainstream. In contrast, Messala's homoerotic passion for Ben-Hur *was not* rejected by audiences (and censors) around the world, attributed by one scholar to Vidal's ability to navigate subtextual discourse as a "Hollywood insider" (Devore 135). But it was essentially Stephen Boyd's performance that demonstrated that it was possible to present homoerotic passion to audiences in a way that would make it blend into the centre of a story about other things.[11]

VOICE, SOUND, SOUNDTRACK, AND SUBTEXT

How did Boyd create Messala as a gay male lover? Certainly, the reunion scene and the famous "look" are a key sign; however, what gives the component of passionate love (rather than merely lust) its grounding is Messala's voice, its pitch and timbre in key scenes, as well as, crucially, the interaction of the film's score and his voice. This pitch and this timbre are absent from Ben-Hur's voice in all the key scenes. Since Charlton Heston had a very distinctive and readily identifiable male voice as a major star of epic films, his timbre and pitch—compared to Boyd's—provide a vocal contrast throughout their major scenes together that suggest the dynamic of unrequited love, which is Vidal's aim. When Messala says to Judah, "I said I'd come back" and Judah responds with "I never thought you would; I'm so glad," the difference is physically palpable (0:21:12-0:21:20). The high-point of this dynamic is the second confrontation scene between Ben-Hur and Messala, when Judah begs Messala to release his innocent mother and sister:

"Beg?" Messala thunders ragefully, then reduces the pitch and timbre of his voice into a completely passionate mode:

"Didn't I beg you!?" (0:54:18-0:54:28).

Judah's passions, as conveyed in his voice in this scene, are utterly different ones. He is in a state of sorrow and despair and oblivious to Messala's continuing desire for him, just as Bob had completely suppressed their past story when he was reunited with Jim in *The City and the Pillar*. He even accepts Messala's argument that as a military leader interested in controlling Judea, he is prepared to sacrifice him in order to cement his reputation as a tough guy to potential rebels. Where Ben-Hur draws the line—and where his emotional investment is most evident—is with the women in his life. Under no circumstances can Messala's rationale include them.

As an actor, Stephen Boyd—born William Millar in 1931, the youngest of nine children, in Whitehouse, Northern Ireland—was especially attentive to the role of voice and elocution in his performances. Often recording his own dialogue as a form of rehearsal, his sensitivity to voice modulation was related to his life-long effort to suppress his Northern Irish accent, which he was able to use only once in one of his last films in 1977. His ambition to break into the theatre in Great Britain in the 1950s, and thereafter into film in Hollywood, made it necessary for him to develop what he called a "transatlantic accent," in order to get major roles and to avoid typecasting. For careful listeners, however, Boyd's Irish lilt is occasionally evident (particularly in the pronunciation of "r" sounds) and gives to his rich voice a more emotive quality when compared with Charlton Heston's edgier U.S. English elocution.

The emotive, sensual quality of the early reunion between Judah and Messala, as well as their "falling out," is actively complemented by Miklas Rozsa's film score. Indeed, Rozsca wrote a "Friendship" theme to highlight and dramatize the relationship between Judah and Messala, a musical dimension that would underscore "male interiority and male intersubjectivity" (353).[12] As Stephan Prock, a scholar and a musician, has insightfully argued, that theme "could represent two powerful yet diametrically opposed emotional relationships" and testified to Rozca's "musical ingenuity" (368). Of course, it also made possible a more thorough integration of the homoerotic subplot at the dramatic level. It is not difficult to imagine Vidal's subtextual theme of "spurned love" within the "exotic" register of the score's shift between affection and ragefulness. The theme accompanies the story long after Messala's death, implying Judah's continued emotional attachment to Messala, which is finally musically overcome by the themes of Christ's resurrection and Judah's conversion—a completely different type of music—and crucially, as Prock insists, one that uses sound to transform Ben-Hur to a masculine man who can return to the women (378-79).

There is an omnipresent death wish mixed in with Messala's remaining passion, which reappears in key scenes. In the second confrontation, he challenges Judah to kill him: "Go ahead, Judah, kill me!" (0:54:39-0:54:42). The tone of voice, here again, suggests, given his emotional state, that he desires Judah to do so, but that he knows, rationally, that he will not: Judah will not put Messala out of his misery. The death theme is repeated in the scene of Judah's return as a Roman when he has the gift of a valuable dagger delivered to Messala prior to his own arrival. Messala responds with: "Your gift is exquisitely appropriate, young Arrius. Do you suggest I use it on myself?" (2:03:20-2:03:28). Here too, the vocal expression is filled with quiet pathos: Messala exists in one emotional register; Judah exists in a completely different one. Death is on the horizon for Messala, and by the time we get to the chariot race, we intuit that he will get his wish.

The death scene after the race offers all of Boyd's vocal range that continually mix the vocal grain of physical pain and erotic desire. He literally wills Judah to him for a final meeting prior to the amputation of his legs: "There's enough of a man still

11 That would not be the case a year later in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), where a significant subtextual homoerotic scene between Crassus, played by Laurence Olivier, and Antoninus, played by Tony Curtis, did not make it past the censors, and wasn't returned to the film until its video release in 1991 (Devore 131-135).

12 This dimension is also completely missing from the original piano score of the 1925 silent version of the film by William Axt and David Mendez.

left here for you to hate" (0:33:54-0:33:58), and then reveals that Miriam and Tirzah are alive and leprous. As Judah moves in closer to Messala, whose head is being cradled by the silent Drusus, Messala's facial expression suggests he longs for the proximity of this man, which he forces—at last—as he suddenly grips Judah's vest in a final spasm. Judah's expression of contempt and rage as he removes Messala's frozen grip gives dramatic testimony that the audience is witnessing a profoundly tragic unrequited love scene.

Messala's death wish as performed in *Ben-Hur* can certainly be linked to Roman "martiality" and notions of "honour." (As suggested, for example, between Quintus Arrius and Judah when the former tries to commit suicide after what he believes is military defeat and is prevented from doing so by Judah.) However, this death wish is also central to *The City and the Pillar*'s original, controversial ending among gay readers and critics: the murder of Bob by Jim as a response to having been called a "queer" by Bob. As philosophies of gay rights were developing following World War Two, the key to overcoming societal condemnation of homosexuality would be to overcome internalized self-hatred and begin to identify with one's sexuality—this would be the future of the gay rights movement, especially following the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969. In the decades prior, however, the question of creating a literary depiction of a gay figure without a death wish and without death as their fate moved writers such as Christopher Isherwood to encourage Vidal to consider unhinging gayness from literary tragedy. And indeed, reader responses to *City* also questioned the necessity of having Jim murder Bob at the end (Ibson 114-118). Later, Vidal would rewrite *The City and the Pillar*, considering this idea. Interestingly, however, by transforming the murder of Bob into a rape, he actually did not bid his conflicted conception farewell. Like Messala, and like Jim, Vidal could not let go of the past (Ibson 142).

RESPONSES TO THE *BEN-HUR* SUBTEXT: PRE-*CELLULOID CLOSET* "OUTING"

Given the centrality and intensity of the gay subplot in *Ben-Hur*, the question arises to what degree it was registered and appreciated by film audiences at the time of the film's release and in later decades. Three examples prior to the publication of Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* suggest the film would become the subject of various forms of homosexual parody, an effort to establish emotional distance from the implications of the subtext. These parodies rendered the gay subtext a joke, not unlike Gore Vidal's version in his memoirs. As a form of appreciation for the aesthetics of the performance, these responses are limited, but they are revealing in what they suggest about the public response to the subtext. All are meditations of sorts upon the text/subtext dynamic itself, its possibilities and parameters as a means of gay identification, intertextual homage, and irony. Particularly within the realm of humour defined as "camp," the text/subtext dynamic had long been central mode of cultural resistance to gay oppression (Meeker 81; Bérubé 86-87). But in the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s, the parodic responses to *Ben-Hur*'s gay subtext suggest that there had been a shift of sensibilities: a call of sorts to "out" such a subtext, to laugh at its necessity, and to highlight changes in audience attitudes about sexuality more generally.

An early response is *Ben Hurry*, produced by Richard Fontaine in 1961. It is a "gay-oriented short film…in which extras from the film take time out from shooting to undress each other and wrestle in flimsy G-strings. Parasitic on the success of *Ben-Hur*, Fontaine's film assured its audience that while the action on the screen of Hollywood Roman epics might be straight, queer activity was intimately close…" (Blanshard 257-58). One in a series of "physique" films, *Ben Hurry* is clearly more interested in the general connection between depictions of Ancient Rome and homoeroticism than it is in the relationships of specific characters. "Parasitic" or not, the film demonstrates the ways the "text/subtext" dynamic used in *Ben-Hur* could work effectively in other film genres as well that sought to appeal to gay audiences, but could also be camouflaged for straight audiences.

Another intriguing response to the subtext of *Ben-Hur* prior to Russo's work is a significant scene in one of Stephen Boyd's most enjoyable "Eurotrash" films from the early seventies: the Spanish/Italian co-production *Historia de una Traición* (English: *The Great Swindle*), co-starring Marisa Mell and Sylva Koscina. Perhaps best comparable to the classic heteroerotic thriller *The Swimming Pool*, with Alain Delon and Romy Schneider, *The Great Swindle*'s plot revolves around the two gorgeous high-end prostitutes, Carla and Nora, lethally outsmarting Arthur, the gorgeous con-man. During a key scene, the three attend a swinger party where the enigmatic Carla (Marisa Mell) has been hired to do a striptease. Immediately prior to this scene, we see two gay men at the party toasting each other in Ben-Hur/Messala modus, a direct homage to *Ben-Hur*. As the striptease progresses, we watch Arthur the con-man (Boyd) observing Carla's one-woman act about to become a two-woman show when Nora (Sylva Koscina), Carla's beautiful friend, tipsily and unexpectedly joins in—to Carla's dismay and Arthur's very evident enjoyment. The act is broken off by Carla, and Arthur, gallantly draping Nora's wrap over her exposed body, removes her from the scene. What Arthur the swindler does not get is that the two women are lovers, which is what does him in in the end. Thus, *The Great Swindle* introduces a lesbian "subtext" that the viewer is in on, but Arthur (Boyd), the quintessential subtextual gay man, is not.

The ultimately playful quality of *The Great Swindle*'s gay themes contrast sharply with the tragic high seriousness of the *Ben-Hur* subtext. In this sense, light years separate the 1959 epic from this forgotten 1971 homage, seen almost exclusively by Spanish and Italian audiences at the time of its release, until the second decade of the twenty-first century, when fans began uploading and moderately restoring various video versions of the film on *YouTube* (Scholz, "'Eurotrash'").

Just a few months prior to Stephen Boyd's death in 1977, the Canadian comedy program SCTV did a hilarious spoof of *Ben-Hur* in its entirety. Here, too, much of the humour was based upon the clear recognition of and parodying of the film's gay subtext. Gay themes appeared both in the spoof itself and in the "commercial breaks" in between, without ever being openly addressed by the shifty "host" of the screening, Moe (Harold

Ramis), who also happens to be playing "Mazola" (Messala) in the spoof; instead, he comments upon the film's stellar reputation and its pious themes, even telephoning later long distance with one "Paul Pope," who turns out to be "Pope Paul."

With regard to more private responses in the late 1950s and early 1960s, these are difficult to come by given the nature of the filmic medium in the mid-twentieth century. Stephen Boyd's fan mail (an estimated 4000 letters a week) following *Ben-Hur* would surely offer insights, if it were still available. Written responses to *The City and the Pillar* sent to Vidal after its publication suggest a gay male fan base in search of role models and emotional empathy (Ibson 114-120). But since the overt connection to Gore Vidal as co-author (with Christopher Fry) of the screenplay was not made public, viewers of *Ben-Hur* who had also been readers of *The City and the Pillar* could not have made the connection. The empathetic homoeroticism could have only been intuited from Stephen Boyd's characterization of Messala.

In an interview with a British fan magazine about his role in the film, Boyd responded to the interviewer's assertion that the character of Messala was a "villain," someone unworthy of audience identification:

> Messala just carried out orders…. He was a very good soldier—the sort of man who's regarded as a hero if he happens to be on the right side. As for the chariot race, people don't know what you need to do to be a charioteer. First of all, you have to be a murderer; then you have to be mean and vicious, determined to get there first by fair means or foul. If you do all this you *may* become a professional. Ben-Hur became a professional too, you know. Messala first tried to win the race by fair means; after that he was quite open about what he was doing. Besides, you would not find a more sympathetic reunion between two old friends in a modern story; nor would you find a more sincere relationship within a modern story. Without any basic change in his character, Messala could be seen as a hero; it has even been suggested as a possible interpretation. What I'm really saying is that I don't like black and white. I don't believe that there is any black and white—just human beings. ("Gone Hollywood?"/Stephen Boyd Blog)

The interviewer does not pursue the question of whose interpretation Boyd is speaking of, but it is not a stretch to imagine that—given *Ben-Hur*'s colourful production history—he could well have been talking about Gore Vidal.

After [Messala's] death, the main plot's effort to reconnect Judah to Esther, and so restore the heterosexual order, feels curiously unsatisfying for anyone who has been focusing upon the "feud" between Judah and Messala.

CONCLUSION

Scholars of gay cultural studies, such as Harry Thomas, situate Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* as a pioneering effort to "normalize homosexuality" by joining it to masculinity and disassociating it from femininity or the effeminate. In so doing, he made possible a more complex understanding—at the time—of gay desire.

But Vidal also did this quite unashamedly at the expense of effeminacy, that is, gay men who identified as feminine in order to attract men (Thomas 603, 606). This dynamic, I hope I have shown, is also central to *Ben-Hur*. Messala is utterly male-defined throughout the film and any effort to link him to heterosexuality is quickly side-stepped. After his death, the main plot's effort to reconnect Judah to Esther, and so restore the heterosexual order, feels curiously unsatisfying for anyone who has been focusing upon the "feud" between Judah and Messala. Popular American gossip columnist Hedda Hopper was not the only viewer who noticed this quality of the film when she wrote in her nationally syndicated column in 1960: "Messala was such a strong, vital character, and I've heard so many people say that when he died in 'Ben-Hur,' the picture was over" (Hopper *Hartford Courant*/ Stephen Boyd Blog). The women's claim on the men is at no point depicted with the emotional intensity as is the relationship between Judah and Messala. What *Ben-Hur*—via Gore Vidal's contribution to the screenplay, Wyler's direction, Rozca's score, and Stephen Boyd's characterization of Messala—thus succeeded in doing was to aesthetically legitimize, through counterpoint performance, darkness, and light, the visual and aural expression of homosexual desire in mainstream Hollywood cinema, without irony, and without contempt. ▪

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Theatre and Film Intertwined

Transgression and Intermediality in *Fleabag*

DORA DOMBAI
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

In the distinctly contemporary story of writer-producer-actress Phoebe Waller-Bridge's monodrama *Fleabag* (National Theatre Live, 2019), an anonymous 21st-century heroine struggles with existential angst, grief, sexuality, and loneliness in today's London. The artistic element that elevates this narrative from a sea of similar stories is the stark remark of self-reflexivity.

The monodrama is an heir to postmodern theatre and, as such, is inherently post-Brechtian in that several new techniques had been designed in order to reach beyond the field of conventional bourgeois theatrical tradition and to distance the audience from the possibility of emotional involvement (Fischer-Lichte 281). The attempts of disillusionment and alienation of spectators by V-effect and enhanced self-reflexivity are the heritage of modernist Brechtian theatre. In the contemporary tradition, the assets of modernism are already incorporated in the aesthetics of theatre, as well as the adaptation of syntactical elements of film, constituting the essence of today's theatrical *mise-en-scène* (Finter 46). While theatre is necessarily stylized and abstract to a certain level, film is traditionally perceived as the "imprint of reality." In order to challenge the ontological cohesion between symbol and referent in filmic perception, the *Fleabag* television series (Two Brothers Pictures, 2016-2019) borrows the device of *aside* from classical theatre, creating an increased quality of self-reflexivity. The following comparison and analysis of different representational strategies and self-reflexive techniques of both the theatrical and television series versions of *Fleabag* highlight similarities and, even more importantly, differences that designate the viewer's position in remarkably different ways, either as the recipient of the *parabasis* or as a participator in the diegesis.

Live theatre, consisting of performative acts in an empirical space, is inherently interpersonal and ephemeral in nature. The monodrama genre is particularly suitable for absolutizing the main character's inner world by constructing a definitive narrative identity, since the entire structure of the play functions as an extended monologue, speaking directly to the audience in the absence of other characters. The opening scene displays a minimalistic setting with Waller-Bridge as Fleabag, the narrator and protagonist of the play, sitting on a chair in the middle of an empty black space without detailed set design or props. A closer examination reveals that the visually minimalist structure of staging is based on the intense use of external sound and Waller-Bridge's frequently changing viewing directions. The *mise-en-scène* signifies the presence of two physically absent characters

Fig. 1 | Imitation of cinematographic framing and viewing directions based on the face of the actress, who marks the position of the other character on stage left in *Fleabag*, 00:00:24. National Theatre Live, 2019.

Fig. 2 | The sudden change of framing with the overhead lighting and the shifting position encourages us to perceive the actress's whole posture, and the other character in the new scene is positioned directly in front of her in *Fleabag*, 00:00:26. National Theatre Live, 2019.

Fig. 3 | The scene functioning as a narrative frame for the inner monologue ends with Waller-Bridge covering her gaze in *Fleabag*, 00:02:36. National Theatre Live, 2019.

Fig. 4 | Immediately afterwards, the first direct eye contact takes place, indicating the change in the tone of voice in *Fleabag*, 00:02:43. National Theatre Live, 2019.

(a secretary and a company manager) with recorded dialogue fragments and the actress's constantly maintained eye-contact in given directions. The frame scene of the play (also the only one featuring other characters in sound) is easy to read in the way we have become accustomed to in the perception of filmic texts, where the viewer does not always see all the characters but can usually place them in the diegetic space without further ado. The abrupt change of lightning and the actress's posture on the chair, along with her viewing direction, creates the illusion of a hard cut, switching the imitated framing of the view from a close-up (Fig. 1) to a full shot (Fig. 2).

The opening scene features multiple filmic elements offering a possible reading method by emphasizing the intermedial codes of the performance. Therefore, the film-like mise-en-scène comes before the first gesture of direct transgression: at the ending of the frame scene, Waller-Bridge covers her face for a moment (Fig. 3), lightning changes, and only then does she look out directly at the audience (Fig. 4).

That is the distinctive moment when the real internal monologue in a first-person narrative begins (00:02:36). From this point onwards, she quickly switches from past tense to present and begins to provide lengthy, subjective descriptions and explanatory commentary on the self-interpreted story. There is an important change in the signification of other characters as well: Waller-Bridge herself voices everyone else, often utilizing the visual dichotomy of POV shots and reverse POV shots (00:12:25). These intermedial elements contribute to an even greater immersive and ephemeral presence in every level of the narrative, where the ego filters the outside world through itself and directly reveals the contents of its own consciousness. Thus the play paradoxically reaches the ontological essence of the self-absolutizing monodrama genre by adapting traditional cinematographic techniques.

Although the play in itself was a groundbreaking contemporary work, the new version made for television (coming after and due to the enormous success of the theatrical performance) was not a mere transposition of the script. Narrative film is an immersive medium with a typically illusionistic style and concealed formal devices. Cinematic storytelling asserts naturalistic representation in terms of camera angles, editing, pacing, and acting, offering traditional modes of interpretation in relation with the ontological realism of the filmic image. The dominant narrative techniques also present an objective, omnipotent narrative point of view, while offering the viewer the position of *voyeur*.

Fig. 5 | A subjective shot as the opening moment of the TV series *Fleabag*, 00:00:03. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

Fig. 6 | Confirmatory objective shot recorded from side position in *Fleabag*, 00:00:07. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

Fig. 7 | The first act of transgression in *Fleabag*, 00:00:16. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

In the television series *Fleabag* this fundamental aspect of traditional cinematic storytelling is negated by the ancient device of the theatrical *aside.* By having the protagonist look into the camera, the work forms its own audience, portrayed as a presence, and exposes the artificiality of the film's diegetic reality. However, instead of working to strengthen disillusionment, this effect aims to highlight the presence of the spectator inscribed in the filmic text.

In the opening scene of the series' first episode (00:00:03), we are confronted with a subjective shot (Fig. 5), formally indicated by a shaky handheld camera footage and the confirmatory, lateral close-up showing the actor to whom the subjective image belongs (Fig. 6). The conspicuous absence of an objective establishing shot promptly embodies the subjective manner of the storytelling. This disposition is compounded by the fact that Waller-Bridge immediately looks aside and into the camera, directly addressing the viewer without changing camera angle or inserting a filler shot during editing (Fig. 7).

The typical element of *aside* consists of two versions throughout the series. The first one is similar to the one developed in the ancient Greek theatre. The traditional gesture of *parabasis* is comprehended as a virtual exit from the diegetic space, usually by the actor stepping to the edge of the stage with a specific gesture and tone of voice, signifying the very act of transgression (Hubbard 1). When the unnamed heroine turns her head away from the ongoing scene she is taking part in, or even repositions her entire posture (00:09:51) without any other characters noticing the change (at least in the original first season), the gesture of *aside* is often accompanied by spectacular effects of changing the depth of field (00:21:40) or an unusual camera angle. With this transgressive element, cinematic representation turns to the devices of theatre in order to create a new, external "layer" of diegesis, one shared with the spectator, while making motion picture similar to the ephemeral nature and liveliness of a theatrical performance. The inherent intermedial quality of the series is easily recognizable in this spectacular gesture of *parabasis,* which is often associated with tropes of irony (de Man 179). The significant distancing effect of irony serves as the main tone of voice employed in the series by the protagonist, especially in her acidic remarks addressing the audience. The mise-en-scène, however, repeatedly performs another variety of the infamous *aside*, when the actress, with the slightest averting of her gaze (Fig. 8), looks directly into the camera in the very same shot without editing or any shift in the camera angle (Fig. 9). Thus, it creates the feeling of the most intimate connection with the viewer, as if they were integrated as equally essential participants of the scene. This technique of self-reflexivity is so delicate and barely perceptible that it is hardly viable without the immersive cinematic depiction of diegesis, which is considered one of the most effective and fundamental devices of filmic representation. Although during the reception of a film only a limited amount of space is visible to the viewer, the mechanisms of editing allow us to comprehend the diegetic space as a whole, consistent universe, where the characters live and breathe, viewers only secretly witnessing the action. Mise-en-scène elements build on that effect when the angle of the camera and the main character's point of view are arranged side by side (00:01:24), or completely congruent (00:01:25). Looking into the camera with such a tiny correction involves the viewer in the space of the scene, creating the illusion of being right in the middle of the action.

Under the aegis of intermediality, by the incorporation of cinematic mise-en-scène in a theatrical performance, as well as through the extensive use of the ephemeral theatrical devices in the television show, *Fleabag* strives toward a new tradition of self-reflexivity, that is both a phenomenon and an indicator of the *Zeitgeist*. In contrast to the Brechtian theatre, however, *Fleabag*'s self-reflexive quality seeks the possibilities of participation. Instead of alienation and disillusionment, *Fleabag*, the embodiment of the lonely hero of our time, aims to create a collective experience and a sense of community, and, most importantly, to arouse compassion through cruel irony and sarcastic commentary in a fragmented and polyphonic era. ▪

Fig. 8 | Narratively objective shot at the beginning of the scene in *Fleabag*, 00:01:24. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

Fig. 9 | Exposing narrative subjectivity by looking into the camera from the same position in *Fleabag*, 00:01:25. Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

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Threading Together Time, Space, and Emotion with Music

An Interview with Film and Television Composer Jeff Russo

BY PAUL RISKER
Independent Film Scholar

In 1993, American guitarist, songwriter, and composer Jeff Russo co-founded the Grammy-nominated rock band Tonic. During the band's four-year hiatus between 2004-2008, Russo discovered his interest in composing music for pre-written narrative stories in film and television (Fig. 1). His first opportunity was Noah Hawley's crime drama series *The Unusuals* (2009). Since, Russo has composed the music for all five seasons of Hawley's *Fargo* (2014-present) as well as Hawley's psychological feature film, *Lucy in the Sky* (2019). Russo has also struck up a collaborative relationship with writer and director Steve Zaillian, composing the score for the crime miniseries *The Night Of* (2016) and the Netflix limited series, *Ripley* (2024), an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's 1955 psychological thriller, *The Talented Mr Ripley*.

Russo has scored a diverse collection of stories, from crime to sci-fi, black comedy to action thrillers. His works include *Star Trek: Discovery* (2021-present), *Picard* (2020-23), Peter Berg's espionage action-thriller *Mile 22* (2018), Craig William Macneill's biographical thriller *Lizzie* (2018), and Nick Tomnay's delightfully dark comedy, *What You Wish For* (2023), about a chef with gambling debts who assumes the identity of a friend, only to find himself asked to procure an unusual menu for an exclusive dinner party.

Speaking with *MSJ*, Russo acknowledges the difficulty of discussing music given its subjectivity. The conversation is not difficult. Instead, what becomes apparent is the limitations of words to explain how music makes us feel. It can be described, but there's something evasive and ambivalent about this description. We're left searching for a fuller way to verbally and intellectually articulate what it is that music makes us feel.

Two of today's prominent composers, John Williams and Hans Zimmer, shape the conversation about the role of music in storytelling. Russo identifies some fascinating contradictions in how we can compare the pair. It becomes apparent that Russo understands the process of composing music is the pursuit of connection and, for viewers, the subliminal manipulation of music is intrinsic to the emotional connection. This idea of connection is a recurring theme that he returns to when he discusses sublimating the experiences of characters in his own process for *Fargo*, *Picard*, and *Ripley*.

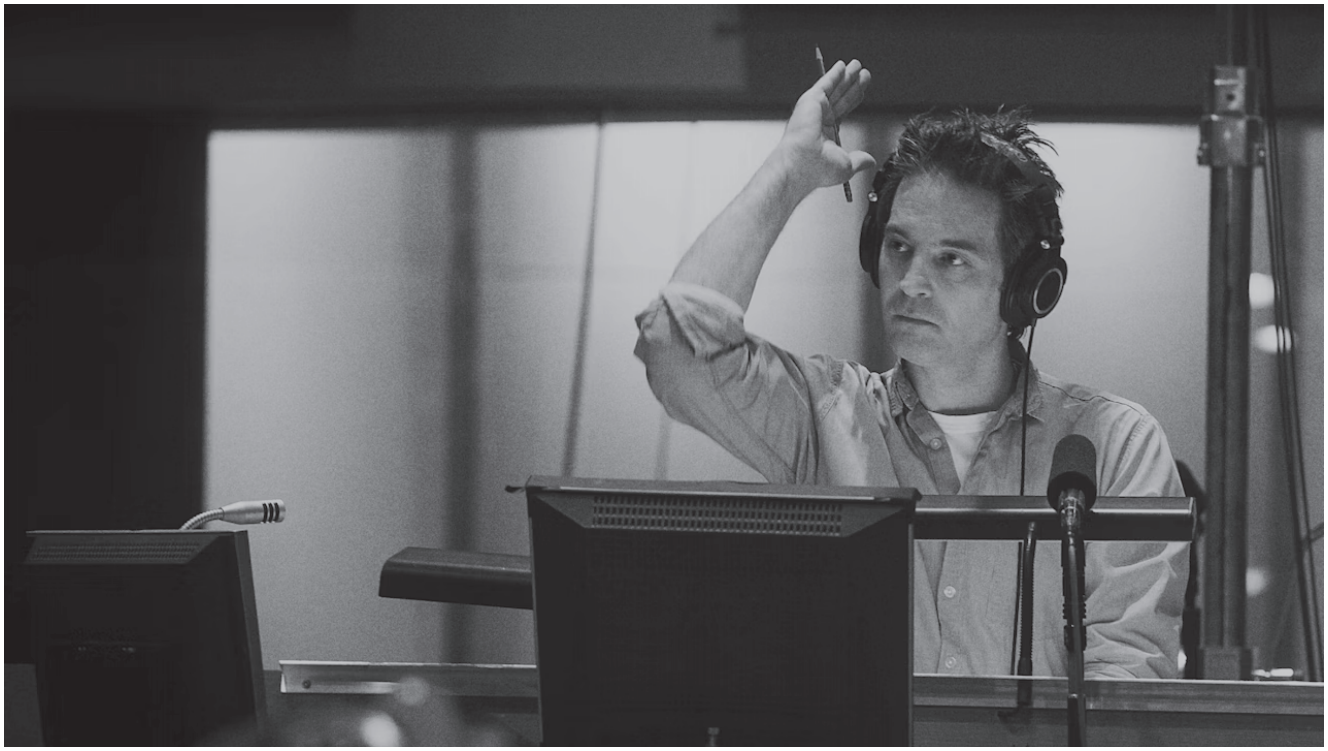

Fig. 1 | In the studio with composer Jeff Russo. *Composer Magazine*, 2024.

PR: What motivated the segue into film and television?

JR: It wasn't something I'd planned on doing. Taking a break from the band, I was trying to figure out what my next thing was going to be. I had a few friends who were doing film and TV music. They asked me to come by their studio to hang out and see what the lay of the land looked like because I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Was I going to make a solo record? Was I going to open a bar? I didn't know what my next career step was going to be, so I went to hang out with them in the studio.

They were working on a couple of television shows at the time, and I thought writing music to help tell the story that's already set was really cool. So, I stayed at my friend's studio for a year and a half just watching, helping, working and writing, and learning how to do the whole thing - that was the transition right there. That was my introduction to working in film and television, and wanting to write music that was a part of telling narrative stories that were already written. Then, about two years later, I was hired to do my own show [*The Unusuals*] and it all blossomed from there.

PR: On reflection, how would you describe your relationship with film and television over the years?

JR: I don't really know how to answer that. I've loved movies since I was a kid. For me, it was a family outing. I never really understood what it was about movies that I really loved, but now, I look back and my favourite movies, and my favourite parts of movies, were those emotional moments. What I know is that music played a big part in that. It's the reason why I was so connected to movies like *E.T.* (Spielberg, 1982). It was emotional storytelling, but if you think about the music and its interplay with the story, it was important, and John Williams is maybe the greatest film composer ever (Fig. 2).

It wasn't at the time like, 'Oh my God, I want to do that' because that was certainly not what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a rock star; I wanted to be Jimmy Page or David Gilmore. As I went through my career as a guitar player and writer in a rock band, the film score that I loved the most and made me perk up and take notice and think, 'Oh, I like the sound of that and that's something that feels familiar to me, musically, so maybe I could do something like that,' was Gustavo Santaolalla's score for *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005), which incorporated guitars and pedal steel and strings and stuff.

It was emotional and impactful and made me feel this was something I could accomplish. I'm not saying I could do it as well as he did, but I'm saying that it didn't seem out of reach. When thinking about John Williams, that just seems out of reach, right? That's not what I write or how I write, and I'm not anywhere near as knowledgeable about film music and the orchestra that would put me in a situation where I could do that. But this particular score at that time felt within reach to me. I think that piqued my interest in working in film and television.

PR: John Williams is one of those people that even if you don't know him by name, it's likely you know his music. What is it about his film scores that have captivated generations of audiences?

JR: Music is subjective, so it's impossible for me to say what is special, objectively, about his music. I can tell you what it means to me. I think his ability to connect the emotion of a character with the emotion of the viewer is unsurpassed, and he does that with

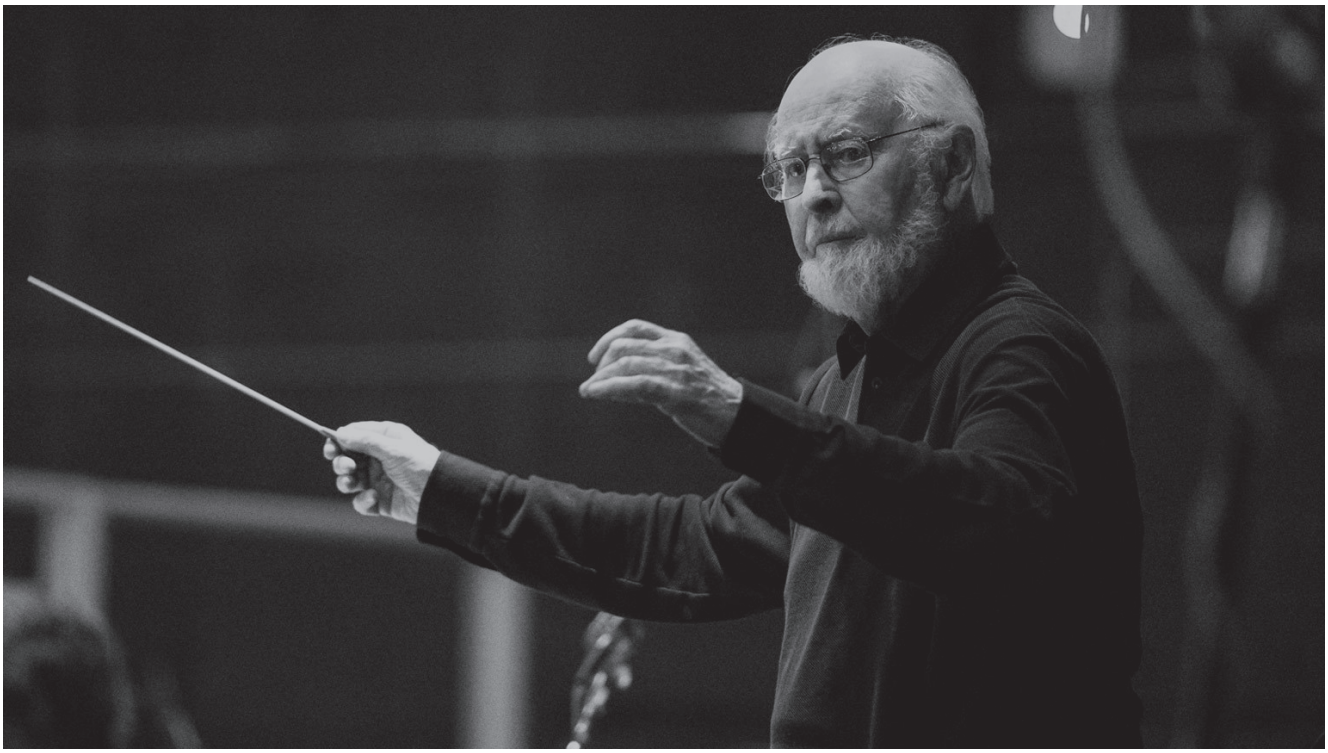

Fig. 2 | Legendary composer John Williams. Dan Brooks, 2022.

melody and harmony, counter melody and counterpoint. He does that with so many different things. It just keeps you connected to the material and that, to me, is the thing that keeps me in awe of what he does. He might say that he's not doing that on purpose - I don't know what he would say - but it seems so effortless for him to connect the emotion of a character and the scene to the emotion of the viewer, and that's my subjective opinion.

PR: Hans Zimmer is another celebrated composer, who, alongside Williams, is one of the most prominent and recognisable film composers, although Bernard Herrmann was equally notable, whose scores for Alfred Hitchcock's films were integral to Hitchcock's success. Zimmer's unorthodox approach to creating different sounds is striking. What are your thoughts on Zimmer and does he exist in a different musical context to Williams?

JR: He's a master of being evocative, whether it's sound, melody or chord progression, in terms of connecting music to the picture and having it be this one big threaded together mesh. Nobody does it as well as he does. He and Williams are very different in their processes, but the result is similar. I'm not saying the end result of the music is similar, I'm saying the end result of what it does is similar. Both are enmeshed in the narrative that connects the viewer to the emotion of the scene, and it takes a very keen eye to be able to do that, and he [Zimmer] does that very well.

All the composers you mention are in that same category. It's the ability to be evocative and yet also stay out of the way. It's a thin and difficult needle to thread and every one of the composers you mention does that really well, and that's what elevates them to that level.

PR: Given the importance of music to a film, I often find myself drawn to rewatching films not only for the narrative and characters, but to again hear the music that's set to the images.

JR: That's the thing. I don't think it's music that we want to go back and hear. I think there is something about it that we don't know - it's subliminal. Music might draw someone back, not because of the music specifically, but because there is this invisible thread that is tied to the viewer when music makes you feel something. Music can manipulate the viewer's emotion, so you may be going back to see it again, but not because the music was so great, and you were thinking, 'Oh, I want to hear that theme again.' You're drawn back to the feeling of this emotional connection.

Music, to me, is always the heart of any narrative. When I say heart, I mean it's the thing that's beating in the background that keeps the film alive, but you don't know it. You're sitting there right now talking to me, but you're not noticing the fact that your heart is beating, and blood is rushing through your body, keeping you alive. That's the thing about music, it's happening, and sometimes you notice it and sometimes you don't. It's underneath the surface weaving a thread between the film and the viewer. A talented composer, excuse me, when I say a talented composer, I'm not talking about someone whose ability to write music is high, because there are a lot of people who can write really beautiful music that are not necessarily great film or television composers. There's an underlying understanding and ability to take the music, and have it work with the picture in a way that it rises and falls is noticeable and then not noticeable. This then ties the viewer with the story. How it ties it altogether is what people go back for. It has nothing to do with a person consciously wanting to hear a piece

of music again. Instead, they subliminally want to experience that feeling again and that feeling has a lot to do with music.

It's like when you hear *Dune* (2021) for instance, there are a few themes that are really noticeable, like when the woman sings. They use that in a way that is very noticeable and there's also that percussive thing that Zimmer did in the first one, which was very unique. I didn't even notice it in the second movie, but it's there. Interestingly enough, I was talking to a friend about that. I said, "It's weird in the second movie that he doesn't use it." He told me, "Dude, it was all over the second movie, you just don't know it." I went back and watched it again, and there it is. So, to me, that was a subliminal thing and that's the beauty of music, and that's what I try to do [laughs].

PR: If we focus on some of your scores, for example *Picard*, *Ripley,* and *Fargo*, could you describe the process of how you're connecting the music to those characters in specific ways based on the story?

JR: Well, it's the same process for all three and that's just my own process. The idea is how I can connect with the feelings of the character and what they're experiencing. With *Picard*, I was able to connect with what I thought he, as a character, was experiencing in this latter stage of life. When I was writing that theme, I was trying to tie everything together for him, his feelings about the past and what his future looks like. How does that feel in a melody? How does that feel in a harmony and rhythm? How does it make me feel?

I approach all the things that I do in that way. With *Ripley*, I started in one way and had to pivot because I was writing this emotional, romantic style of Italian music. I talked to the filmmaker [Zaillian] and he said it was all beautiful and wonderful, but really, we're making a movie about a psycho killer, and a serial killer at that. How do we include that feeling of being off-kilter and that feeling of being mysterious and intense and ugly? I rethought what that meant for some of the underscore and then, of course, there was the Italian and Sicilian nature of some of the pieces of music, so the Italian setting felt authentic.

With *Fargo* season five, I look at the characters and story and try to stay in the same vein as the previous four seasons. The feeling that I'm trying to evoke is the same, but how do I do that with a different melodic and harmonic structure? We have a whole new story and cast. What does that look like? But really, the process is all the same - approaching it from an emotional connection.

PR: Rewatching Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), the ending is as dark and cynical as I remember. The main musical theme refuses to be swept up in romantic sentimentality. Composer Jerry Goldsmith holds it back from hitting those high sweeping notes, the music a cautionary voice that knows what is to come. Of course, on first viewing, the viewer is unaware of this, but on repeat viewings, what the music communicates changes.

JR: Like I said, it's almost impossible to discuss and talk about it in that much detail because the subjectivity of music makes it different for everyone. There's no one way to do it, to talk about it, or to feel it. My experience with telling stories is my experience with telling stories. Everything that I've experienced in my life with the way I've told stories, from the beginning, writing songs and then writing music for a narrative story has all led to how I do it. My connection with character is really it. I don't know how to explain it any deeper than that.

PR: I recall coming across the idea that if you try to explain why you love a piece of music, you undermine it, because it's a feeling. Music is one aspect of film and television that we're trying to find words for, but it's elusive because of that subjectivity.

JR: It's very true. There's no one way, and so it's impossible to have a conversation about it other than to talk about my process and my experience.

PR: We've done okay and had a decent conversation around a subject that's ironically difficult if not sometimes impossible to discuss.

A filmmaker once told me that the person you are before you make a film is different to the person you are afterwards. Do you share that experience in the process of composing a score?

JR: The idea of making any kind of art is certainly transformative. I'm a very fortunate individual in that I get to sublimate all of my bullshit into music, right? So, the way I sometimes get to express myself is simply through music. Artists have a one up on people who don't create art, and the one up that we have is this direct outlet for our emotional baggage. If I'm angry or sad, I can put it into music. Then, taking that one step further, that is me making music for myself, and as I get to write music for other characters, I have to sublimate someone else's. I say someone else's, but it's something else's. I have to sublimate that, turn it into something and then spit it back out and all of that gets rolled up in my own crap.

So, if I'm watching something, and I'm not connecting with it, I've got to find a way to connect to it. I have to find a way that I can make sure I can take it in, churn it up and then churn it out as something that helps tell the story. And that is certainly also transformative, sometimes positively, sometimes not. But it's transformative.

Would I say I'm a different person now than some other time? Not necessarily, but I understand why a filmmaker might say you're a different person before you start a project than you are after. There's definitely something that's transformative about making art, and I just feel transformation is different for everybody. ▪

David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and the Los Angeles Uncanny

LYDIA FRASER
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Unlike other American metropolises, Los Angeles' identity is inextricably intertwined with moving images and postmodernism, thereby ascribing the city with an ahistorical character and evoking a sense of the uncanny—a subject rooted in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. An interdisciplinary study of various theories of the uncanny synthesizes a new Los Angeles Uncanny that acknowledges the complexities of urban experiences that are unique to the City of Angels. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is a film that fundamentally relies on its setting in Los Angeles for its metaexploration of the implications of the media and entertainment industry. Placing the synthesized theory in conversation with Lynch's film unveils the hidden histories and identities of Los Angeles—the suppression of which, this essay argues, is ultimately responsible for the uncanniness and horror experienced in *Mulholland Drive*.

The uncanny—a concept that intertwines the strange and familiar—has long fascinated scholars, evolving from its origins in German psychiatry and Freudian psychoanalysis to a rich field of study that permeates modern humanities, revealing the eerie intersections between our known world and its hidden depths. The term first originated from psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* and was then reanalyzed by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny*. While the "uncanny" was often translated to mean "unhomely," the German word for it—*unheimlich*—deconstructed more literally translates to "unconcealed" or "un-secret." Under this repositioning, Freud describes the uncanny to mean something which "ought to have remained…secret and hidden but has come to light" (224). It is a paradoxical compound of the strange and the familiar–"that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Vidler 7). As a Freudian concept, the uncanny has been a source for much theory and analysis, the continued augmentation of which now includes many studies within the humanities including architecture, queer studies, film studies, urban studies, etc. These "uncanny studies" have only expanded as experiences of the modern continue to defamiliarize a world once thought to be understood and "prepare the way for its inevitable return in disturbing, unrecognised form" (Collins and Jervis 4).

Urbanization, perhaps one of the most widely felt phenomena of modernism, continues to shift our construction of cities as they rapidly grow to accommodate increasing populations. This urbanization, despite maximizing the proximity between citizens, has also raised questions about feelings of anxieties, estrangement, and dissociation–experiences and sentiments often attributed explicitly to urban cities (Huskinson 1). The city allows the co-existence of millions of people but produces minimal interpersonal interactions. The urban uncanny, then, might "denote the slippage or mismatch between our expectations of the city, as the organised and familiar setting for citizens…and the often surprising and unsettling experiences it can evoke" (1). These uncanny experiences signal to something dormant and hidden, waiting to expose itself.

My intent with this contextualization of the urban uncanny is its application to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), a film about an amnesiac woman who later names herself Rita after suffering a car crash in Los Angeles. In this initial scene, we are introduced to Rita (Laura Harring) in the context of the cityscape,

Fig. 1 | Cityscape view from the site of Rita's crash in *Mulholland Drive*, 00:07:16. Universal Pictures, 2001.

which captures the sprawling urban expanse of the city at night. The shot, taken from the site of Rita's car crash, sets the stage for the film's exploration of the uncanny within an urban context (Fig. 1). The vast, illuminated grid of the city appears both mesmerizing and disorienting, highlighting the dual nature of Los Angeles as a beacon of dreams and a labyrinth of hidden truths. The framing of the shot through the foliage adds an element of voyeurism and concealment. It implies that we are peering into a world where much remains hidden beneath the surface, aligning with Freud's notion of the uncanny as something that should have stayed hidden but has come to light—one of the most conspicuous being the mystery of Rita's true identity which triggers her friendship with Betty (Naomi Watts), an aspiring actress who has just moved to the city to pursue her goals. *Mulholland Drive* follows the two women as they attempt to figure out who Rita is. An unconventional movie that toys with the viewer's perception of time, reality, identity, and narrative, *Mulholland Drive* has been subject to much academic analyses. With elements of the mystery, horror, and thriller genres (in addition to the David Lynch branding), it can also be opened up to studies of the uncanny–specifically, in this case, the urban uncanny. Particularly, *Mulholland Drive*'s setting in Los Angeles unlocks a reading of Lynch's movie as an essay film dissecting the role of Los Angeles in the aforementioned urban uncanny. Through this essentialization of the city in *Mulholland Drive* emerges a concept of the uncanny that is especially unique to Los Angeles—interacting with the hidden, unsettling realities beneath the city's historicism, glamorous surface, and architecture.

To first break down why Los Angeles is distinct from other major urban cities like New York, the romanticization of Los Angeles is largely dominated by perceptions of Hollywood and the city's relationship with the movie camera and filmmaking. This puts Los Angeles in a rather unique position relative to modernism, enforcing a "distinctively post-industrial and post-modern character"–"an exceptional urban paradigm in whose image more and more of the world's urban landscapes are being reshaped every day" (Shiel 16). Upon the shift from the modern to postmodern, Los Angeles displaced Chicago as the epitome of twentieth century urbanism and the "forerunner to postmodern urbanism" (Maher 15).

But despite there being plenty of writing on the connections between the uncanny and modernism and urbanism–with Jo Collins and and John Jervis even going as far as to describe the uncanny as a "distinctively *modern* experience" in their book *Uncanny Modernity*–there appears to be little literature on the city of Los Angeles and the uncanny. In Lucy Huskinson's collection of essays entitled *The Urban Uncanny*, there are writings on various urban cities from Budapest to New York, but little to no reference to Los Angeles, which was considered to be an "urban anomaly" for much of its development (15). This paper attempts to remedy that gap. By placing *Mulholland Drive* in dialogue with the earlier-established theory of the urban uncanny, we can analyze how the uncanny of Lynch's film can be traced back to Los Angeles's repressed or overlooked identities and histories in favour of a modernized and romanticized self-image.

Placed in conversation with Anthony Vidler's writings on *The Architectural Uncanny*, we can centre the urban uncanny on the development of urban spaces. The architectural uncanny of urbanism would, according to Vidler, derive from the empty spaces "appropriated" by urbanism and "given over to architecture, which is forced, in the absence of a lived past, to search for posthistorical grounds on which to base an 'authentic' home for

Fig. 2 | Dan and Herb inside of Winkie's Diner in *Mulholland Drive*, 00:12:23. Universal Pictures, 2001.

society" (Vidler 13). This ultimately culminates into uncanny experiences reminding us of "possibilities that are latent within, and other perspectives and orientations to life" (Huskinson 3).

This uncanny navigation between one's expectations of the city as a place of organization and its unsettling experiences is most potent in the initial scene at the Winkie's diner. The first clip of this scene unmistakably orients the viewer to its location: Sunset Boulevard, but nothing else really situates the viewer in this particular diner. Any following shot of its interior is relative to the two men we are immediately introduced to seated at a booth, Dan (Patrick Fischler) and Herb (Michael Cooke). Dan initiates the conversation by saying, "I just wanted to come here." Herb, the second man, responds, "To Winkie's?" to which Dan clarifies, "*This* Winkie's," which, as we already know, is the Winkie's on Sunset Boulevard. Dan, evidently petrified for some reason unknown to us at the moment, then begins a spiel about a recurring dream about a frightening man in the back of the same Winkie's they are dining at, emphasizing his desire to settle his paranoia. Their conversation further emphasizes the centrality of the location to this clip but solely from the perspective of Dan's imagination and his perceived reality.

Through his nightmare, Dan has caught a glimpse of the very mismatch between city and person referenced by the urban uncanny. As the film has already established, Dan and Herb are on Sunset Boulevard, which is one of the most well-known streets in Hollywood and a popular tourist destination. Here, the city has much at stake in upholding its romanticized character. To expose the hidden here would be to remove the city's rose-tinted filter. After Dan recounts his dream and reveals he has come to Winkie's to rid himself of "this god-awful feeling," Herb stands up from his seat at the booth assertively. Once he leaves the shot, the camera cuts back to Dan's face, filled with apprehension. He pauses before turning his head back over his shoulder to see Herb standing by the cash register, exactly like he had just previously described in his dream. When he turns his head back around to look forward, the dread settles in his face as he closes his eyes in fear. Dan's experience of the uncanny is not just a dream obstructed from reality. It is a "mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming" (Vidler 11). This manifestation of this elision compels both Dan and the viewer to question the boundaries of the real and the unreal in Hollywood's carefully curated narrative (Fig. 2).

While general trends can be determined within the urbanization of most major American cities on the east, they are usually not applicable to Los Angeles. As aforementioned, Los Angeles has been historically considered to be an exception to the metropolitanization of the twentieth century and has been known *more* for straying from the traditional urban characteristics of cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, Boston, and Philadelphia (Maher 13). Los Angeles' antithesis to other urban American cities contextualized by the centralization of estrangement and defamiliarization to the uncanny already sets it up in a peculiar situation relative to the urban uncanny. Its location in southern California and the dominance of Hollywood on its identity not only place it in a position of estrangement physically but also culturally, which ensued in a contentious process over putting Los Angeles on the map in the early to mid-twentieth century (Shiel 69).

To delve deeper into the earlier mentioned observation of Los Angeles and modernism, because Los Angeles is so heavily associated with filmmaking, and cinema has been a "key social and historical phenomena…symptomatic of modernity," through

Fig. 3 | The back of Winkie's Diner in *Mulholland Drive*, 00:16:15. Universal Pictures, 2001.

transitive property, Los Angeles, then, is the American city most synonymous with modernism and its various stages throughout the twentieth century–an association that has only strengthened as Hollywood has continued to monopolize the film industry even in the twenty-first century (Maher 23). This attachment of the "modern" to Los Angeles has resulted in general critiques and prejudices about its "monotonous placelessness," "contemporary condition," "transience and lack of history" (Shiel 15, 16). While Shiel acknowledges the film history in Los Angeles in which early motion pictures are able to conjure memories that no longer exist and that most of us have never experienced, he also points to the city's history of the reinforcement of middle-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony in films, which has been contingent on the appropriation and erasure of pre-modern histories of Native, Spanish, and Mexican Californians and an ignorance to residents living under the poverty line (8).

Back at Winkie's, as Dan and Herb head toward the back of the diner, they pass by a sign labeled "Entrance" with "Use the front door" written above it and an arrow pointing in the opposite way of which they are walking. There are two signs here indicating to Dan and Herb that they are going in a direction they are not supposed to–warning them of the back. The back is intended for things that are not meant to be seen. The two men proceed to go behind Winkie's anyway. The camera, filmed from Dan's perspective, gives the audience an overview: garbage cans with overflowing trash–no cityscape, no Hollywood sign (Fig. 3). This perverts the reputation Los Angeles has meticulously attempted to build for itself and foreshadows the impending horror the two men are about to confront. The overflowing trash points to the accumulation of the city's discarded and repressed elements, both literally and metaphorically. As Dan and Herb move closer to this concealed area, the mundane and neglected surroundings enhance the uncanny feeling—transforming an ordinary space into one filled with dread and suspense. Simultaneously, upon this collapse between dream and reality, the audience is forced to confront their own assumptions about the city. This is not the Hollywood people like Betty dream of living in. By leading the characters (and the viewers) into this grim setting, Lynch effectively sets the stage for the revelation of the terror lurking in the shadows.

When Dan and Herb reach the very back past the garbage cans, the man from Dan's dream appears, coinciding with an abrupt muffled sound, before Dan collapses to his death. If this abrupt sound is meant to be associated with the startling presence of the man behind Winkie's, then we can reasonably conclude it to also delineate the moment we realize the world of dream, intended to be kept separate from reality, is no longer separate from reality. Furthermore, in another conditional statement, if, according to Freud, dreams are channels for unconscious and repressed sentiments, then their physical rupture into reality in *Mulholland Drive* might mean the materialization or exposure of the hidden or suppressed (44). In Dan's case, placed in the context of the urban uncanny, the man from his dream–who we can deduce by the end of the film to be an unhoused person living behind Winkie's–represents the sudden rupture from a purposefully fabricated to an unfiltered, unconcealed Los Angeles that threatens the artificial harmony between city and citizen. This figure, much like the trash-strewn alleyway, represents the unwanted and the unseen—elements of the city that defy its cultivated image. The scene's layout, therefore, is not just a backdrop but an integral part of the narrative that deepens the sense of unease and anticipation, foreshadowing the nightmare that is about to become reality.

From this perspective, Los Angeles' seeming "absence of a lived past" would manifest in the form of an attempted "contemporary memory theater" without a past (Vidler 183, 201). But the urban uncanny's mismatch between the city and its citizens' habitation, predicated upon a "return of the repressed" that forces the ego to confront that past betrays itself via Los Angeles' suppressed histories and identities (Huskinson 2). In short, in order to build its current image of modernity, as the Los Angeles metropolis was being formed, its prior indigenous and cultural histories were forced to go into hiding to institute the "essential complicity of the architect's project and the collective memory from which it derives" (Vidler 204). In place of this repressed history was a modern film history that established Los Angeles as the "narcissistic…self-referential and self-promoting" city that we know today, "driven by the production and consumption of images" (Shiel 15). Not unsurprisingly, this carefully constructed reputation developed alongside the city's just-as-carefully constructed urban space and grid plans that are infamously exclusionary to unhoused residents (Nally). These methodically compartmentalized areas offer suggestions for where citizens can travel to but are often negotiated by those same citizens, once again exposing an uncanny slippage between the city and its inhabitants' lived experiences. In their subjective negotiations of Los Angeles spaces and grids, citizens open themselves to the urban uncanny of the very suppressed identities the city has attempted to keep concealed.

This manufactured perception of Los Angeles, dependent on its relationship to Hollywood and film, is most obvious when Betty first arrives at the Los Angeles International Airport. Her entrance in *Mulholland Drive* is emblematic of an idealized Los Angeles (Fig. 4a). She is literally radiant–a sharp contrast to Rita's introduction, shrouded in darkness and mystery (Fig. 4b). This spotlight on Betty is constant until she visits Club Silencio with Rita. The film's emphasis on light through Betty's experience of Los Angeles is evocative of the historical zoning of filmmaking studios as "light industrial" areas in Los Angeles, which is also, not accidentally, what the city was and still is most associated with. These zones have allowed the filmmaking process to exploit light in both its natural and artificial forms (Martin 52). Here, Betty is the aspiring star still unknowingly subject to the romanticization of Los Angeles and the city's architecture. Thus, the light here highlights, quite literally, its own cruciality in both architecture and cinema. What is meant to mimic a natural spotlight on Betty in this scene then simultaneously evokes a sense of cinematic commodification as she arrives to the city to live a life behind the camera and under the lights.

To clarify, the totality of this characterization of Los Angeles does not make an argument about Lynch's knowledge of Los Angeles history and cultural landscape or his filmic intentions–which would be a disservice to his deliberate ambiguity with his filmography–but rather to advance the essentiality of Los Angeles in *Mulholland Drive* via its unique relation to the urban uncanny.

In one of the final sequences before Betty becomes Diane and Rita becomes Camilla, Betty and Rita go to Club Silencio, located in downtown Los Angeles. In this club, illusions are unmasked and

Figs. 4a & 4b | Betty's and RIta's character introduction in *Mulholland Drive*, respectively, 00:18:37, 00:05:13. Universal Pictures, 2001.

deceptions are revealed–the perfect foundations for the "return of the repressed." As Betty and Rita approach the club, the camera catches an incomplete shot of the US Bank Tower, the tallest building in the area (Fig. 5), seemingly emphasizing the rigid grid these towers are built on, "highlighting a tension between downtown's intensely controlled spaces and the fluidity of Mulholland Drive" (Martin 56). The grid entails the most precise yet repetitive compartmentalization of space. "Los Angeles' grid…in Lynch's spatial pantheon" is a "form of repetition that seduces, circulates, and subverts reality" (56). This subversion of reality is what Betty falls victim to, what Dan's dream exposes, and what the urban uncanny is grounded upon.

To further dissect the relevance of Club Silencio within the context of "the repressed," the club's exposé on illusions might serve as a parallel to the imminent exposure of Betty's presumed fantasmatic life, but it can also serve as a parallel to the urban uncanny that threatens to unveil the city's "repressed" and estrange one from their conceptions and understandings of Los Angeles. As previously mentioned, the urbanization of Los Angeles was built on the suppression of Indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican Californian history–the disclosure of which triggers the urban uncanny and a recollection of "the old city, its old monuments, its traditional significance, which were all seen as being too implicated with the economic, social, political, and medical problems of the old world to justify retention" (Vidler 179). Before Betty and Rita go to Club Silencio, Rita mutters Spanish phrases in her sleep that prompt their journey into downtown Los Angeles in the middle of the night. We can conclude from the announcements made and the singer's rendition of "Crying" that Club Silencio is a Spanish club. Rita's connection to this club can be reasoned

Fig. 5 | During Betty and Rita's drive to Club Silencio in *Mulholland Drive*, 01:44:46. Universal Pictures, 2001.

from her discovered heritage, which, up until this point, has been suppressed by her amnesiac state in Betty's presumed fantasy. She finally realizes her "true voice, and it is a Spanish one" (Martin 60). Here, Rita's forcible repression of her identity by Betty is analogous to the forced suppression of Los Angeles' pre-metropolis histories by Hollywood.

The modernization and urbanization of Los Angeles have synonymized it with Hollywood and the film industry. However, a closer inspection of the city and its situation within society and history reveals additional layers beneath the domination of modern, white bourgeois Hollywood. By using the urban uncanny to read Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, we can better comprehend urban experiences unique to Los Angeles and thus unconceal what has been hidden through the development of the metropolis. These uncanny ruptures in the city's construction that are initially unsettling and destabilizing to the relationship between city and citizen, however, can also lead to better insights and understandings that open up opportunities for new and more authentic experiences of the city. ▪

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Stories of Resilience

An Interview with Filmmaker Shubham Chhabra

KIRAN JOHAL
KWANTLEN POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

Fig. 1 | Filmmaker Shubham Chhabra at the KDocsFF screening event for his two films. Rattanphoto, 2024.

As part of the ARTS 4800 Practicum course in the Faculty of Arts at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, I was placed with KDocsFF, where I had the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge I gained throughout my undergraduate degree. While my History degree doesn't directly align with filmmaking, it has fostered a deep appreciation for individual stories within a broader societal context. Being a part of KDocsFF allowed me to merge this appreciation for storytelling with the power of film to amplify social justice issues.

Through this placement, I was introduced to director, producer, writer, and recipient of the KDocsFF Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize, Shubham Chhabra (Fig. 1). I had the opportunity to collaborate with Chhabra on several occasions, most notably by assisting KDocsFF with the screening of his films, *Cash Cows* (Honeywagon Media, 2023), a drama-comedy (Fig. 2), and the rough cut of his upcoming documentary *Working Title* (Honeywagon Media, 2024), both of which explore the lives and commodification of international students in Canada as they strive to build better lives for themselves. The test screening event for Chhabra was aimed at gathering audience feedback to help guide and refine his documentary toward its final cut. One of my primary responsibilities for the event was to create an audience feedback form.

In our conversation, we discussed the challenges of navigating multiple roles as a director, producer, and writer, his creative process, and the themes of immigration, resilience, and identity that influence his filmmaking. Chhabra also shared insights he gained from his KDocsFF residency and his time spent in

Fig. 2 | Promotional poster for *Cash Cows*. Honeywagon Media, 2023.

the KDocs Social Justice lab. Here is a look at our conversation, where he reflects on his experiences and shares details of his future projects.

Kiran Johal: With experience as a filmmaker, director, and producer, you bring a unique perspective to each role. Can you tell us how you first got into filmmaking? Among directing, producing, and writing, which resonates with you most creatively, and why?

Shubham Chhabra: From attempting to make my first short film at the age of 12, sharing my vision through the camera has always been a core part of how I express myself. My love for filmmaking reignited when I took an arts elective at Langara College, Intro to Film, which inspired me to seriously consider it as a career. Since then, it has been a wonderful journey, from going to film school to working on blockbuster features to doing my own projects like *Cash Cows*, progressing one step at a time.

Directing resonates with me the most because I love taking stories with a strong foundation and adding my own perspective and skills to them. I also find it to be the most enjoyable aspect of filmmaking. Being on set, tackling challenges in the moment, and bringing it all to the screen is [. . .] a privilege and an exhilarating experience. I feel incredibly lucky to do what I love. Writing and producing are my second loves, as they are crucial to supporting a director's career—especially for an emerging director like me.

KJ: Your journey to Canada as an international student seems to be an essential part of both your personal story and also your filmmaking perspective. How has that experience as an immigrant shaped the way that you approach storytelling?

SC: It has informed it if not 100%, then most of it, because you can only tell stories that, A, you have lived, and then B, you also have experienced—either directly or by proxy. I think me being here, realizing that there are a lot of stories that come from someone of my background that aren't being told, has been important. It's almost like I'm a director because I'm able to tell stories based on my experience here in Canada. If that wasn't the case, I'm sure I'd be telling different stories, but not to the same degree, not with the same tone, and not within the same universe that my priorities exist in right now.

KJ: Your upcoming documentary, Working Title, explores the lives and commodification of international students in Canada. What sparked the idea for this project, and why do you think it's important to explore this subject now?

SC: I think it touched on holding people accountable and also shedding more light [on the issue]. I think the reason it's important now is because, a year and a half ago, when I pitched the project, I could start to see the international student pathway, and people were being talked about a bit more. As our economy was getting a little more stressed—like, the recession and the post-COVID fallout, and everything—I could start to see it happening, and that's when I pitched the idea.

Throughout making it, it has really become a hot topic now. I think it is done by design from the government—that's just my personal perspective on it. It's really about naming and calling people out for problems that they didn't cause or can't really cause, even from a mathematical point of view.

Social media and news organizations weren't doing a great job of providing an unbiased point of view, and also they were talking about the people as numbers, just policies, and how they're affecting Canada—not talking about people as individuals, and not sharing their personal stories. That's when the idea came about: to shed some light on individual stories with the goal of creating understanding and empathy. Also, to talk about the issue at the heart of it, which is how this "problem" became a problem. I mean, having roughly a million people on temporary status, who are by design promised this pathway to study, work, and stay—and then somewhere between work and study, barriers are being put up that say, "Hey, you can't stay," but that was the whole point of the program in itself. If Canada didn't have those pathways, I don't think this "problem" would even be a problem.

KJ: I know you faced some challenges finding subjects for this film, as many recently immigrated international students were hesitant to speak about their experiences on camera. So, when creating a documentary like Working Title, how did you go about selecting the subjects to feature? What steps did you take to ensure a balanced and diverse perspective on such a complex issue?

SC: I just went to [. . .] the basic pillars and stakeholders in the sphere, which include, colleges, government, international

students themselves, aggregators, immigration lawyers, and consultants. I went from that and started to reach out to a few people within those spheres. I had great success with [both] the researchers and the teaching side of things because there were a couple people in the documentary who were researching the same topic as the doc, which was great because it allowed them to talk about it within the same story structure.

With the government, [my producer and I]— we knocked on all the doors, and most answers were either just a written template response, or nobody got back to us for months on months. We've been doing this for, I guess we really started to reach out to people [about] a year ago, at least, and we haven't received any solid commitment from a government perspective. We did receive great input from the teachers, the researchers who we can talk about in the documentary, from immigration consultants themselves as well, and then also [for] international students it was a little tricky, because being somebody on a temporary status, it does come with a lot of insecurity, and speaking your story, or speaking badly about somebody, doesn't really resonate with, the vulnerabilities that you have right now.

[There] was a lot of talking to international students, confirming with them what our goal with the doc is, how we plan to present the point of view, and that they have full authority over how we use their footage and to be able to really create that safe space. In the rough-cut stage that you saw, the anonymous guy, you know, to be able to really confirm to him, that I know you are actively involved in a scam, we know that—just sharing, it's really important because I know this guy is going through a lot, he's having a lot of mental health struggles. I'm like, this will help somebody in the same shoes in future, just to know your story and know there's people out there. That was the angle where he was willing to talk about it while, still creating that anonymity for him.

That was my approach, and it was a lot more word of mouth, too. The researchers that I talked with [recommended] some people, and there were just a lot of recommendations here and there. I think that worked out the best because, once they knew about what the topic is and how I'm approaching it, they were able to pitch it just a bit better.

KJ: What role do you see that this documentary will play in this ongoing conversation about immigration and international students in Canada, and what do you feel is the core message, or feeling, that you're trying to get the audience to take away from this work?

SC: To create understanding and empathy, and also to look at this problem as not being an international student problem, but being a policy problem and a corporate greed problem. I think, by taking it from a bit of a wider perspective on how these issues came to be, not just blaming X amount of people for being in a system.

KJ: In your short film and documentary, you've chosen to focus on South Asian immigrants. What draws you to these subjects, and why do you feel telling these specific stories is important?

SC: I think it starts with tell what you know. I feel my perspective gives me confidence in being able to justify telling these stories to the 100% truthfulness that I can. Also, at least now, what we see—at least in terms of the topic of the documentary and the short—is that [there are] a lot of South Asian students coming from India, mainly from Punjab. It is about the majority story that I'm trying to tell. I also think that helps narrow down the narrative a bit more, and it gives people a personality [with] which they can connect, because just the topic of immigration, and even international students [who are] not South Asian, it's so big and so nuanced that I think I won't be doing justice just talking about something in a bigger format.

Fig. 3 | Group photo of the host and panelists at the KDocsFF screening event for filmmaker-in-residence Shubham Chhabra. Rattanphoto, 2024.

KJ: Recently, KDocs hosted a screening for your two films, Cash Cows and a rough cut of Working Title (Fig. 3). As a practicum student, I helped organize the event and had the chance to experience the audience's reaction firsthand. It was amazing to see how engaged they were. How did the audience's response feel from your perspective? Was there any feedback that surprised you or influenced the direction of your work?

SC: It was great! I mentioned it in the screening as well, that not a lot of people get to screen their rough cuts and get feedback that they can actually implement and I feel that's just the best way to do it. I am super thankful to, Greg (Chan, KDocsFF Community Outreach Director), KDocs, and you as well for organizing that [audience feedback] form [. . .] which gave us, something that I don't really necessarily have to remember but I can refer back to and people really shared, important stuff and it was detailed to a point where I got what they were taking from it. It did confirm for me that it is engaging for people to a point where it creates more curiosity about the programs, [and] about how things came about to be.

One interesting thing that I didn't really think of initially was [the prominence of] our researchers, Lilach (Marom, Assistant Professor SFU) and Lisa (Brunner, Postdoctoral Fellow at UBC Centre for Migration Studies), and then also [teacher] Teresa (Comey) [. . .]. They were a good chunk of the whole narrative. There was a lot of feedback like, "I don't see that many South Asian faces in there," but from my perspective, I didn't really think of them as not being South Asian or being White. I just thought of them as being a professional opinion, a well-informed opinion. I got that note a few times, which made me think a bit more about

how it reflects. I already had an immigration consultant and international student success platform. It's an online community—both of their perspectives: the consultant, she's from Spain, and the student success platform—she is a former international student, now a successful business owner. I think I'll add their perspective in as well, just to make it a bit more diverse. Which again, it wasn't something that I was really thinking about or noticed, but I got that note a few times, so I thought, maybe this is something I should think about.

KJ: Your acclaimed short film Cash Cows has won multiple awards, including recognition at the Mighty Asian Moviemaking Marathon, the Sundar Prize Film Festival, and a nomination for the DGC's Best Short Film award. You also received the Best Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize for this work (Fig. 4). Can you tell us about that experience and how the residency, which provided access to the KDocsFF Social Justice Lab and consultations with film studies faculty, influenced your creative process?

SC: Oh, big time. I'll talk about the consults first, because [I spoke] with Sean Farnel, who is a big-time producer. He did *To Kill a Tiger*. He's very well connected. There are a couple of other docs that are doing festival runs, and he's really well connected with the community, and also just with the documentary filmmaking world. He was very valuable in providing feedback, and I purposely kind of spread out his consults throughout the project and residency, so I could get the best out of it as the project evolved. Diego (De la Rocha, KPU Entertainment Arts/Animator) guided me through some animation and gave me some good ideas on how to approach it with the low budget we have. Also, Ian Frayne (KPU English Student and Actor)—he gave me some acting advice, which I didn't really implement into the doc, but there are a couple of narrative projects that are in the pipeline for next year, which I think would be really beneficial for me as a director talking to an actor and getting that consult, which is a really wonderful and important relationship on set.

The lab itself gave me an office to kind of work from, and just really a space that was all my own, and I was able to utilize it. I was able to set up some software that really helped me get through it. It also kind of worked as a meeting point for a lot of the meetings, and to get some planning done.

KJ: You mentioned Sean Farnel, who is a regular consultant with KDocsFF, and I was actually planning to ask about him as well. How was your experience working with Sean, who specializes in creative, marketing, and distribution services for documentaries? Can you share some insights from that collaboration and what you gained from it?

SC: He has given me a really good cheat sheet for a festival [. . .] plan that he himself uses, and he was kind enough to share that template with me. For this project, doing a solid festival run is my goal, because it's already going to be on Telus for X amount of time so, I think that really helped me start thinking about the festival circuit way in advance, and then prepping my list, and then seeing what works, what doesn't work, just hitting the targets that I want to. I think it really helped formalize it and just really kind of put it into place quite well.

Fig. 4 | Shubham Chhabra accepting KDocsFF Best Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize from KDocFF's Greg Chan. Charlie Beerling Photography, 2024.

KJ: In Cash Cows, you explored the subject of international students through a comedy-drama lens, while your upcoming documentary Working Title delves into the same subject but in a documentary format. How did the experience of tackling the same subject in these two very different genres go for you?

SC: It was really fun. Narrative just gets me excited. Being able to play with the stereotypical stupidity of it all, like on set, and even in the prep, that was just the best time ever. We were just laughing consistently on set, and just getting to create something that's in a very high energy [environment], and there's deadlines, [there are] three days to shoot, we have to cut [the film] down in seven days, do all the sound and everything. That was a really good experience.

The reasoning for it is because a doc audience and a short film narrative audience, they're two different audiences with very little overlap, and I wanted to just get this message to as many people as possible, just to get this idea out, and tell them that stories like these exist. I think a short form really helps in doing a lot of festival runs, getting a lot of screenings, getting in front of a lot of people. It's like when you write a story and you're working on a story—it just, something clicks in, and you're like, "This is me. I am the only person who can do it in this time and space right now." That's something that just kept me going with it.

KJ: Currently, your documentary is titled Working Title. Where are you in the process of choosing a final title and how do you approach finding one that you feel fits the story?

SC: I'm very convinced—let's say 95%, it's [going to] be *Pakke* or *Pakka*. Which I feel is the strongest point of the doc to end on that. Also, I think *Pakka*, the word, does mean *resilient* and to be strong and that's the story of all international students—that's something that is common throughout, regardless of what educational or financial background you come from. Also, I think it's short, it's catchy, it just flows much better than *Working Title*. Also, for people who don't know Punjabi, it creates intrigue. So, I think that kind of fulfills another goal—people reading it on a poster and then that just kind of makes them lean in a bit more.

KJ: We talked about this briefly after the screening, and I think the title you suggested would be a great fit. The final poem in the documentary really moved me, and it seemed to have an emotional impact on a few other audience members as well. Although I'm not an international student myself, I could still deeply feel the emotions and experiences the poem speaks to. So, if you decide to go with that title, I think it would be a great choice.

SC: That's why it's so universal, and I think it works.

KJ: Where can audiences watch Cash Cows, and also your upcoming documentary Working Title?

SC: *Cash Cows* is just finishing its festival run. Now, we're [going to] be looking into some distribution at the traditional platforms: Crave, Air Canada. I think that's a dream of mine—to just have it on Air Canada for people to watch while they're flying. We're looking for distribution. I don't want to just sit on it for too long, so we'll do that initial couple of months of [pushing], and [. . .] if it's not distributed somewhere, we'll just put it on YouTube for people to share. It's 10 minutes—it's an easy watch, it's a fun watch.

The documentary, that'll be out in early spring on Telus, and they are very kind with the distribution. If we get some distribution, or if we get a festival circuit going on, then they're more than happy to hold the release. We'll ideally get some festivals done with this, but also I would want it to be on Telus so people can watch it right away.

KJ: Does that mean it's only accessible to Telus customers, or is it available to everyone?

SC: No, that's only accessible to Telus Optik TV subscribers, but in [the fall]. It really changes with every single edition that they do. That's the general timeline: early spring, they would release [it] on Telus Optik TV, and then in the fall, I think they put it on their YouTube channel.

KJ: With the residency coming to an end and Working Title in its final stages, what's next for you as a filmmaker? Are there any upcoming projects or new directions you're excited to explore?

SC: Excitingly, [. . . there is] one project that we were working on pitching for the past three years, and a writer friend of mine wrote it five years ago. It's a passion project for him, and then I took on that passion, and now it's a passion project for me. We're co-directing it. He wrote it, and it's about a universe where winning a dance competition will solve your life problems. It's about a struggling ballerina and a guy in a wheelchair stuck in a dead-end job. They both team up to win a dance competition to save their independence and regain their individuality. That's the narrative short. It's also funded by Telus Story Hive, their narrative platform, which we'll start [soon]. We've already kind of started prep on it a little bit, but we'll get on it next year, and it's going to be a short—around 20-25 minutes. We're really excited about it. All the hard work and all the rejections of three years finally paid off, because one big thing for that is casting for somebody in a wheelchair and then having them dance, which was a big hurdle for getting funding from [funding bodies] for the past three years. We didn't really have that person, [and] we still don't, but at least it's funded. Now, we have to find them, and [that] just gives us more of a reason. ▪

Cash Cows

Comedy Condensed

COLIN HUNTER
KWANTLEN POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Originally written for my second-year film studies class at KPU, this is my film review of Shubham Chhabra's *Cash Cows* (2023). It establishes how *Cash Cows* is a compelling black comedy that captures the essence of the genre and sheds light on the the treatment of immigrants, all within a limited runtime.

Tragedy plus timing equals comedy, but what if the run time is only ten minutes? Then you get *Cash Cows* (2023), directed by Shubham Chhabra and produced by Honeywagon Media. Black comedy can be a hard genre to pull off while still bringing awareness to the issues being poked fun at, so how does a ten-minute short do its content justice? *Cash Cows* demonstrates that a compelling black comedy can be pulled off in a limited runtime while capturing the essence of the genre and shedding light on the issues of immigration and worker exploitation that are important to the film.

Cash Cows is a short film about our protagonist, Rohit (Dikshant Joshi), taking up a questionable security job to fund his Permanent Residency (PR) card. Filmed in just three days, the runtime was purposely limited to ten minutes for the film to qualify for Sundar Prize Film Festival. Due to this, Chhabra mentioned full scenes being removed to make the final cut, meaning that every shot and every scene must effectively convey the film's message, tone, and genre in less time than a standard-length film. The film captures the turbulence of our current 2020's zeitgeist with immigration being the clear topic of the short. Immigration, especially from South Asia, is one of the most hotly contested topics in Canada with it being keystone in political debates between Liberals and Conservatives, the latter claiming that too many immigrants have been let in (Tasker). Yet South Asian immigrants already in Canada are faced with unjust public hostility paired with exploitation in the workforce through unsafe working conditions and inadequate, possibly illegally low, pay. Rohit's eventual job is that of night security at a car dealership where he is ill-equipped, improperly trained, and poorly treated by his boss, Jaspreet (Ranjit Samra), who finds every possible way out of paying Rohit. These conditions mirror that of reality where South Asian immigrants are given physically demanding jobs that they unfortunately must take in order to make enough to scrape by. This exploitation is not just by pre-existing Canadian residents but also other South Asian immigrants who are trying to gain a higher position in Canada's social ladder. This is exemplified in the short by Jaspreet also being South Asian but still exploiting Rohit to save more money.

Fig. 2 | Rohit fights The Vandal, 00:07:16. Honeywagon Media, 2023.

In the film's climax, the Vandal (Vesh Kadlec), who has been breaking car windows throughout the short, decides to escalate his crimes by attacking Rohit with a machete. Faced with the unsafe situation, Rohit must defend himself with a pylon in order to live as showcased in Figure 1.

Although this scene is amplified for comedic purposes, instances of unprovoked attacks on immigrants have happened on multiple occasions without public sympathy or uproar. The film's setting of Surrey, British Columbia is the perfect location for this issue as the city contains a high population of South Asian immigrants. A lot of injustices seen in *Cash Cows* commonly occur in Surrey and the film's message could really resonate with the residents. Rohit needing to use family connections to find simple work and having the "Canadian" life over sold to him are both issues faced by South Asian immigrants who have had the deck stacked against them. As one of the first films to tackle this subject, it could easily become a rallying point for all those who feel like Rohit, which is a high accomplishment for a film only 10 minutes long. The message is clearly conveyed in every scene and leaves the audience with a new perspective.

To support this message, made this film a black comedy instead of a drama. Black comedy focuses on topics deemed "too dark" or "taboo" and tries to bring awareness to them through comedy to make the topics feel more approachable and remove stigmas. Black comedies crossed the line of social acceptability and leave it to the audience to decide how far is too far. *Cash Cows* adds its own taboo with its comedic takedown of immigrant exploitation and employers' choice to capitalize off them. This topic is often overlooked by the public and swept under the rug by the companies exploiting them. These current issues are taken to their extreme to hammer home the message as well as keep the audience entertained and engaged. Rohit's cousin, Ash (Shivam Arora), is made out to be a cartoonish version of an immigrant who made it in a way that pays homage to the lavish lifestyle of Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio) in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). Ash is always seen with women dancing around him and drives an expensive car with the license plate "$1200-MNTH" to brag about how much money he makes. Besides Ash, Rohit's security shack is just boards nailed together, and his boss is the stereotypical horrible boss. Even the fight with the Vandal is exaggerated by giving The Vandal a machete instead of a more common knife or bat, which is then made funnier by Rohit successfully fighting him off with the traffic pylon.

In just ten minutes, *Cash Cows* delivers a combination of relevant social issues and exaggerated black comedy in every scene which leaves the audience engaged through both laughing and learning. *Cash Cows* is worth watching and proves that a compelling black comedy can be pulled off in a limited runtime while ensuring spectators receive the film's core message. ▪

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Vol.10 No.02 | Winter 2025

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