

# CINEPHILLE

The University of British Columbia's Film Journal

## No. 1

## Addiction

# 9

Vol.



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It all started with an argument over poetry.

In the fifties, Dorothy Somerset was a professor in the English Department. She made a request to her department to allow her to run a poetry speaking course and the request was denied. Clearly, she believed in the importance of this venture, so the enterprising Professor Somerset applied to the senate to create a separate Theatre Department and, in 1958, her request was granted. Four years later, UBC built a brand new four hundred seat iteration of the Frederic Wood Theatre, and three years after that, the department offered its first film course.

# CINEPHILE

The University of British  
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“Love, Sex, and Other Drugs:  
Addiction and Obsession”

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Columbia Film Program

**Editor-in-Chief**

Chuiwen Kong, Donnie Lee,  
Jonathan Liu, and Jasmine Sanau

**Design**

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**UBC Film Program**

Department of Theatre and Film  
6354 Crescent Road  
Vancouver, BC, Canada  
V6T 1Z2

## Table of Contents

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Contributors	2
Letter from the Editor	3
Articles	
<b>Cinephilia and Primitive Agonies</b> — Ben Lazar	4
<b>Spectatorship's Intoxicating Field</b> — Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece	10
<b>The Corps-à-corps of Queer Love</b> — Killian O' Dwyer	14
<b>Sex-Swapping the Age-Gap Romance on Screen</b> — Lauren Rosewarne	19
<b>Cigarettes on Film: the Sacred and the Profane</b> — Nathalia Bell	26
<b>Macabre Demonstrations</b> <b>Framing Addiction in Nightmare Alley</b> — Monica Foster	32
<b>Data Addiction and Cyborg Fascination: Cyberpunk Imagery, Addictive Aesthetics, and the Reconstruction of Future</b> — Neo Xia	38
Film Reviews	44

# Contributors

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**Lauren Rosewarne** is an Associate Professor in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of 11 books – her 12th book, *The Twin Film Phenomenon*, will be published by Routledge in 2025.

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**Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece** is associate professor of English and Film Studies, director of the Film Studies program, and director of undergraduate studies in English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is the author of *Movies under the Influence* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024) and *The Optical Vacuum: Spectatorship and Modernized American Theater Architecture* (Oxford University Press, 2018), as well as many articles in books and journals, and the co-editor of *Ends of Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

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**Ben Lazar** is a first year PhD student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the English department's Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies program. His academic interests include traumatic events and their mediation, film history, and psychoanalysis. He can be reached at [bdlazar@uwm.edu](mailto:bdlazar@uwm.edu).

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**Killian O' Dwyer** is an associate lecturer and PhD researcher in the department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. Upcoming chapter contributions to edited publications include questions of nudity, orientation and the art of fisting.

**Neo Xia** is a PhD candidate at RMIT University in Melbourne. His primary research focuses on screen studies related to the cyberpunk genre. Additionally, he has a strong interest in communication and media studies.

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**Nathalia Bell** is a Canadian-German film artist and scholar. She is doing an MA in Philosophy at Loyola Marymount University in California. She has an MA in Experimental Film from Kingston School of Art. Her art practice uses found footage to create film essays that explore the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, informed by her academic background in film theory, history, philosophy, and theology. Her scholarly and film work has been featured internationally in conferences, festivals, and venues, including the British Film Institute and Imperial War Museum. [nathaliabell.com](http://nathaliabell.com)

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**Monica Foster** is a University of Toronto graduate currently pursuing a master's degree in film studies at Concordia University. Her research interests include classical Hollywood cinema, depth psychology and film, cinematic representations of subcultures, melodrama, the cinema of David Lynch and exploitation films.

## Cover Designer:

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Lee Chae Won is an industrial product designer who has worked with a collective called Korea Design Membership (KDM), working with companies such as LG, Hyundai Motors, Squeeze, and Link Flow. Her projects included graphic and spatial designing as well. She is currently working as a freelancer, branching out to various other sectors of design. With this cover, she tried to express various forms of addiction through hand gestures and threads that entangle them. You can reach her at [odet9395@gmail.com](mailto:odet9395@gmail.com)

# Letter from the Editor

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Dear readers,

Hi, my name is X and I'm an addict. I don't remember how it all started. I was introduced to it by a friend when already at an all-time low. Depressed and lost, I found me a new habit. And yes, habit is a great deadener. That's how it is on this bitch of an earth. I fell into a rhythmic groove between self-destruction and recuperation, losing myself in the repetition. Of course, there were the minor differences. Sometimes I'd feel overwhelmed and sit in my dark corner and scream. Sometimes I'd fall into a deep reflection, and in my revery forget to do all else that a decent standard of living requires. No matter the details of the assault. It always left me bruised.

Always tried to leave it. Never was afraid to lose it. But it killed me. And I was no more. My speech, my thought, my body, and my soul irretrievably lost. Just wanted to forget a little, escape a little, love a little.

How long has it been. Goodness, it must've been at least thirteen years. Violent fluctuations of the emotions, unreciprocated longing for love, fabrication of things past, and many other irretractable footsteps that brought me on this path – it's an indulgence I can't seem to let go. Love of my life, fire of my loins. I am a cinephile. And a cocaine addict.

Addiction leads us to a sense of divided Self wherein we somehow manage to travel down both roads where they diverge. We take the one less travelled by, for the object of our devotion is uniquely ours. But we also take the one more travelled by, for who hasn't devoted themselves to something, anything, that led them to their own elevation/destruction? In one way or another, we all seem to be addicts.

Cinema appears to be particularly adequate in exploring this uniqueness and ubiquitousness of addiction, since cinema too loves to indulge in the logic of addiction. Its gaze, being more literal and explicit than prose or poetry, seems to be almost obsessive at times. It devotes itself to its subject more intimately, more palpably, and the repetitions of images with minor differences brings us to truth or despair. It deadens us as we partake in its universe, for the world outside the film-world is closed off. Within this closed-off circuit, all conceptions of Self are to be abandoned. You partake wholly. You lose yourself. And you devote yourself to the film as the film devotes itself to its subjects.

With this edition of *Cinephile*, our contributors explore what form this devotion/addiction may take. In "Cinephilia and Primitive Agonies", Ben Lazar examines how cinephilia channels our most intimate desires and cherished memories, revealing cinema as both a vessel

of affect and a site of longing. In "Spectatorship's Intoxicating Field", Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gilleace traces the entangled metaphors of substance and cinema, uncovering how film's hallucinatory representational power, alongside its historical ties to technological innovation, mirrors the logic of intoxication itself. Kilian O'Dwyer, in a piece on Queerness, rethinks the Hegelian notion of filiation, proposing instead a corps-à-corps dynamic: an encounter of bodies, affects, and dissonant ideas, resistant to synthesis. Lauren Rosewarne, in "Sex-Swapping the Age-Gap Romance On Screen", interrogates the reversal of the conventional age-gap romance—older woman and younger man—as a lens through which to understand Hollywood's shifting gender politics and the cultural logic behind "sex-swapping" tropes. In "Cigarettes on Film: The Sacred and the Profane", Nathalia Bell analyzes smoking as a cinematic ritual, a gesture that exceeds character development to signify a mode of "being-in-the-world," drawing from Heideggerian ontology. Monica Foster's "Macabre Demonstrations: Framing Addiction in Nightmare Alley" explores how the 1947 film renders alcoholism as a spectacle of horror, reinforcing stigmatized images of addiction. Finally, in "Data Addiction and Cyborg Fascination", Neo Xia investigates the "addictive aesthetics" of techno-fetishism in *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*, where cybernetic desire and identity blur in the circuitry of visual pleasure.

So come buy our white lies and white lines. Sweeter than honey from the rock, stronger than man-rejoicing wine, clearer than water flow'd that juice; you'll never have tasted such before. So come buy our white lies and white lines. You'll die when you buy.

Sincerely,

X

## Cinephilia and Primitive Agonies

In her foundational article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey famously connects cinematic pleasure to the control that the voyeuristic spectator members member can assert over objects on the screen (8, 9). This omnipotent and narcissistic pleasure finds its most apparent agent in the figure of the cinephile, the viewer who takes extraordinary pleasure from the movies. The cinephile dominates the screen by acquiring bottomless knowledge about the history of the art form (Keathley 19), or by engaging in the practices of “remastering and reinterpretation” (Elsaesser 37) of the movies they love via Letterboxd reviews, “x movie explained” video essays, fan edits, and by obsessively seeking out their love objects when they appear at the cinema. However, this interpretation of cinematic pleasure neglects the ways that love is an act of losing oneself as much as it is one of taking control of the loved object. The cinephile’s love is a kind of addiction, in the sense that compulsively return to the dark cinema space echoes Freud’s original interpretation of his grandson’s fort-da

game, wherein he reads the child’s compulsive repetition of his mother’s disappearance via a cotton reel toy as a method of mastering the loss of her as an all-encompassing good object (15). We repeatedly attempt to bring the loved object under our control because we are terrified of losing it again. The methods of mastery through obsessive repetition that the cinephile enacts are necessary because it is an ephemeral, unreliable experience. Indeed, as Christian Keathley notes, 20th-century cinephilia was shaped by the movie lover’s lack of control over when they could grasp their objects of desire considering that before the rise of home viewing, the relative scarcity of access to films gave them a quasi-religious aura exemplified by the affective intensity with which the influential post-war French cinephiles wrote about film (20).

The tension between control and lack of control, one that plays out in the fort-da game, is an indistinguishable part of discourses around cinema. The technological shifts in how we engage with moving images have allowed for more control, but the cinematic

experience (the public collective viewing of images on a big screen) remains a unique space where the viewer is out of control while not being totally disempowered. I argue that the practice of attending a film screening is one that allows the audience member to be both totally overwhelmed and safely held, in a manner that repeats the most primitive experiences of childhood life. To love the movies is to be addicted to them. The cinephile uses moviegoing to repeat the experience of overwhelming sensation in a safe environment, transforming early childhood experiences into something new. Such an experience is precarious, and thus cinephilia is, as Sarah Keller notes, always anxious and ambivalent about the experience of loss of control and frightened by its implications (3). But it is in this loss of control that we are able to better understand what is so uniquely addictive about the experience of attending a cinema and subsequently understand what makes it a different form of engagement with moving images than the forms that have followed it.

### **Warm environments and disempowerment**

In one passage in *Journey to the End of the Night*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's narrator Bardamu describes the cinematic experience in evocative terms:

"It was warm and cozy in the movie house. An enormous organ, as mellow as in a cathedral, a heated cathedral I mean, organ pipes like thighs. They don't waste a moment. Before you know it, you're bathing in an all-forgiving warmth. Just let yourself go and you'll begin to think the world has been converted to loving-kindness. I almost was myself. Dreams rise in the darkness and catch fire from the mirage of moving light. What happens on the screen isn't quite real; it leaves open a vague cloudy space for the poor, for dreams and the dead. Hurry hurry, cram yourself full of dreams to carry you through the life that's waiting for you outside, when you leave here, to help you last a few days more in that nightmare of things and people." (174)

This physical sensation of warmth is something that Francesco Casetti notes in his analysis of air conditioning in cinemas in the 1920s. Trade publications and advertisements regularly asserted the importance of a

consistent temperature year-round as a method of sheltering the audience from the outside elements (91). Air conditioning, along with measures such as the enforcement of audience etiquette and the removal of distracting lights and sounds from the outside world, produced the cinema as "an alternative environment that replaced the reality spectators left behind and at the same time offered them the opportunity to reestablish a safer contact with the world by other means (99)." Roland Barthes' famous "Leaving the Movie Theater" echoes these sentiments of comfort, as he describes an experience of sleepiness leaving the theater, wherein the dark but populated space serves as a cocoon for his sensation (346). When in an environment separated from the perils of the outside world and surrounded by other people, the audience member can let themselves go into "that festival of affects known as a film" (Barthes 346).

But Bardamu is also defensive against the warmth of the space, exemplified by comments such as "They don't waste a moment," "I *almost* was myself," and the sarcastic admonishment to "cram yourself full of dreams." He reflects on the fact that the experience of cinematic reverie is not entirely one of cozy nesting. Mary Anne Doane writes that in contrast to pre-cinematic optical toys, the moviegoer "became dominated, overwhelmed, and dispossessed in relation to an image that seemed to be liberated from the obligation of dimension." (200) There is a sense of terrifying disempowerment in the cinema space. The audience member is not omnipotent but is instead overwhelmed by the images and sounds they experience. Doane notes that the IMAX screen is often painful to behold, which she connects to the terrifying sublime (250), and while IMAX may be an extreme example, the cinephile's relationship to any cinema image is one of repeatedly consenting (or perhaps wishing) to being taken over by the larger-than-life image. This position, notes Thomas Elsaesser, is part of what resulted in the critical film theory of the 1970s. "The magic of the movies," he writes, "in the cold light of day, had become a manipulation of regressive fantasies" (32). Thus, critical distance was the cold shower necessary to re-empower the cinephile in the

face of an overwhelming experience. Barthes for one explicitly draws a parallel between hypnosis and moviegoing (345), as the environment of the cinema places the viewer into a position of suggestibility and openness where the constituted “I” that goes into the theater becomes a diffuse being. In moviegoing there is, as Keller notes, an oscillation between subject and object, a collapse between the self and the other (97), which is in part an experience of disintegration—not narcissistic omnipotence, but disempowerment. How do we reconcile the fact that the cinema contains both the pleasures of being held in a warm cocoon and the terrors of being overpowered, manipulated, and disintegrated? Primitive agonies at the cinema

Donald Winnicott’s posthumously published article “Fear of Breakdown” deals in explicit terms with this problem of diffusion of the self. He writes that in the infant’s dependency on the mother in early life, “it has to be remembered that the infant has not yet separated out the ‘not-me’ from the ‘me’ ” (104). The infant lacks what Winnicott calls “unit status,” a position of relative independence and self-possession, but it would be simplistic to read experience at this stage of life as one of total satisfaction and oneness with the mother. The dependency of infancy contains, according to Winnicott, states of “primitive agony,” wherein the infant’s dependency on the mother makes them vulnerable to an experience of disintegration and loss of external reality if the inevitable breakdown of that dependency (through which the infant attains unit status) is not done with care. In an unstable environment, Thomas Ogden writes that the infant will “short-circuit” these agonies and adopt a psychotic defense (such as fantasies of disintegration and depersonalization) to avoid, in a very real albeit peculiar sense, actually experiencing them (211). So, the fear of breakdown reported by some patients is a fear of finally experiencing the primitive agonies of early life and facing the un-lived experience of life as something both painful and fuller. Ogden notes that “the need on the part of every person to re-claim, or claim for the first time, what he has lost of himself and, in so doing, take the opportunity to become the person he still holds the

potential to be” (214) is universal. We all could, at some point, be more in our experience, less protected by psychic defenses that we use to survive our first moments as beings separate from our mothers.

In the cinema, the moviegoer is finally able to experience states of primitive agony, repeating early childhood, but experiencing it for the first time. The interplay between the diffusion of the self and the stable holding environment of the cinema space allows for the cinephile to finally take ownership of the primitive experience. They lose control and gain control of themselves at the same time. What the cinephile is searching for at the movies is not so much omnipotence but instead the experience of primitive agony that the fear of breakdown seeks to avoid. Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece has outlined the ways in which intoxication and the history of cinema are intertwined (12) and the pleasure of cinema has long been theorized as being related to the liminal experience of seeking out altered states of consciousness (Sinnerbrink 246). The consciousness of the moviegoer is one that parallels the experience of the infant as much as it does the substance user or the person hypnotized; like the infant, the moviegoer is confronted with sensate data that overwhelms their capacity for conscious comprehension. A sense of reality has to be generated by the movie and by the audience’s perception of it. As in the early stages of life, the experience of overwhelming sensation from the outside world is slowly organized by the establishment of rhythm and by the audience’s own projective identification and fantasizing about the meaning of the images that they perceive.

The moviegoer does not possess unit status and instead, as Julian Hanich notes, are one part of a larger audience collective, embedded with others as a part of a larger group (240). They are disintegrated and lack a sense of what is real and unreal, a situation that are outside of the theater results in the kind of withdrawal from experience that Winnicott and Ogden describe in the fear of breakdown. But in the theater, the audience member is able to *be more in the experience* than they would be outside of the theater. Walter Benjamin spoke to this capacity of film, writing that

“the film has enriched our field of perception” by “extend[ing] our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives.” (238) Thinking back to Ogden, we could perhaps say that the pleasure of going to a film is the way in which it allows the audience member to attend to this universal need to reclaim the parts of oneself that are lost. The excesses of the screen allow for a long-delayed experience of reality. Its scale disempowers the audience member and strips them of the defensive strategies that separate them from life as it exists outside of the theater.

Winnicott notes that in transference, a patient can bring the experience of primitive agony within the realm of their “personal omnipotence” (104). That is, the strength of the analytic situation and the patient’s position as a more mature constituted individual allow that which was unbearable as an infant to be addressed. The holding environment of the theater is what strengthens the ego of the audience member and allows them to come into their own experience. Being part of a collective and in a space so alien to the “nightmare of things and people” is what allows the audience member to feel the omnipotence they lacked in infancy. But, importantly and paradoxically, this omnipotence is only made possible by the audience member’s willingness to resign themselves to their lack of omnipotence. In contrast to watching a movie on television or a mobile device, the moviegoer must physically give themselves over to the experience of being a part of a collective and must attend to the social conventions of the space and experience the moderately impinging presence of others. This being embedded in a social space is what allows them to process their sensory experiences of the film and of their embodied being in the world: “We do not behave as we would in our private surroundings,” Hanich writes, and “the fact that we sacrifice many of our short-term self-interests like answering the phone or talking to our partner underscores our joint – not just private – intention to watch the film” (82). The presence of others in the cinema space, though it stifles the control the audience member has of the experience, allows for their experience of the film and subsequently of the experience itself.

It is through these methods of disempowerment that the movie-going experience distinguishes itself from other methods of engagement with moving images. The dominating forces of the audience and the massive images work in the service of helping the audience member come more fully into their experience and to lay claim to their life. This is not so much a situation of being totally immersed in the film, such that it is indistinguishable from outside reality – although this has been a longstanding fantasy for cinephiles like André Bazin (Keller, 150). The film as a disempowering medium still exists as something separate from the audience member. There is a physical distance between the screen and the viewer that allows them to take the screen into their own personal omnipotence, as well as a distance between the audience member and the world projected onto the screen. This distance allows the moviegoer to use the film as a container for their experience. Their mind is able to wander in the cinema and engage with the filmed world precisely because it is disempowered by the conditions of the space (Fuey 51). In other words, they can experience the intensity of sensation without becoming too overwhelmed and retreating into defensive fears of breakdown.

### **Repetition, addiction, moviegoing**

More than other methods of engaging with moving images, the cinematic experience is repetition of the experience of infantile disempowerment that now takes place in a warm holding environment. It is no wonder then that the cinema inspires such fervent devotion. But while every moviegoer has experienced this repetition, the cinephile seems addictively compelled to repeat it. The decline in casual moviegoing (Masunaga 2024), product of a myriad of cultural factors, illustrates the unusually addictive nature of this kind of love. Cinephiles repeatedly and deliberately place themselves in a position of intensity and dependency on the surrounding environment to hold them, while more casual viewers choose other forms of engagement with moving images that avoid this position of intense vulnerability. Winnicott writes that “anxiety is not strong enough a word” (104)

to describe the agonies of infantile life, and to return to this position is not a task to be taken lightly. Ogden writes that “attempting to realize that potential to become more fully oneself involves experiencing the pain [. . .] which had been too much to bear in infancy and childhood and has led to the loss of important aspects of self.” (95) The binding of anxiety to affection throughout the history of cinephilia that Keller describes (56, 59, 90) could be understood as an expression of the movie lover’s fear of breakdown, and the cinematic situation, in its evocative repetition of primitive agony in the present, cannot be wholly separated from those agonies. But the warmth of the space, the distance of the experience, and the presence of the holding audience mean that this is not a direct repetition of the agonies of disempowerment. “It is,” Barthes writes, “an amorous distance” (349), one that gives space for the audience to build something out of their repetitions rather than remain trapped within them.

As with any addictive substance, the cinephile repeatedly attempts to gain mastery over something that they were not able to internalize in early life, in this case their long-avoided experience of the world. This experience with moving images is distinct from the engagement found on smaller screens. Videos on platforms such as TikTok are often discursively constructed as addictive, but this compulsive repetition lacks the holding environment that allows for the cinematic experience to create something new from this repetition. Because the cinematic experience is profoundly alien to our day-to-day life outside of the theater, the “nightmare of things and people,” can both force a regression to primitive agony while facilitating a profound transformation of that agony into a fuller experience of the world.

Encounters with moving images in our normal environments do not have this otherworldly and collective quality. Our engagement with them is not one of amorous distance but is instead a voracious consumption, an attempt to internalize the outside world rather than accept its difference. The cinephile allows themselves to be frighteningly disempowered, while the small screen user seeks to empower themselves

with a fantasy of omnipotence. There is no experience of being hypnotized or bowled over by the image or held tightly by the warmth of the environment. With these images, primitive agonies are avoided and rejected by the user’s defensive fantasy of total symbiosis with their good screen objects. Upon withdrawal from the fantasy, the user is agonizingly alone as they confront the breakdown of their interdependent relationship. The collectivity and disempowerment of the cinematic experience allows for a safe withdrawal from omnipotence and is only an addiction in the sense that it is a repetition. Nonetheless, this repetition can lead to growth. Cinephilic love repeats the breakdown of the mother/infant tie in such a way that the pain of that experience can finally be felt. The nightmare of things and people is not a safe space for this breakdown, and thus users of images in that world work desperately to avoid it. The screen, as Casetti notes, functions as a protective bubble (134), but as these screens grow smaller, their ability to evoke the past in a way that is necessary for change has depreciated. Like the patient with psychic defenses operating full force, the small screen user avoids disempowerment in favor of the illusion of control and protection. The small screen user is not typically aware of the oscillation between subject and object that Keller describes in the cinema, and if they become aware they retreat, and thus lose their potential for change.

In his cinephilic poem “Ave Maria,” Frank O’Hara posits the movies as a place where the soul can grow (48), a sentiment echoed by Céline’s notion that “dreams rise in the darkness.” The cinematic experience can thus be (like the experience of psychoanalysis) a place of intoxicating growth and discovery. Addicted to this experience of amorous distance, of a safe regression, the cinephile sets themselves up for something more than repetition and insulation. While there is anxiety in this experience, it is not an attempt to avoid existence, but rather a new embrace of it.

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# Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece

## Spectatorship's Intoxicating Field

Hollywood, as Hortense Powdermaker knew, has long been a dream factory. But the movies are also intoxicants. From its earliest days, film has delighted in the representation of intoxication. Edwin S. Porter's *Laughing Gas* from 1907 depicts a woman sent into contagious laughter fits from nitrous oxide, strikingly similar to Charlie Chaplin's *Laughing Gas* that appeared seven years later. Alcohol has been the movies' constant companion, from 1897's *Old Man Drinking a Glass of Beer* (George Albert Smith) to Clara Bow's turn in the bootlegging drama *Wine* (1924) through Jean Harlow's bathtub gin-fueled antics in Jack Conway's *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), and on ad infinitum past Prohibition's end and into the present day. Opium's history is long and varied, including 1948's *To the Ends of the Earth* (Robert Stevenson) and its depiction of global narcotics smuggling, while Louis J. Gasnier's *Reefer Madness* (1936) signaled the beginning of cannabis' long cinematic history. From the 1960s-on, psychedelic drug use proliferated onscreen in films like Roger Corman's *The Trip* (1967) and Otto Preminger's *Skidoo* (1968), while cocaine ruled the 1980s, as in *Scarface* (Brian de Palma, 1983), and MDMA fueled a spate of '90s and '00s youth films like *Go* (John August, 1999).

As evidenced by these and countless other examples, the movies have always enjoyed a deep intertwinement with substances. But that connection isn't only reflected in representation. The experience of spectatorship has also long been enjoined with the experience of the intoxicant. In my recent book, *Movies under the Influence* (University of Minnesota, 2024), I explore this historical imbrication of American moviegoing and American substance use, from caffeine and nicotine to alcohol to opium to psychedelic drugs. Along similar lines, writers like Caetlin Benson-

Allott and David Church have considered other versions of these histories, illustrating that the text of film and the text of the substance have always co-constituted one another.<sup>1</sup>

Intoxicants and the movies, then, share elements of representation and experience. But they are also metaphors for one another, from the champions of psychedelia exploring "liddies," or movies of the mind, that LSD activates behind one's closed eyes, to Harry Anslinger's warnings of the addictive potential of druggie film for impressionable audiences post-World War II. Yet beyond the actual texts, watching itself might be understood as its own kind of intoxicant: a social lubricant, like alcohol, or an artificial and temporary community, like a group of mushroom eaters at a music festival. To be a spectator is also to be intoxicated, but not just via or necessarily with the movies themselves. Instead, we could think about spectatorship as a version of intoxication that is becoming increasingly lost. In an era when streaming has supplanted theatrical viewing as the popular mode of watching, could cinematic spectatorship re-intoxicate sociality? Or in a time of progressively popular temperance, from the surgeon general's warnings on alcohol bottles to sober raving, is spectatorial intoxication simply a curio of attractive dangers better left in the past?

One way to approach these questions is the concept of the field, a term that has long been used by psychologists. William James was the first to theorize the psyche as a field, meaning in part an "entire wave of consciousness," a flexible and mobile self that emanates out into a

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1. See Caetlin Benson-Allott, *The Stuff of Spectatorship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021) and David Church, "The Doors of Reception: Notes Toward a Psychedelic Film Investigation," *Senses of Cinema* 87 (June 2018).

periphery.<sup>2</sup> That aura is permeated and changed by the world around it, including other selves with whom it comes into contact, directing its attention onto different points of view and objects both tangible and virtual. As Philip Davis explains, James' field theory of consciousness was inspired in part by Michael Faraday's discoveries of electromagnetism, electrochemistry, and other elements of the natural world that suggested a fungible and energetic reality more than a physical one<sup>3</sup>. Much like a magnetic field that veers between attraction and repulsion, James' field was concerned with "crossing a threshold" and entering into a dynamic and ever-changing space of potential.<sup>4</sup> In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty would expand upon this concept of a psychological field to describe a phenomenal field which, following, a transcendental field, demonstrates, as Davis does, how a Jamesian field can be understood as the beginning of a theory of aesthetics akin to Davis' writings.<sup>5</sup> Today, practicing therapists interpret the field as a dynamic connection between people, such as clinician and patient, making the field an essential tool for successful psychotherapy. The field in general, though, explains how we integrate sensory information from the world and from one another. A field is at once a description of the individual mind and of that mind in social and perceptual operation.

Fields, then, constitute an important element of how we understand our minds in the modern era, especially one inundated with therapeutic lingo. Whether or not we have become utterly permeable, either nervous balls of energy battered about in modernity or alienated floating beings succored by the barrage of today's constant stream of visual technology, is less of concern than whether we consider ourselves permeable. And, I think, we do.

Today, that permeability tends to be categorized as the infiltration of the individual by flows of information and capital: our days bleeding

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2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), 226.

3. Philip Davis, *William James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 97.

4. Davis, *William James*, 103.

5. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2005).

into our nights, our work bleeding into our leisure, all aided by the push of digital technology into all elements of our being. We manage not only our workload by way of digital "tools," but also our finances, our households, our nutrition, our bodies, our drives, our desires. In these new days of Midjourney and Large Language Models, our aesthetic exploration is also increasingly managed by digital outsourcing. What used to be a field between persons and abundant sensory information in the same space has transformed into a field between person and technology, or even between technological mediation and technological mediation, such as when ChatGPT combs Reddit posts to answer a prompt. While Philip Davis argues that "our best is found when we inhabit the richest, most mobile field that we can," which can be encountered in the brightest areas of culture and interaction, those fields today are often reduced to a single atomized vantage dictated less by a breadth of experience than by extreme personalization vis-à-vis algorithmic directive.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the field's relationship with technology has not always been so hyper individualized, for the field is also a way to think about spectatorship. If the movie theater, as it has long been described, creates an experience of public intimacy, that intimacy depends on a field at work. The field between viewers meets the field between viewer and screen, and the experience of watching film can be understood as its own version of a connective field. Experiments in peripheral screen vision in the first half of the twentieth century give this credence; perfected perception may be one element of the widened screen, a dynamic field another.<sup>7</sup>

But the movies are dead, or so the story goes. They're old, subsumed by other forms of media, useless in specificity when all the sensorium is delineated by the digital. Why then might a consideration of film spectatorship be something of relevance today? I think that what has seemed a vast array of digital potential has been repeatedly, if counterintuitively, revealed to be a shrinkage of

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6. Davis, *William James*, 103.

7. See, for example, John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, "A Field of Light: Optics and the Demasked Screen, 1932-1952," in *The Optical Vacuum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

experience, and that reduction of richness means that many of us are calling out for an experience of the field. And the movie theater offers that, or it once did. In Esther Kinsky's recent book *Seeing Further*, the narrator tarries in a quiet Hungarian town where, like the village ignored in the wake of European Union economic development, an abandoned cinema has been left to rot. Inspired by some phantom desire that she cannot quite name, she stays to restore and reopen the theater. Her attempts – which succeed eventually in showing films in the theater, if not in sustaining an interested audience past a few brief weeks – elucidate a longing for a return to that cinematic field of temporary intoxication that she describes here:

Despite being relegated to the fringes of the action, the cinema still retains some mythic quality as a venue for seeing. The more the privatization of all experience eats away at our lives, the more fabulous appears a venue where seeing was a collective experience, where wit, terror, dismay and relief found a communal expression without encroaching on the anonymity offered by the dark room. Even those who never visit the cinema any more will still remember particulars of the experience, of the place: the act of entering into the dark in order to then look out of it; the unspoken, abided by rule of seeing: 'All eyes in the same direction.' In the direction mastered by the projectionist, invisible to the audience.<sup>8</sup>

For Kinsky, it's not just the movies that function as a guiding mythos: it's the ways in which we watch them and the spaces of our encounter. In other words, it's the field of spectatorship that holds the power to intoxicate an audience. There is no profit to be had in the narrator's drive to reinvigorate a dying form of spectatorship; there is only a need to feel that intoxicating field again. But all her efforts result in an ultimately fruitless endeavor and, in a parallel track to her own anecdote, cinemas die across the world from the illnesses of individualized and domestic streaming: "Some went quickly and others with

a grinding slowness. They died due to lack of an audience, lack of renovations, due to the general rampant, feeble opinion that it's enough to watch digitalized images flicker across any old screen... In a world that is forever growing more uncomfortable, quicker and harder-pressed, the illusory convenience of continually available data that yields a succession of images gave occasion for the intercession of the small gaze in the small room."<sup>9</sup>

I don't mean to romanticize substance use or its darkest partner, addiction. But given that this is an issue on love in *The Cinephile*, I won't apologize for a little romantic desire for a dissipating form of spectatorship. For I share with Kinsky the feeling that, once upon a time, spectatorship had the power to intoxicate. Once, it was a substantive and palpable experiment in perception. Once, it felt like an experience where you could lose yourself among others. Above all else, once, in its best moments, it was a version of what James called a field. When we find ourselves in the throes of nostalgia for cinephilia, perhaps what we are searching for is less the analog film than the field it participated in creating. That was a field where we found ourselves and, thrillingly, found ourselves everchanging.

As we are ever more atomized and categorized by virtue of appeals to our digital selves, that changeability coalesces into solidity. We become, as Colin Koopman explains, our data, which are "active participants in our making," where the "formats structuring data help shape who we are."<sup>10</sup> For Lowry Pressly, that slippage means that our definitions of data privacy ironically illustrate how we now define our deepest personal selves as simply accumulations of stable data. What we really need, Pressly maintains, is a preservation of private oblivion where the self is unstable, shadowy, mutable.<sup>11</sup> Pressly's advocacy seems, to me, concerned at heart with a return to self as field. And that self-in-process can sometimes be found in spectatorship.

In its most ideal state, intoxication removes

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9. Kinsky, *Seeing Further*, 185.

10. Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), vii.

11. See Lowry Pressly, *The Right to Oblivion: Privacy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2024).

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8. Esther Kinsky, *Seeing Further*, trans. Caroline Schmidt (New York: New York Review of Books, 2024), 4.

us from the prison of ourselves, however briefly or artificially. It shows us glimpses of a field of experience where metamorphosis reigns. That, too, was the occasional and rarely achieved project of cinematic spectatorship: a public taste of fields and oblivion. If we are ever to gain or regain a semblance of shared experience, perhaps the place where it could be inspired is in the intoxications of spectatorship and its “rule of seeing.” There we might once more look in the same direction, see further, and extend our antennae out into the dynamic and undefined elsewhere of darkened oblivion.

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# Killian O' Dwyer

## The Corps-à-corps of Queer Love

As a self-proclaimed addict of sex in philosophy, I often wonder about the place of queer love in relation to the Hegelian dialectic. Granted, this is no small task, given the fact that the modern definition of homosexuality as a “new species” of being only entered social consciousness more than half a century after the publication of *Phenomenology of Spirit and Philosophy of Right*<sup>1</sup>. In addition, it is unclear how the so-called “unnatural” gesture afforded by queerness sits alongside Hegel’s particular brand of idealism, and the progressive work undertaken by sublation in reducing the internal differences between contradictory statements or ideas during the movement of back-and-forth rationalisation.<sup>2</sup> What is clear, however, is that Hegel also seemed to suffer from a form of sex addiction himself. An obsession with vindicating the formation of the family as the social arrangement in which the immediate substantiality of spirit is achieved, and where ‘one sex’, privileged by Hegel, emerges as ‘spirituality’ itself.<sup>3</sup>

1. In *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault credits Westphal for his instalment of the homosexual as a defined psychological, psychiatric and medical category, one in which the perception of same-sex desire shifted from sodomy to an inner androgynisation of the human soul. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 134.

3. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206.

For Hegel, sex is fundamentally an issue of rationality, one in which the manifestation of the seed or semen in nature becomes the phenomenal substance *par excellence* for the sublation of life itself.<sup>4</sup> As he writes in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, ‘spirit’ (the rational awareness or self-conscious certainty of one’s own being in reality) is comparable with the activity of the seed (samen; “seed”, “semen”, “grain”, “togetherness”), ‘for with this the plant begins, yet it is also the result of the plant’s entire life.’<sup>5</sup> Man’s ability to relate to himself, as a form of internal mediation, is similar to the generative work of the seed, since it develops only in order to produce itself again as another kernel of self-relation.<sup>6</sup> Man conceives *himself* by producing a son, a living being that allows him to relate to himself as his own resource.<sup>7</sup> This relationship of father and son, glued together by the substantive feeling of familial love, enables man to ‘know himself’ implicitly through his self-conscious unity with another and of the other with him.<sup>8</sup> Spirit, therefore, is the *filiation* between father and son,

4. As highlighted by Derrida in the most recent retranslation of *Glas*. Jacques Derrida, *Clang*, trans. David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 35.

5. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 253; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914), 82.

6. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 50.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

the expression of rational 'love' that binds the family structure together and which concretises his position as its head.<sup>9</sup> There is no deviation from this according to Hegel, no queer divergence from the family unit or its understanding of love as the substantive feeling which unites members together under the auspice of one spiritually endowed sex which privileges male power, authority and sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Queer love, it seems, has no possible place in Hegelian thinking.

In Luca Guadagnino's *Queer* (2024), however, resides a love story that departs from Hegel's idealised notion of filiation, one that engages with the formidable work of sublation and its attempt to rationalise sex as such, in subtle yet deeply compelling ways. Set in 1950's Mexico City, *Queer* is a poetic exploration of love, obsession, sex, (and yes) drugs shared between a downcast American expatriate Lee (Daniel Craig) and a much younger Eugene (Drew Starkey). Meeting eyes with one another for the first time over a cockfight, Lee immediately becomes infatuated with the suave, poised figure of this boyish character, whose overtly blasé demeanour imparts a profound sense of mystery or inscrutability, about who he is, what he is thinking, or even who or what he desires. After manufacturing several encounters at the local café and bar, Lee eventually befriends the enigmatic Eugene, before later establishing a relationship as lovers. However, Eugene's impenetrable façade, emphasised by the indifferent gaze that flashes from behind gold framed spectacles, soon causes the heroin-addicted Lee to unravel as he struggles to read his young counterpart's emotions. In fact, the visually Edward Hopper-esque cinematography, in which candied-coloured interiors and skylines are offset by the cool shadows cast by pale moonlight, only adds to the general atmosphere of isolation in the film, and the subsequent distance that seems to grow between Lee and Eugene, despite the increasing time spent with one another during their unlikely companionship.

If one were to apply a Hegelian lens to this queer love story, it is clear that this particular relationship struck up between both men is not

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9. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

10. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

the same filiation expected of father and son (think gay fantasy, not the literal paternal bond of blood relations *per se*). Lee's frequent doubts about Eugene's sexual orientation, given his successive evenings spent presumably dating a woman, highlights the tenuous nature of their precarious arrangement, in which the substantive feeling of love reads as distinctly one-sided. As Jacques Derrida notes in *Glas* (his most "direct" engagement with the motif of the family in *Philosophy of Right*), love in the Hegelian dialectic acts as the immutable substance which allows man to overcome egoistic individuality and act universally according to the human will, with a reverence for the laws and truth of the world.<sup>11</sup> While nature itself lacks a rational order that can sustain the synthesis of the human spirit, the loving family provides the instance for self-conscious certainty in which all individual members can achieve objectivity, truth and an ethical life through the back-and-forth rationalisation of their familial bond.<sup>12</sup>

For Hegel, the dialectical movement of contradictory ideas, which eventually sublates into a synthesized concept, indicates that there is already an innate *familiarity* or *filiation* shared between opposing positions in the moment prior to apperception. 'What is familiar and well known,'<sup>13</sup> Hegel writes in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'as such is not really known [cognized] for the very reason that it is *familiar* and *well known*.' While sublation, as a process which cancels, negates but also preserves an element of the antithetical argument in the final concept, is a unity of ideas that arguably incorporates differences which are 'unfamiliar' to the workings of conscious mind, Hegel asserts that the immediacy of representation (the ability to cognise something *as such*) suggests that there is in fact some

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11. Derrida, *Glas*, 12; Allen W. Wood, Introduction to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xii.

12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Science of Logic* trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55; 66; Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 276.

13. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 20.

‘unmoved indifference in existence itself.’<sup>14</sup> In other words, what might appear to be queerly distinct is in fact always somewhat ‘familiar’ to the workings of rational thought, as the underlying structure which enables man to know himself’ implicitly through his self-conscious unity with another (his son).<sup>15</sup> However, it is clear that Lee does not ‘know’ Eugene, or perhaps even himself, as such. Whatever filiation is shared between them at times appears to be disjointed, frigid, and transactional; and while there are genuine moments of tenderness and intense passion, these scenes are always bookended by Eugene’s profound unfathomability, his distinct elusiveness when confronted with Lee’s persistent probing.

Eugene’s emotional distance, his seeming refusal to revel in Lee’s affections, precipitates an obsessional decline for the latter into drugs, sex and frustration at the unknowability of the conscious mind. Bereft at not ‘knowing’ his lover, Lee travels with the reluctant Eugene to South America in the hopes of finding *yagé*, a plant that promises to grant a willing recipient with the gift of telepathy. There, they find the fierce character of *yagé*-expert Dr. Cotter, who brews a psychedelic ayahuasca for both men from samples collected in the forest. What ensues in the following scene provides the audience with a curious engagement of the Hegelian dialectic, one which complicates the divide between queerness, filiation and self-conscious certainty.

Following a bizarre sequence in which both men appear to vomit up their hearts (or are they gonads?) after drinking the ayahuasca, both Eugene and Lee join Dr. Cooper by the campfire at the edge of the forest. Staring into the flames that lick the logs of wood, their bodies slowly begin to fade into nothing, dwindling away as Lee finally telepathically “hears” Eugene’s truth for the first time: “I’m not queer, I’m disembodied.” The gentle response “I know” that escapes his lover’s mouth is succeeded by a scene in which both men, visible again, engage in a highly performative dance that is balanced between visual displays of longing and/or mourning. Naked, they embrace, twist, rub and pull at one another, before each begins to penetrate the other. This is not sex, but a vivid blending of bodies into one flesh, in which each delve below the other’s skin. Arms and legs

move beneath the surface of a shared membrane as they continue to explore, tease and wrestle with one another. Lee’s forehead becomes Eugene’s chest, whose fingers become part of the other’s shoulder blade. Skin stretches, melts and fuses. Together, both men merge in the act of shaping the other’s body, pouring over one another in what can only be described as a powerful erotics of translation, a *corps-à-corps* in which the once inscrutable mind of the young Eugene (text) is finally revealed to Lee (reader) as such.

*Corps-à-corps*, from the literal French “body-to-body”, is a phrase used when describing “a dual,” “hand-to-hand combat,” “wrestling,” or the act of two fencers coming into physical contact with one another. However, it is also suggestive of “intercourse,” “love-making,” or “a sexual embrace” shared between bodies, a grappling or tussling performed with one another during an erotic encounter.<sup>16</sup> In an interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida remarks curiously that ‘in every reading, there is a *corps-à-corps* between reader and text,’ an intimate struggle or squeeze in the moment when writing engages with the immediacy of the analytical mind.<sup>17</sup> *Corps-à-corps*, for Derrida, is an expression that gestures to the readerly intimacy or relationality which exists at the heart of translation itself, as an operation that is always mediated by the threat of violent interruption of textual bodies, the conceivable loss of meaning or context that accompanies any act of interpretation between reader and text.<sup>18</sup>

As Lenka Vrábliková and Thomas Clément Mercier note in their double special edition of *Parallax*, which wrestles with Derrida’s notion of *corps-à-corps* in two parts, the relational aspect

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16. Lenka Vrábliková and Thomas Clément Mercier, “*Corps à: body/ies in deconstruction*,” *Parallax* 25, No. 1 (Spring 2019): 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1570600>

17. Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 126.

18. Lenka Vrábliková and Thomas Clément Mercier, “*À corps: the corpus of deconstruction*,” *Parallax* 25, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2019.1607228>

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14. Ibid, 19.

15. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 199.

of this expression testifies to the structural necessity of translating the individual bodily experience beyond said singularity, a desire for exposition and transmission that loses the notion of the singular body in the moment of translation.<sup>19</sup> Put differently, while Hegel's dialectic of the loving family represents a social formation that continually unfolds internal differences until a purer, universality (one spiritual sex) emerges, Derrida's intimate *corps-à-corps* is an expression that acknowledges the interruption or 'betrayal' of disparate meanings which makes translation possible, a togetherness that remains queerly marked by division.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, *corps-à-corps* equally represents the impossibility of ever truly synthesising opposing arguments as such, since the ongoing struggle or sexual embrace between reader and text, fuelled by the obsessional desire to translate what necessarily remains untranslatable, is an activity predicated on the loss of 'bodies' or textual meanings during the very act of transmission itself.<sup>21</sup>

This dual *corps-à-corps*, the grappling or tussling of bodies in translation which circumvents the finality of a "winning" argument or position, is gleaned towards the end of *Queer* following the peculiar wrestling/embracing of skin shared between two queerly marked lovers. Having returned to their sleeping quarters after this out-of-body experience, Lee visibly seeks affection from Eugene, only to be rebuffed with his customary aloofness. Despite their telepathic connection and subsequent merging of corporeal flesh, there is still an irrevocable distance that exists between both men, to which no drug can ever truly bridge as such. When dawn comes, Eugene and Lee set out into the forest on their journey home, but before too long, the figure of the young lover disappears in the moment that Lee turns away briefly. This is not the same fading of bodies witnessed the previous evening around the campfire, when both men erotically tussle together in a poetic display of translation and transmission between discrete beings. Instead, it is a sudden and irreparable vanishing, an evaporation that does not signal the synthesis of opposing ideas or figures into one spiritual sex or identity, but instead gestures to 'what remains' anterior and exterior to sublation – the queer differences that 'fall away' as the

19. Ibid.

20. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 81; 115.

21. Vrábliková and Mercier, "À corps": 112.

remainders or excrement of Hegel's philosophical essentiality.<sup>22</sup>

While Derrida recognises that Hegel's dialectical method is predicated on the fact that it can anticipate and incorporate the very notion of a possible counterargument in advance of it being posed, the *corps-à-corps* that inevitably plays out between disparate bodies of meaning evidences how the translation of ideas is always a slippery and elusive affair. In *Queer*, both men are textual strangers to one another, constantly and dynamically interacting, contradicting, and confusing each other in unexpected and unpredictably loving ways. Queer love in this film is not the substantive feeling or filiation that allows man to know himself as such, rather, it is the transmission of discrete positions that is predicated on the inevitable collision of meaning which threatens to disorientate or dislocate the logical progression of the rational mind. Lee's obsession, and ultimate failure, with truly "knowing" Eugene as such, illustrates that difference never becomes a property of the final concept via sublation in the strictest sense of the word. There is, and always will be, a *corps-à-corps* between text and reader, a sexual wrestling of individual entities that resists becoming synthesised as such, the queer occurrences which scholars and lovers obsess over, the differences that remain outside of any form of dialectical calculation.<sup>23</sup> There is no place for queer love in Hegelianism, only the potential for queer things to interrupt or derail the accumulative progression of absolute knowledge itself, exposing it to the risk of being torn to pieces during the act of translation, just like the concepts or ideas we obsessively wrestle with (sexually) but which forever elude the totality of rationalisation as such.

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## Sex-Swapping the Age-Gap Romance on Screen

The May-December romance is one characterized by a significant age gap between lovers who are at different stages of life: the younger person is in their supposed Spring while the older partner is in their Winter. Historically this configuration involves an older man and an ingénue, and commonly – be it explicitly or implicitly – their story is presented as one of resource exchange: the older man brings to the relationship his money, power, and status while the younger woman brings youth, fertility, and ripe Spring freshness. While routinely boasting romantic and erotic themes, such stories regularly also stir in taboo and social judgment, power play, manipulation and possibilities for genuine love and personal development too.

Likely sparked in part by the MeToo movement and sustained by ongoing interest in the private lives of celebrities, the sexual politics at play in these age-gap relationships have been under close scrutiny. At the 2020 Golden Globe awards ceremony, Ricky Gervais joked, “*Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* [2019] - nearly three hours long - Leonardo DiCaprio attended the premiere and by the end his date was too old for him”. Apparent in the quip was just how mainstream it has become to not only comment on these relationships but notably to criticize a dynamic that had once been accepted as completely normal. Such romances,

of course, are also regularly defended with any scorn decried as a sign that society has become excessively puritanical and predisposed to infantilizing the younger female participants.

The same Zeitgeist so well versed in interrogating the politics underpinning these relationships has delivered a cluster of narratives that sex-swap this age-old dynamic. Instead of the clichéd older man/younger woman dynamic, it is now older women in trysts with younger men. The French language *L'été dernier* (*Last Summer*) (2023) for instance, along with the American docudrama *May December* (2023), both focused on older women having affairs with younger men. The following year, the same dynamic was at the heart of the quartet of films focused on in this essay: *The Idea of You* (2024), *A Family Affair* (2024), *Lonely Planet* (2024), and *Babygirl* (2024). This list of 2024 sex-swapped, age-gap romances is certainly not exhaustive: the film *Between the Temples* (2024) and the Italian mini-series *Inganno* (*Deceitful Love*) (2024) released that same year also told stories of older women/younger men love affairs, demonstrating that the theme has certainly been having a moment.

I begin this essay by presenting the case for discussing the four films together, and introduce the idea of them being sex-swaps. I then present two intertwined explanations for the whys of their

close succession releases: economics and the Zeitgeist.

### Introducing the Quartet

Clustering films as being similar is often criticized as a reductive exercise: that drawing links between films based solely on synopsis – as I am doing with these sex-swapped, age-gap love affair narratives – overlooks all the things that make each presentation unique (Rosewarne 2020). This is, of course, accurate: in discussing how films are similar, their differences invariably get papered over. Such reduction is also, problematically, part of the reason that some films in a cluster will be overlooked or even condemned by critics and audiences because they are perceived as little more than the third or fourth film about the exact same topic released that year. *Lonely Planet*, for instance – arguably the worst reviewed of the four films discussed here – was inevitably compared to similar productions released the same year, as apparent in a *New York Times* review: “In this 2024 lineup, *Lonely Planet* is distinctive mostly for being the one starring Laura Dern. Unfortunately, despite its wattage, it pales in comparison to its cousins” (Wilkinson 2024).

Media analysis and also film criticism however, are inherently discussions of the connective tissue that links films to not only those that have gone before but – as is the focus of this essay – those released at approximately the same time. On the occasions when this happens, a snapshot is provided of a society’s preoccupations and anxieties as well as the kinds of storylines considered as bankable at a given moment.

The clustering of *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet*, and *Babygirl* in this essay – as well, to be fair, as occurred in many reviews where the films were discussed together – is that in each instance an affair transpired between an older, successful woman and a younger man. In *The Idea of You* for instance, Solène (Anne Hathaway) is a divorced 40-year-old gallery owner who has an affair with the 25-year-old lead singer of a boy band, Hayes (Nicholas Galitzine). In *A Family Affair*, Brooke (Nicole Kidman) is a widowed author who has an affair with her daughter’s employer, actor Chris (Zac Efron). In *Lonely Planet* Katherine (Laura Dern), also a writer, is freshly out of a long-term relationship and has an affair with the younger Owen (Liam Hemsworth). In *Babygirl*,

Romy (Nicole Kidman) is a married CEO who has an affair with her younger intern, Samuel (Harris Dickinson). In *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair* and *Lonely Planet*, the narratives end with the affairs destined to become committed relationships. In *Babygirl*, Samuel takes a job overseas and Romy seemingly stays in her marriage.

The unique if not wholly unprecedented sex-swapped age-gap relationships offered in these films link them but there are additional commonalities that serve to further justify viewing them as a cluster. At the helm of each film is a superstar actress with a decades-long career. These are female stars who audiences have well-established familiarity with and who have each quite literally grown up on our screens. While comparing careers is fraught – we would first need to agree upon a set of criteria for doing so which is beyond the scope of this essay – it nonetheless is relatively easy to identify that each actress has had a longer career than her on-screen lover and that all three actresses have won Oscars; something that can’t be said for their on-screen male counterparts. While only *Babygirl* plays with power within the storyline in a meaningful way, from a production perspective each actress in each film holds a position of authority on the screen – wielding real-life power as well as the power possessed by her character – and each female protagonist is framed as not merely consenting to her affair but holding power within.

Further linking the films is that women also had significant roles in each production. *The Idea of You* for instance, was based on a novel written by a woman. *A Family Affair* was written for the screen by a woman. *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* were both written and also directed by women. While I’ve discussed elsewhere that women scribes and women directors don’t automatically make for a feminist film (Rosewarne 2019), nevertheless, women in production roles certainly help to diversify storytelling, at the very least.

### Understanding The Sex-Swap

The 2016 film *Ghostbusters* – the remake of the 1984 film – was a high-profile example of a sex-swap, igniting a firestorm of backlash attributable to it not only being a remake of a “classic”, but for daring to be a reimagining. The 2016 film updated its 1984 source material via a sex-swap:

the four male protagonists were replaced by four women and the female secretary character from the first film was swapped with a male. The 2016 *Ghostbusters* was by no means the first film to reimagine a story with a different gendered cast. This phenomenon, in fact, can be traced back at least as early as 1921 with the German silent film *Hamlet* where the title character was a woman secretly living as a man (Rosewarne 2019).

While changing the sex of a character or a cast is one manifestation of a sex-swap, the same thing can happen where a particular *type* of gendered story gets altered. In 2017, *Girls Trip* and *Rough Night* for instance, took the male ensemble raunchy comedy – think the *Hangover* (2009, 2011, 2013) trilogy – and sex-swapped it by reimagining the story with a female cast. *Widows* (2018) and *The Kitchen* (2019) similarly took the male ensemble heist film template and reimagined it with female thieves. The release of *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* fits this sex-swap template where the standard older man/younger woman narrative trope is flipped.

Certainly the act of taking a male narrative and sex-swapping the characters can be construed as progressive filmmaking, if not necessarily *feminist* filmmaking. In a mediascape where men still occupy most protagonist roles, to have women at the helm is noteworthy. Further, in a world where so few films are successful and where sequels, remakes and franchise expansions dominate (Rosewarne 2020), by offering audiences material they are already somewhat familiar with but tweaking it via a sex-swap, the new women-led film gets a head start. These reasons however, also explain why sex-swapped films are often criticized as crude ways to make a film appear modern and cutting-edge when, in reality, they are often risk averse means to produce female-led content. Further, there is an opportunity cost argument that when a sex-swap is produced, a more original, more authentic *women's* story isn't told (Rosewarne 2019). Each position has merit. It is for these reasons though, I assert that sex-swaps of the classic age-gap romance isn't inherently an act of feminist filmmaking, although definitely can be. While I sideline the debate about the extent of each films' feminism, certainly their sex-swapping makes them modern.

## The Modern Age-Gap Narrative

The idea of what constitutes *modern* love or a *modern* relationship or even a modern affair is complicated and worthy of its own analysis elsewhere. Suffice to say here, I focus on the technique of updating a familiar story – in this case the age-gap romance – via a sex-swap to make it feel modern, fresh and newly appealing to audiences. While the sex-swap itself is key in the modernization, so too are other elements. Two aspects that enable us to view *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet*, and *Babygirl* as uniquely contemporary are their modern takes on sex appeal and also sexual agency.

### Reimagining Attractiveness

In 2023, then CNN anchor Don Lemon made an off-handed on-camera comment about presidential candidate Nikki Haley – 51-years-old at that time – claiming that she was no longer “in her prime”. Lemon went on to say that a woman is “considered to be in her prime in her 20s and 30s and maybe 40s.” So very controversial were his remarks – many viewing them as completely sexist, notably so when spoken by a man who was actually *older* than Haley, thus highlighting rampant double standards in media – Lemon was fired. While CNN obviously decided Lemon's comments conflicted with their values, it is by no means a new idea that women are perceived to have an expiry date even if it has become unacceptable to articulate it. In Western culture sexual attractiveness has long been bound to youth; that it is the young fertile woman who is the object of lust, not her older counterpart. It is for these reasons that when actress Melissa Joan Hart – known to audiences for her starring role in the teen series *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003) – was, at 47-years-old, cast as a grandmother in *Would You Kill For Me? The Mary Bailey Story* (2023), audiences were largely appalled: “That's it. I'm done ... Let's get on a porch in a muumuu, yelling at teenagers to get off my porch ... I'm spiraling” commented one fan on TikTok (in Solé 2023). Sure, it's biologically possible for a 47-year-old to be a grandmother, but Hart's casting was viewed as part of the very long, troubling history of women's portrayals on screen: either they're the sexy figure of desirability on to whom audience fantasies are projected, or all too quickly they're relegated to mother or grandmother

roles, defined primarily by care duties. The Hart example actually seems much less egregious when compared to some of Hollywood's other high-profile sexist casting decisions premised on the idea of a woman being past her prime. In *Blue Hawaii* (1961), for instance, Angela Lansbury played Elvis Presley's mother. Lansbury was only ten years older than Presley. In *Forrest Gump* (1994) Sally Field was similarly only ten years older than Tom Hanks, yet she played his mother. In *Alexander* (2004), Angelina Jolie was only one year older than her co-star Colin Farrell, yet she too was cast as his mother. A distinctly ridiculous example occurred in *Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001) where Drew Barrymore played the mother to Adam Garcia's character: Barrymore was two years younger than Garcia. Countless similar casting examples can be drawn upon to paint a picture of Hollywood long having had a problem when it comes to imagining roles for women over 40. Something that makes *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* appear modern in comparison is that these characters are not defined by their care duties. Further, in each instance, the female protagonist is presented as attractive and as possessing sex appeal: qualities she proffers to the audience long before she ever meets her affair partner. These characters aren't subjected to a makeover before being recognized by audiences as appealing – these are women who are presented as objectively attractive from the outset.

While there is a point to be made about the actresses in these films not being reflective of what ordinary over-40s look like – as Alison de Souza wrote in *The Straits Times*, “These movies would not work quite so well if their female leads did not look exceptionally youthful” (de Souza, 2024) – to be fair, actors on screen rarely ever look their age nor mirror the appearances of the audience.

### *Reimagining Appetite*

It would be an overstatement to claim that women over 40 suddenly discovered their capacity for arousal in 2023. From *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), to *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* (1961), to *The Graduate* (1967), to *40 Carats* (1973), to *White Palace* (1990), to *The Piano Teacher* (2001), to *Adore* (2013), to *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (2017), there are plenty of films where older women allowing themselves to feel and also

act upon arousal, notably so within affairs with younger men. *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* letting their over-40 leads desire sex and then have sex on screen certainly isn't unprecedented. And yet, because all four films came out in close succession, an impression was conveyed that some kind of cultural shift had occurred: that rather than us having to scour film history for isolated examples of age-gap love affairs featuring older women, a batch of them released in the same year signified change. Robinne Lee, actress and the writer of the novel that *The Idea of You* was based on, discussed her own activist intentions with the story as specifically related to sex appeal:

I was learning the hard way that in Hollywood, after 40, women are much less desirable. The assumption was that we ceased to be sexual beings and were thus less valuable. I was eager to prove the industry—and our culture at large—wrong, in my own little way (Lee 2024).

Recurrent in reviews of the four films was the idea that a kind of “reclaiming” was transpiring – of self, of identity, of sexuality. Even Lee made this point in an interview claiming that her novel was about “a woman approaching 40 and reclaiming her sexuality and rediscovering herself” (in Ruiz 2024).

While we can interpret the reclamation assertion in various ways – i.e., as affording older female characters the kind of desirability that Hollywood largely implies they've aged out of – the allegation became almost a cliché in reviews. While the word is generally not defined, the inference is that the sexuality possessed by these characters bucks conventional screen presentations and those constraints generally imposed on such narratives by Hollywood conventions. Most sharply in contrast to most films with older female characters, the women in *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* are not defined by their caretaking responsibilities. Mentioned earlier were older films with older women/younger man affairs. While, for their eras, those earlier films were groundbreaking, in retrospect their clichés about older female sexuality can be viewed as somewhat anachronistic today. The stereotypes of the “MILF” and the “cougar” for instance, have been critiqued on numerous grounds: that such women are ultimately “othered” – that they're flagged as different to the kind of women society normally deems appealing due to their age, due to

them being mothers – and that there is something objectifying and fetishistic about desire for them: as May Friedman argues, the label “denies sexual agency, positioning mothers as the recipients of sexual attention and as sexual objects, rather than as active participants” (Friedman 2014, 50). When we think of characters like Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) in *The Graduate* or Stifler’s Mom (Jennifer Coolidge) in *American Pie* (1999), both have little identity beyond embodying the sexual fantasies of the men they seduce. Their identity in the films is inextricably bound up with the man’s desires and her wants are restricted to reciprocating his. For the women in *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl*, not only are these women the protagonists – a departure from films like *The Graduate* or *American Pie* – but these are women who had very full and fleshed out lives before engaging sexually with their younger lovers, and are granted identities and personalities beyond objectification by their sexual partners.

Hollywood is a business and thus it is one thing to identify that these films are doing something different and something modern, but it’s important to understand the financial drivers of such storylines as opposed to tricking ourselves into believing Hollywood has suddenly decided to do women a favor.

### **The Economic and Zeitgeist Rationales**

Whenever I’ve written on the whys of film and television production, my starting point is almost always the same: money (Rosewarne 2020). We get the screen content that we do because someone thought it would make money. Thus, in 2024, on at least four separate occasions production teams believed that an older woman/younger man romance had the capacity to make money. The why of this occurrence is unpacked in this section, identifying what was happening in the culture that made *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* suddenly seem like good bets.

#### *Capturing the Moment*

In one review of *The Idea of You*, the film was described as having “soaked up the cultural zeitgeist” (Ross 2024), and in another as having “hit the zeitgeist” (Proudfoot 2024). A review of *Babygirl* similarly claimed that it “captures the

zeitgeist moment we’re in” (English 2025). While there is, of course, no singular Zeitgeist and sometimes time is needed to fully determine a moment’s social and political preoccupations, nonetheless, viewing these films as responses to contemporary sexual politics is necessary. Years on from the height of MeToo, compounded with more recent American political events – notably restrictions on women’s reproductive freedoms, interpreted widely as a very targeted attack on women’s sexuality – the films are open to interpretation as modern assertions of sexual autonomy in an environment where the power of older women is slowly being recognized.

While generally “Zeitgeist” is deployed in reviews without efforts to identify what the spirit of the age actually is or just how a film harnesses it, one review of *Babygirl* offered an explanation:

... *Babygirl* is an oddly timid film, owing in large part to [director Halina] Reijn’s attempt to fit so many ideas in the zeitgeist into it—the expectations of women in power; intergenerational conflict; age-gap relationships; discomfort with the sexuality of older women; whether sexual kinks are innate or the product of trauma; and, on top of all that, AI and the future of humanity (Schwartz 2025).

While kink, AI and powerplay are very *Babygirl*-specific, the other themes are indeed detectable across all four films. How mainstream these themes actually are, and just how prevalent they are in the Zeitgeist is a topic for another essay, but certainly they are ideas in the ether.

In a crowded media environment with so much content on offer, capturing the Zeitgeist – offering audiences something that seems fresh, cutting edge and distinctly modern – is considered as essential means to achieve cut-through and capture an audience (Rosewarne 2019). For *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl*, the age-gap relationships, the power of older women, as well as sex-swapping a Hollywood cliché are each ways to capture the moment we’re in and then sell these ideas back to an audience as an entertainment product.

#### *Chasing an Audience*

In Adrian Horton’s *Guardian* review of *A Family Affair*, the critique opens “*A Family Affair*, a new romcom from Netflix, knows the precisely

calibrated fantasy it's offering" (Horton 2024). This idea of *precisely* calibrated fantasy is at the industrial heart of these four films. Romantic content has always chased a female audience and, of course, the four films discussed in this essay were unabashedly designed to court women. These films each offer female audiences entertainment, escapism and perhaps even a little vicarious romance. While not every romance that comes off the Hollywood production line will be a success, nonetheless, that four close succession releases designed to appeal to women in very similar ways is not a surprise: the film industry has long operated from the perspective of thinking that they know what audiences want and catering accordingly, and thus apparently the moment was ripe to reimagine the May-December relationship.

Whether audiences are more savvy today or, with so many platforms offering so much content audiences can afford to be more selective – or perhaps simply because social media gives us “everywoman” insight into what audiences are loving or loathing – there is a perception that consumers are more empowered about what they watch today and can, through their consumer clout, demand a better calibre of content. While what constitutes “better” can obviously be debated, nonetheless, the idea of women characters occupying more diverse roles – across the life course – would be considered preferable to the historic alternative, and is something that boasts distinct audience appeals.

While offering female audiences something better – something more diverse, for instance – than what they are used to is one underpinning of the appeal of these films, so too is their capacity to flatter the audience, likely envisaging viewers that are similarly aged to the characters and who would far rather see themselves as the object of affection of a movie star (as in *A Family Affair*) or a rock star (as in *The Idea Of You*), than in any way akin to Melissa Joan Hart as a grandma in her 40s. The fantasy that a woman over 40 is desirable, desirous and worthy of the affections of a good man is, of course, something many women in the audience would find seductive.

## Conclusion

On the day that I completed this essay the fourth film adaptation from Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones series - *Bridget Jones: Mad About*

*the Boy* (2025) – was released. In it Jones (played by 55-year-old Renée Zellweger) has an affair with Roxster (played by 28-year-old Leo Woodall). Also scheduled for forthcoming release in 2025 are *I Want Your Sex* and *Marty Supreme*, both also with older woman/younger man romances at their helm. Seemingly we're now in our third year of this romantic cluster!

When a certain type of storyline is popular, Hollywood is incentivised to make lookalikes – milking a trend for as long as it can keep making money. The fortunes of *The Idea of You*, *A Family Affair*, *Lonely Planet* and *Babygirl* along with those of the similar-plotted forthcoming releases will determine whether studios feel there is mileage left in this sex-swapped age-gap narrative or whether audiences have had their fill. Regardless, that in such a short period of time so many media minutes were devoted to this romantic configuration is interesting and quite possibly reflective of a shift of not only what audiences want but notably what Hollywood is willing to offer them.

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# Nathalia Bell

## Cigarettes on Film: the Sacred and the Profane

Inspired by scholarship on the aesthetics of breath in cinema, this article explores a contentious type of breathing prevalent on the screen, namely, smoking in films. With mindfulness breathing, traditionally a Buddhist meditation, as a counter-reference, smoking might be considered secular Western culture's closest manifestation of intentional breathing, a ritual for the breath. In the act of smoking, the smoker's repetitive focus on the breath conveys a meditative bodily stance, and the cathartic exhalation of a smoke cloud evokes an offering akin to prayer—a vulnerable surrender of hopes and fears. In religious rituals where goods, such as incense, are burnt as offerings, the intangible—spirit, *pneuma*, or breath—becomes manifest. To read smoking phenomenologically as an embodied process, as a posture of dwelling, is not to romanticize it but to move beyond reductive readings of it being an addiction that can be solved with a nicotine patch. The 'addiction' more accurately reflects an ineffable devotion that calls breath beyond itself.

The complaint has often been leveled that films have excessively glamorized the act of smoking. Despite cigarettes rarely being an essential part of any film plot,<sup>1</sup> they are strewn across the

1. Films are rarely about cigarettes, with rare exceptions such as *Thank You for Smoking* (Jason Reitman, 2005). Also, in exceptional occasions cigarettes are an incidental plot device to create suspense, such as in action or thriller films, where a burning cigarette might be used to ignite gasoline to create an explosion, such as in *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963).

liminal spaces of cinematic history, constituting a core element of its atmosphere and mood; what purpose do they serve in cinema, and what is their appeal to both filmmakers and audience? Nicotine cannot be a factor if the medium of cinema is said to influence smoking. The appeal of cigarettes seems not to be merely chemical but visual, specifically a haptic visuality, the term used by new media and film scholar Laura U. Marks, to evoke “the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole” (163), and conveys the “dynamic subjectivity between looker and image” (164). The haptic image conveys a sense of touch, a type of embodied perception, wherein the affected body participates in the texture of the visual on film, which is beyond the content of the film's narrative.<sup>2</sup> As a frequently inessential feature of the plot, smoking functions as a haptic index to the presence and texture of breath, referring to the breathing apparatus of the body and ultimately to the palpable human need for affective postures and gestures articulated in the ritual-like play of breathing.

The appeal of smoking seems to speak to our need for embodied rituals and tangible devotions. The burning, inhalation, and exhalation of cigarettes convey an affective cathartic

2. “The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative.” (163) Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke University Press, 2000. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ct-v1198x4c>. Accessed 29 Mar. 2025.

release and a transcendent yearning. In our industrialized era bereft of ritual, smoking offers a form of ritual—albeit of a tragic and nihilistic type in its compromising of the breath; it creates a space for the smoker to step out of themselves, to while, wonder, and play with their breath. Might smoking's prominence in films reflect a subconscious overcompensation for the lack of ritual and enchantment in our secular age? Is smoking in films a last bastion for the numinous and irrational in an era of pragmatism where the scientific paradigm prevails? To say the least, cigarettes in film parade as vestiges, relics, even specters of pre-modern ways of being, haunting our modern rational constitution.

With a nod to Martin Heidegger, this article hopes to push readings of smoking in cinema beyond semiotics. For example, semiotically, smoking might function as a subliminal message indicating two characters have just had intercourse, but here smoking will be read ontologically as articulating a way of being-in-the-world and dwelling with the uncanny. In cinema, smoking manifests semblances of the sacred in the profane, in the liminal spaces between breath and spirit, and in the rituals of set-aside spaces it provides.

### **The Profane and the Sacred**

Cinema is a mirror that represents the world to us. André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, both advocates of realism in cinema, extoll the medium's ability to record reality as objectively as possible. For these theorists, realism is the revelatory medium for the sacred and otherworldly. Scholar of religion Mircea Eliade, in his book *The Sacred and The Profane* (1959), taking inspiration from Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), defines the sacred, or the holy, as that which is "wholly other," consecrated, set aside from the everyday (9-10), seemingly contrary to the profane. Yet paradoxically, it is precisely in profane spaces that glimpses of spiritual and numinal phenomena are encountered. Kracauer, in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), ponders: "[P]erhaps our condition is such that we cannot gain access to the elusive essentials of life unless we assimilate the seemingly non-essential. Perhaps the way today leads from, and through, the corporeal to the spiritual? And perhaps the cinema helps us to move from

below to above?" (ii).<sup>3</sup> Cinema's virtue is taking the everyday and rendering it uncanny. It trains the eye to see prayers in everyday gestures, to glimpse the vestiges of rituals in the mundane and liminal spaces, the stirrings of the sacred in the folding of a kitchen towel, and the kneading of bread. Likewise, with smoking, the slight gesture of the hands, the gentle sway of breath, the cinematic portrayals of smoking manifest this chorus of sighs, the primordial groan behind all things. Taking the profanity of modernity, cinema articulates the rituals therein, disclosing existential and spiritual yearnings.

In the seedy settings of the industrialized and dark cities of the film noir, the exhalation of smoke casts a mystical shroud on the squalor, rendering the profane momentarily sacred. Film historian Robert Porfirio, in "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" (1976), identifies ritualistic habits of the film noir protagonist setting aside spaces of order: "Set down in a violent and incoherent world, the film noir hero tries to deal with it in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world" (217). Characters are thrown into a cruel world, needing to find an anchor or space to articulate their *raison d'être*. Porfirio continues, "[t]here are still a few restorative rituals remaining to the *film noir* hero, in particular the private eye: sometimes they are little things like rolling a cigarette... such ceremonies as smoking or drinking take on sacramental overtones" (217). For the character Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), the ritual of assembling, holding, and inhaling his cigarette constitutes his comportment and gait, his way of being in the world. Thus affirming that even the seedy worlds of crime and nihilism can have their devotional spaces; "The only sanctuary left for the hero is his Spartan office or apartment room, and he goes back there for spiritual renewal..." (217).

### **Breath and Spirit**

Religious rituals are dedicated to that which we cannot see, yet which also fundamentally constitutes us, namely the soul. Smoking likewise

3. See Alan J. Bilton, "Cinema as Refuge: Frank Borzage and the Mystical Tradition." *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 46 no. 1, 2016, p. 33-42. Project MUSE, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/flm.2016.a626143>.

attempts to articulate what cannot be seen and yet what fundamentally constitutes us, namely, breath. Breath parallels the soul, or spirit, both coalescing in the word *pneuma*. In *The Place of Breath in Cinema* (2014), Davinia Quinlivan explores breath's all-pervasive yet ambiguous presence in cinema. She asks, "How can we start to think about something we cannot see?" In this way, she explores the "borders between visibility and invisibility" (1). Breath is invisible but implicit, invisible yet perceived albeit aurally and haptically by virtue of cinema's rhythmic unfolding flow of images. Cinema brackets reality, making the numinous unseen palpable. Smoking brackets breath, making spirit manifest. With smoking, the invisible suddenly becomes visible; breath becomes incarnate in smoke. We hear breath



Figure 1. Sam Spade, played by Humphrey Bogart, rolling up a cigarette.

Figure 2. Still assembling a cigarette, Spade seals the cigarette shut.

exhaled, a blowing sound, its direct diegetic referent then appears as a deluge of smoke.

With cinema's hard realism, the filmmaker cannot point the camera at someone's soul, yet cigarette smoke makes breath and spirit visible, perhaps contributing to smoking's appeal. Cigarette smoke gives the filmmaker a hint of abstraction, an animating force, a glimpse of the otherworldly. In the restrained studio system of Hollywood narrative film, the smoke permits an element of surprise and accident in the *mise-en-scène*, allowing the ecstatic irrational to enter. The static photographic images of talking heads become animated, haloed by the pirouetting and cascading aura of silver smoke, as seen in the neo-film noir *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). There is a scene where Rick Deckard administers the Voight-Kampff test on a replicant, a type of human-clone, Rachael, who is smoking. The smoke exhaled is illuminated and dense through the use of a key light, only striking Rachael's hair, neck, hand, and smoke, leaving her face in a soft and low light. The aura of exhaled smoke foregrounds and engulfs the whole shot, creating an ethereal and otherworldly atmosphere, affirming Rachael's quasi-human presence through smoke signals and breath.

The rhapsodic dancing smoke makes visible the human presence, evoking artist Francis Bacon's famous adage, "I would like my pictures to look as if a human being has passed by them, like a snail leaving its trail of the human presence... as a snail leaves its slime [;]" the cigarette leaves silver wisps of smoke. The breathing subject's exhaled breath shrouded in smoke acts like a mirror, representing themselves to themselves; *pneuma*, as breath and spirit veiled in smoke, becomes an existential point of rumination. This offers the smoker a cathartic release focusing on their breath. Spirit becomes haptic; a trace of the soul is left lingering in the smoke.

Quinlivan further explores the sensorial haptic quality of breath, in which breath is projected and touches its surroundings, interconnecting the subject with their sense of place. Referring to Kimsooja, a South Korean conceptual artist

who compares breath to an “invisible needle,”<sup>4</sup> Quinlivan elaborates on this image by adding that this needle-like breath, “threads through flesh and exterior world...” (15). Breath, as a threaded needle, is palpable in smoking, as a type of playing with one’s breath, where the blowing of smoke manifests a desire to touch and be interwoven with one’s surroundings. In “Four Milligrams of Phenomenology” (2006), Simone Dennis, a professor of anthropology, referencing artist Jack Katz’s writing on the subject matter, articulates the smoker’s desire for an inter-corporeality with the world as a type of traveler’s voyeurism. A desire to see oneself in the world for smoking marks “the projection of self through the world... [; the] capacity for visually traceable travel via my breath” (46). Smoking expresses and satisfies the desire to stand outside of oneself, in ecstasy, to be in communion with what is beyond.

### Rituals: set-aside spaces

The question remains about the purpose of smoking. Is it to highlight our breath to ourselves? Regardless, breath continues whether we pay attention to it or not; our paying attention to it seems to serve no pragmatic purpose. The delight in breath is in and for itself. Likewise, smoking a cigarette serves no function other than being an affective and aesthetic gesture. In *Cigarettes are Sublime* (1994), Richard Klein writes on the aesthetic characteristic of smoking: “Cigarette smoking, like a Kantian work of art, does not serve any purpose, has no aim outside of itself” (45); also like a religious sacrifice of a burnt offering, one sacrifices pragmatism for something of no immediate use. The ritual likewise, manifests the sacred, by being space set-aside away from the pragmatic quotidian.

Hollywood narrative films, like industrialized Western society, are action-driven, akin to event-driven plots; the movement of the film is horizontally propelled by cause and effect mechanisms, directed and progressing toward a telos or goal. Unusually, the ritual of lighting and smoking a cigarette effectively interrupts and

slows down the progression of the film, allowing the sacred to enter. The sense of time in the film becomes relative; it becomes elastic, stretching and retracting like deep breaths that ruminate and focus on the poetic unfolding of life in all its small, often-overlooked details. Smoking becomes a non-event, allowing the film’s pace to catch a breath, the dialogue to rest, and the rituals of asking for cigarettes and lighting them are given their due time; a jump-cut does not skip over them. The smoking of a cigarette becomes a set-aside consecrated space. For example, a scene in *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* (Richard Boleslawski, 1937) shows an agreement struck between three characters who, in a challenging situation, are resigned to their circumstances, so they all take a moment to light each other’s



Figure 3. Handing out cigarettes



Figure 4. Each character gets their cigarettes lit



Figure 5. the characters sit and linger, smoking for a moment

4. Quinlivan’s remarks refer to Kimsooja’s website <<http://www.kimsooja.com/projects/breathe.html>> an expired link. See an updated link at <<http://www.kimsooja.com/home/works/to-breathe-invisible-mirror-invisible-needle-2007>> (accessed 08 February 2025)

cigarettes and sit down to smoke together before it cuts to black.

Part of the appeal of filmic portrayals of smoking for directors is that they give their characters excuses to stay still, lingering in a “visible daydream” (Klein 47). It gives the actors something to do with their hands, and the audience receives the aesthetic pleasure of merely watching someone be. Like religious rituals, which are set aside from day-to-day chores, they are gestures articulating something not seen but all implicit. Smoke seemingly manifests as a symbol of and yearning for the inarticulate and irrational, absent in our fast-paced, mechanized, scientific age. Klein evocatively conveys the quasi-transcendent experience that the cigarette can offer in that it interrupts the quotidian:

The moment of taking a cigarette allows one to open a parenthesis in the time of ordinary experience, a space and time of heightened attention that give rise to a feeling of transcendence, evoked through the ritual of fire, smoke, cinder connecting hand, lungs, breath, and mouth. It procures a little rush of infinity that alters perspectives, however slightly, and permits albeit briefly, an ecstatic standing outside of oneself. (16)

In *Ecstasy* (Gustav Machatý, 1933), the protagonist Eva, played by Hedy Lamarr (then Hedy Keisler), seeks a sexual awakening after having been in a marriage that was never consummated. This awakening is akin to a desire for ecstasy, to ‘stand outside of oneself.’ On a sleepless night, pondering the primordial erotic forces in nature that she encountered that day, Eva seems to articulate this ineffable desire by slowly exhaling a trail of smoke that reaches toward the sky. The shot goes from her looking into the camera whilst exhaling for a long time to her looking at the sky, then cuts to the moonlit, cloud-filled sky, evoking a ritualistic offering of incense to the heavens. Though the sexual overtones are clear, this affective release and offering, this ecstatic projection of smoke and the quasi-mystic setting, also conveys a deeper desire for communion with nature and the aether of the heavens, manifesting a desire for union with an inarticulate beyond, an otherworldly releasement. As well as an effective cinematic form of aesthetic expression, smoking here functions as a quasi-religious ritual, offering a set-aside space for Eva to relay her longings.

In the mystical smoke of a cigarette, the film character’s inner world becomes transfigured, animated, and made visible. The exhalation of smoke becomes an inarticulate groan that existentially affirms their existence, articulates their ennui, and seeks transcendence. Even when characters are not in a meditative state, for example, when anxious or agitated, the act of smoking still provides a performative space to articulate affective and existential postures, as it were, defying fate by blowing smoke in the face of odds that seem stacked against them, akin to shaking one’s fist at heaven. Like an offering of their inner world, their emotion becomes transfigured in a grandiose display, like a monstrosity of a smoke cloud; the internal becomes externalized.

In the fast-paced, industrialized, and now digitized modern world, these set-aside spaces of expression and meditation are few. As a substance that burns and has a limited finite duration, the cigarette anchors the smoker in a particular place, providing the opportunity for ritual through a set-aside space in its contingency.



Figure 6. A long exhale.



Figure 7. Eva looks at the sky.



Figure 8. The moonlit heavens.

The cigarette is unique as singular and analogue as opposed to the e-cigarette. Yet the cigarette is also mass-produced, as opposed to a pipe. Cinema is likewise mass-produced as an art form, but was also traditionally analogue, as celluloid film, making its viewing a contingent experience in the cinema.<sup>5</sup> The analogue in its limits provides rituals. In contrast, the digital film has no limit, when it is used to record footage and with regard to where it can be viewed. Likewise the e-cigarette can be inhaled ad infinitum and smoked anywhere at an instance diminishing the ability to create a set-aside space; furthermore unlike the cigarette, nothing is tangibly burned or wasted as in the case of a burnt sacrifice. All this is to say that with the rise of digital film in the early 2000s, the disappearance of smoking in films has seemingly coalesced with the disappearance of celluloid and likewise with the decrease in cinema attendance; curiously, all their fates seem to be tied together. Though there has been a recent surge in the depiction of cigarette smoking due to the nostalgia for historical drama films, the overall trend has seen a reduction of cigarettes in films since the early 2000s. Despite the digital's lack of limits compromising spaces for ritual, the desire for ritual remains, so the creation of new rituals via the digital is still a real possibility.

Though smoking in our society and in films has by no means disappeared, to mitigate the damaging and addictive effects of tobacco consumption, it would seem a more complex understanding of smoking's underlying causes is essential, namely, as yearnings and manifestations of ritual and devotion. If cinema reveals hidden desires unconsciously, the historic prominence of smoking seems to be compensating for a void in our secular age, bereft of enchantment and ritual, speaking to a desire to escape the constraints of our industrialized and pragmatic milieu. Therefore, it seems the expulsion of cigarettes from cinema potentially might only serve to complete the Enlightenment project of disenchantment in our modern age. Klein likens the banning of smoking in public spaces to the banning of public prayer,

referring to the roots of tobacco smoking in sacred pipe ceremonies in Native American tribes: "When the religious dignity of smoking is completely obscured, we have lost a right to pray in public" (16). To say the least, despite smoking's problematic nature and any potential benefits of banning it in public spaces, smoking still nevertheless reflects a constitutive longing in the human spirit that demands a complex reading.

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5. Smoking and the filmic apparatus have many visual parallels which go beyond the scope of this essay, but for illustration's sake: the filmic body of the projector sets alight the celluloid grain of the film similarly to the way the fire in a cigarette sets alight and illuminates the grains of tobacco which breath projects outward in smoke.

# Monica Foster

## Macabre Demonstrations Framing Addiction in Nightmare Alley

Leading scholars in the field of disability studies, Robert Bogdan, Lilian Craton, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson have discussed how central spectacle, disability and physical difference are to the freak show and how the bodily “other” functions as a “magnet” in which the culture at a given time can ascribe “anxieties, questions, and needs” onto the other (Craton 5). For instance, the Victorian era was one where refinement and the curtailment of passions and one’s soul were encouraged, and where science and philosophy worked together to define what constitutes physical normality – in viewing the freak show and in the portrayal of difference, the middle class was able to confirm “normality” and dominant culture beliefs of what it means to be “normal” (32-55). While the academics above have investigated the origins of the freak show, its socio-cultural influence, and its importance to the field of disability studies, it is important to emphasize that the connection between disability and addiction is not obvious; disability is often congenital and is present at birth and does not necessarily lead one into cycles of dependency and self-destruction or obsessive behaviors that define addiction. There is, however, the specter that lingers in this area of research that makes itself known through its absence: the specter of substance abuse and addiction in relation to the freak show’s most garish attraction, the geek, and by extent, the total institution of the

carnival (Easto and Truzzi 550).<sup>1</sup> If the geek was a “down-and-out” alcoholic, as Bogdan proclaims, then the alcoholic becomes subject to the same process of reification, dehumanization, and commodification that performers with physical and mental disabilities were subjected to (Bogdan, 155). Understanding the freak show in terms of its marginalization and the othering of the physically and mentally disabled is important, but it is also crucial to recognize how the carnival was a breeding ground for addiction and how its setting of humiliation, deceit, and cheap thrills was a haven for societal misfits who could not find their place and station in wider society. Understanding addiction by contextualizing it within the realm of the freak show and disability studies allows for a richer understanding of how people afflicted with alcohol addiction and alcoholism’s effects were exploited for the purpose of generating spectacle. This knowledge could spring forth an awareness that could aid in the reduction of stigmatization that those struggling with addiction face. By situating the individual struggling with addiction alongside

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1. Sociologist Erving Goffman coined the term “total institution” when referring to institutions or communities that existed on the periphery of society. Total institutions had no interactions with those who were part of the respectable, wider society – they were “closed off” and socially and culturally separated from the trials and structures of everyday life

those with physical and mental disabilities there is the possibility of a supportive alliance emerging between the two groups along with the realization that their subjective experiences of marginalization may not be so different as previously thought.

In the 1947 film, *Nightmare Alley*, the figure of the geek is deployed to perform his alcohol addiction and to create a spectacle, one that takes on both public and private forms – the public, being the original setting of the carnival, and the private, in a space within the carnival where the individual can simply be. Instead of carrying the responsibility of a social problem film and offering a “cure” for a specific issue, *Nightmare Alley* flagrantly structures alcoholism and the individual as part of the freak show and situates the individual struggling with addiction in the realm of the spectacle. Whether addiction is viewed as a weakness of the will, a disease, or a habituation, *Nightmare Alley* does not offer any satisfying answers to these ruminations; instead, the results of alcoholism are brutally represented on screen with the intent of producing horror, disgust, and fear. By examining addiction in peripatetic communities that figure themselves into popular entertainments, one can come to a greater understanding of how carnivals, travelling shows, circuses and other major entertainments of the late 18th and 19th centuries launched and helped perpetuate the ghoulish matrix of shame, ridicule, and marginalization that the person who is dependent on substances has and is continually faced to endure.

Similarly, the author of the novel *Nightmare Alley*, William Lindsay Gresham, which the film was adapted from, also struggled with alcohol addiction that was triggered after he served in the Spanish Civil War (Tosches, vii). He was not a “well man” and was so entrenched in his alcoholism that even “Freud was powerless” to help him (ix). Having given up on psychoanalysis, he turned to the healing powers of the tarot and carnival magic. Gresham’s gateway into the subterranean world of the carnival was through a man named Joseph Daniel Halliday, who told him of an act that was the lowest of the low of all freak shows and carnival attractions, the “geek show.” (vii). In this attraction, the geek, or “wild man” would chew off the heads of snakes and chickens at the expense of the audience’s amusement (x). The geek was often a man, (on some occasions, a woman, but this was rare) who was a drunkard and performed

these acts in exchange for a place to stay and more booze (to which carnies would supply therefore catering to his addiction) (Bogdan 155). The geek haunted Gresham insofar as he saw himself as a part of this marginalized, peripatetic community of the carnival – the geek, for Gresham, was a mirror for his own fragmented self. In the geek, he saw how far a person struggling with addiction could go to get his fix, even if this would mean sacrificing his humanity and soul.

Moreover, the degradation of the person in active addiction in the carnival setting seemed appropriate to carnies, considering that the carnival was a popular entertainment form that was often viewed as being “cheap and sleazy” in comparison to their amusement siblings of the circus, dime museums, amusement parks, and world fairs (38). The carnival’s meddling in illegal activities, and its status as a deviant, peripatetic community attributed by the public, reformers, and contemporary historians, only contributed to this unsavory image (53). As a popular form of entertainment from the late 18th century to the 19th, carnivals were sought for their prime attraction: the freak show. Bogdan writes of the freak show: “[...] from approximately 1840 through 1940 the formally organized exhibition for amusement and profit of people with physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies, both alleged and real, was an accepted part of American life. Hundreds of freak shows traversed America in the last quarter of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth century” (9-20). The freak show was first and foremost a spectacle of the bodily and the physical other; individuals with physical abnormalities, real or imagined, cultivated or created, were dispossessed of their humanity, agency, and identity, only to be viewed as human capital, a frozen body that was commodified, vilified, and ridiculed.

Comparatively, the individual who was struggling with addiction, the geek, was just another body to jeer at by carnival patrons. The word, “geek” (to which Gresham claimed to have invented the world himself) comes from the word “geck” meaning a fool, simpleton, or dope that was used from the early 16th century throughout

the 19th (Tosches x).<sup>2</sup> In the carnival, as mentioned above, it was used in the context of the wild man act where a “savage” would feign to bite and eat the heads of chickens and snakes. By attributing these words to someone struggling with addiction, there is a direct process of dehumanization and marginalization at play – he is a beast, unable to differentiate himself, devoid of rational thinking and intellectual finesse. *Nightmare Alley* begins with the introduction of the geek sideshow and ends with it. Stanton Carlisle, the protagonist of the film, and the stand-in for Gresham, is fascinated by the geek and asks a fellow carny how “one can get so low” as to perform such a grotesque act.

Carlisle is ambitious and will stop at nothing to advance himself in the carnival world. From being a carnival barker for the mystic Madame Zeena and her husband Peter, who also struggles with alcohol addiction, to a famous mentalist performing in lavish hotels, he cons his way through the hellish scape of the carnival and through Chicago’s elite society by telling lies and swindling the truth. It is not until he is swindled by his psychoanalyst partner, Ruth Litter, out of money that he descends into the darkness of alcoholism, only to become a carnival geek himself.<sup>a</sup>

Regardless of Carlisle’s descent into alcoholism and his transformation into a geek, the performer that instilled such intrigue in Carlisle is rarely present and is only shown at a distance in a subsequent scene. The obscurity and absence of the geek in film and research on the freak show and carnival, a relatively underexplored area of study, fuels his presence therefore feeding one’s imagination with vivid images of horror and grotesquerie in his actual absence, for what is more terrifying than what the imagination can

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2. Granted the confusion surrounding the designations of the words “geek” and “wild man,” it must be made clear that the geek was addicted to alcohol and was struggling with addiction. The “addict,” then, was both a simpleton, a fool, and a savage to be feared – how does this shape the identity of the individual who is not only identified as an addict, but also as a dope and barbarian? Personhood and agency are lost and are only intensified by the degradation that the addict endures at the expense of the freak show much like those with visible disabilities were endured to face.

conjure?<sup>3</sup> The viewer is first introduced to the geek through a carnival barker harking to passersby to come to witness an act that is “solely in the interest of education and science.” He points to a banner with an illustration of the geek (Fig.1.1): overgrown hair, droopy, weary eyes that must again partake in a performance that will grant him his object of desire: alcohol. The carny is setting up a public spectacle that makes a performance out of the geek’s addiction and the outlandish acts he must perform (biting and chewing the heads of chickens or snakes). The viewer is then moved throughout the filmic space through Carlisle’s gait as the carnival barker calls to the viewer/audience bringing them into the diegetic space of the sideshow pit. Associating addiction with the word “creature” while pointing to a banner of a man presented as a “beast” dehumanizes and marginalization those struggling with addiction, placing them in the same category as those with physical and mental disabilities. Bogdan’s categories of “born freaks” and “made freaks” (12) are applicable to the addict/geek whose addiction is either inborn or a product of circumstances. This portrayal in the film dispossesses addiction of its social and personal implications and renders it into a mere spectacle. The intoxication becomes a display, and a belching extravaganza – the lack of bodily coordination, slurred speech, loss of balance and aggression, all that is visible and traumatic about drunkenness is reduced to mere entertainment when it should be regarded with earnest as a symptom not only of the disconnected self, but the ignorance and lack of discernment of the collective. Addiction is not only a public, traumatic spectacle, but also a spectacle of the private, intoxicated self where aggression and destruction towards the self-present itself in a solitary, dance macabre.

Dispensed into the night, the geek/addict has another appearance in *Nightmare Alley*. As Carlisle converses with Pete, another character who is dependent on alcohol, the geek’s wails and cries can be heard as a carny attempts

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3. Here, “object” refers to a term in psychoanalytic psychology that refers to a significant other or being in which one’s psyche relates and how one relates to another, and the processes, traumas, and defenses involved; interpersonal relations here are of significance. This is not to be confused with objectifying one’s person or being.

to subdue him. Here, alcoholism takes on an intended *private spectacle*, despite Carlisle and Pete’s watchful eyes and curious ears. It may seem illogical to associate the word “private” with spectacle, as spectacle is associated with something that is public and is consumed and viewed by an audience. However, in the context of addiction, this contradiction is important. The person struggling with addiction is attempting to reach parts of himself that are abandoned and rejected, which makes this a deeply personal, internal experience; the individual is not only trying to engage with themselves, but they are also trying to reach out to a higher power greater than themselves to aid them in or relieve their suffering. In this way, the journey is personal yet at the same time, is connected to a greater, external spectacle. The addict’s isolation is therefore paradoxical; he or she is alone in their struggle, trying to make sense of their pain in a world that is indifferent to their suffering, but they are also not alone because their isolation is embedded in a social context that ultimately exploits, undermines, and turns their suffering into a public commodity that is consumed. The individual who captivated Carlisle’s attention at the beginning of the film wails and is visibly tormented by alcohol withdrawals, or the “heebie-jeebies” as Carlisle puts it. Gresham describes sobriety and the state of being sober as “the horrors” (Tosches ix). The refusal to live in the “real world” propels the geek to repetitively enter the magical realm that is upheld by intoxication, escaping the horrors of sobriety. The geek then reappears after having been given his drink and he is seen struggling to maintain his balance; the scene is framed as a POV shot, where the viewer, alongside Carlisle, watches the geek in his private

moment of intoxication. (Fig.1.2). This setup is pivotal because it offers a glance into the tortured world of the individual struggling with addiction, not only in a psychological sense, but in the real world of the carnival where addiction becomes performative. Additionally, this shot creates a triplicate of viewing realms: the realm of the viewer, Carlisle’s personal realm—his experiences and perceptions within the narrative—and finally, the realm of the geek; the geek’s world is a world to which the viewer may or may not be familiar. The viewer, alongside Carlisle, is privy to what was intended to be a private spectacle – it is as if the person struggling with addiction is not granted the right to privacy, especially in the carnival setting – here, everything is on display. Alcoholism is often seen as a family disease, a disease that not only affects the alcoholic, but the people around them, whether it be family, or even the larger community. With their addiction, the alcoholic can disrupt and completely erode family life and relationships that can be forever altered and therefore, irreparable. Since alcoholism is a family disease and can affect anyone of any background, income or social group, there is an insinuation that there is little privacy to begin with within the family system as it affects each member substantially and intoxication is performed and visible. (Jung 157). The carnival, as a peripatetic community that is separate from mainstream society, can be seen as a family system as well where the private and public mesh into one another cancelling out any private, authentic expression of the self. The geek sings the following: “A city we all know well / Brought up by two heartless parents / The truth to you, I’ll tell.” He sings to himself, engaging in spectacle that is only for him. This could be interpreted many ways: Were the man’s parents also entertainers who subjected him to mistreatment? What is the nature of this man’s truth and experience? Unfortunately, his truth and his reality are never presented in the film and novel. Before his truth is spoken, he moves out of the frame and the focus returns to Carlisle and Pete’s conversation. If the basis of the geek’s performance was centered on acting out the role of a drunken wild man to an audience seeking titillation, then how might the reception change if the man behind the geek’s title were to perform his pain outright and not conceal it under an act?



Figure 1. A carnie points to a banner of the geek in preparation for his reveal



Figure 1.2. The trichotomy of subject positions illustrates just how far removed one can be from the experience of addiction.

With all this considered, *Nightmare Alley* may not appear as an “alcohol film” in the traditional sense like *Lost Weekend* (1945) or *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) but upon closer examination, the film has considerable commentary about how alcoholism holds the potential to be exploited and the exploitative nature of alcohol addiction. Through the figure of the geek, the film constructs the individual struggling with addiction as a spectacle that can be orientated both in the public and private realms where the former depends on the spectators in the carnival, and the latter, an intention of private, self-dialogue that is hopeful and redemptive. With the public spectacle, alcoholism and its effects become a spectacle under the guise of the act of the “wild man” by the geek. By situating alcohol addiction in the popular amusement of the freak show and in the wider context of the carnival, alcoholism becomes performative and nothing more than a spectacle where the individual is to be ridiculed and pitied. In the private spectacle, the geek laments his plight to himself in a drunken haze in the hopes of understanding his affliction, despite the lack of support and aid that is given to him. *Nightmare Alley* is an important and one of the few texts that gives the figure of the geek consideration and visibility. Through the geek, one comes to learn two things: how addiction to alcohol constituted a large part of the spectacular nature of the geek/wild man show and how including addiction in the discourse surrounding disability and the freak show can help encourage a supportive alliance between those who struggle with addiction and those who have physical and mental disabilities. It is important to consider the figure of the geek when exploring the future cultural representations of addiction and disability. The geek serves as a

call to action and beckons the collective to cease seeing alcohol addiction as a “performance”, a spectacle to be consumed, and to recognize and understand it as a deeply personal struggle that is tinted by trauma. Despite alcohol addiction being treated as a spectacle historically, it is of some relief to note that contemporary society currently tends to look at addiction with compassion and with some discretion. Through the erratic behavior and emotional instability that an addict can display, alcohol addiction will always in these respects be performative as the behavior from intoxication is externalized, but now this can be looked at in such a way that is not dehumanizing, exploitative, and a target for commodification. In performing the wild man, the geek, the individual struggling with addiction has become lost in the carnival’s archives, performing drunken acts as his addiction monstrously grows. There may be hope for him yet if proper attention and care are directed toward him. Unearthing the geek from his nightmare alley and authenticating his experience and personhood is the first step towards his soulful resuscitation.

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## Data Addiction and Cyborg Fascination: Cyberpunk Imagery, Addictive Aesthetics, and the Reconstruction of Future Memory

### I. Manifestations of Addiction and Aesthetic Features in Cyberpunk Imagery

Cyberpunk, a science fiction subgenre that emerged in the 1980s, probes the intricate interplay between technology and humanity through a distinctive futurist lens. The prefix "cyber" originates with the term "cybernetics," denoting systems of human-machine interaction and digital networks, while "punk" encapsulates a defiant stance against mainstream social order. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) is widely regarded as the seminal work of this genre, introducing concepts such as "cyberspace" and phrases like "the body is meat," which have become central metaphors for interpreting the human-technology nexus. Visually, cyberpunk is defined by a "high tech, low life" aesthetic, depicting futuristic urban landscapes where technological progress coexists with societal decay (Csicsery-Ronay, 1988).

These cyberpunk worlds give rise to a concept I term "addictive aesthetics"—a distinctive visual and narrative strategy that both depicts addiction and potentially creates a sense of dependency in its audience (Cavallaro, 78). This aesthetic approach is characterized by alluring

technological spectacles: neon-illuminated cityscapes, layered holograms, and dense data flows. These elements not only establish the narrative tone but suggest technology's persistent stimulation and domination of human perception. These works depict a unique form of "data obsession," where characters exhibit an insatiable hunger for information, network access, and virtual experiences (Hollinger, 35).

To understand this "data obsession" and its aesthetic expression, we must turn to Jean Baudrillard's framework of "simulacra." In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes how symbols progressively supplant reality itself, moving through stages from mirroring reality, to masking it, to concealing its absence, and finally detaching from it entirely (Baudrillard, 231). This theoretical framework is crucial for our analysis because it explains how cyberpunk imagery depicts a world where technological symbols have replaced reality, creating a dependency on these symbols themselves. Characters in cyberpunk narratives often cannot distinguish between reality and its technological simulation, leading to profound identity crises and existential anxieties.

This symbolic erosion of reality leads us to Mark Fisher's concept of "lost futures." Fisher

argues that under the twin forces of capital and technology, contemporary society has lost the capacity to imagine alternatives to the current system (Fisher, 45). What has been lost, according to Fisher, is precisely our ability to envision what he terms a "genuine future"—not just any projection of time to come, but specifically futures that represent authentic alternatives to the present technological-capitalist paradigm.

This notion of a "genuine future" that Fisher sees as "lost" warrants further clarification. It does not merely signify an inability to imagine any future, but rather suggests that, within the paradigm of technological capitalism, conceiving a collective, shared future that transcends the logic of existing systems proves elusive. Fisher's analysis echoes Baudrillard's simulacra theory: when symbolic systems wholly displace reality, individuals grow reliant on these symbols, struggling to envision possibilities beyond them. In cyberpunk narratives, this collective predicament often surfaces through characters' fixations on virtual spaces and their questioning of memory's authenticity—exemplified by Motoko Kusanagi's relentless pursuit of selfhood in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and the replicants' obsession with implanted memories in *Blade Runner* (1982).

Yet, this challenge of imagining a "genuine future" harbors a deeper dialectical tension. The "inability to imagine" delineated by Fisher may not solely be a byproduct of capitalist and technological domination; it could also represent a deliberate rejection of specific future narratives. The fragmented storytelling and nonlinear temporality prevalent in cyberpunk work signal a critique of mainstream notions of progress, concepts often laden with power structures and value judgments. As Donna Haraway contends in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, the cyborg, as a hybrid entity, holds significance beyond merely reflecting fears of human-machine integration; it offers a chance to dismantle binary thinking. As Haraway states, "the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (150). Viewed thusly, the "lost future" in cyberpunk is not merely a loss but a purposeful divergence from predetermined trajectories, creating intellectual room to reimagine the human-technology relationship.

The connection between "addictive aesthetics," "simulacra," "data obsession," and "lost futures" forms the theoretical core of this paper. Each concept builds upon the previous

one to explain how cyberpunk imagery portrays technological dependency: the aesthetics create an alluring visual framework within which simulacra replace reality, fostering data obsession that ultimately results in the inability to imagine futures beyond current technological paradigms. This theoretical progression serves our discussion by providing a multidimensional framework for analyzing how cyberpunk films not only depict addiction but potentially engender it in their audiences through their distinctive visual and narrative strategies.

When addressing cybernetic enhancement in these narratives, the concept of "planned obsolescence" further illuminates technological dependency. In cyberpunk settings, cybernetic components function not only as bodily extensions but as consumer goods engineered for constant updating and replacement (Slade, 72). This design strategy creates a unique addiction cycle: users depend on cybernetic functionalities while being compelled to engage in perpetual upgrades, a dynamic that deepens technological reliance while eroding boundaries between reality and virtuality, nature and artifice.

The following analysis will apply these interconnected concepts to *Ghost in the Shell* and *Blade Runner*, examining how these films employ unique visual and narrative strategies to create "addictive aesthetics" that both portray and potentially engender technological dependency.

## II. From Narrative to Visual Strategies | Visual Expressions of Data Obsession and Cyborg Dependency

This study selects *Ghost in the Shell* and *Blade Runner* as core case studies to explore the manifestation of addiction within the framework of cyberpunk cinema. These two works present distinct perspectives on addiction in futuristic societies: the former delves into dependency on data and technology through Motoko Kusanagi's journey of cybernetic transformation, while the latter examines the obsession with memory and identity through the replicants' fixation on their origins.

### 1. *Ghost in the Shell*: Addiction to Network Access and Identity Loss

*Ghost in the Shell* unfolds in a futuristic world set in 2029, where Motoko Kusanagi, a member of an elite task force, pursues a mysterious

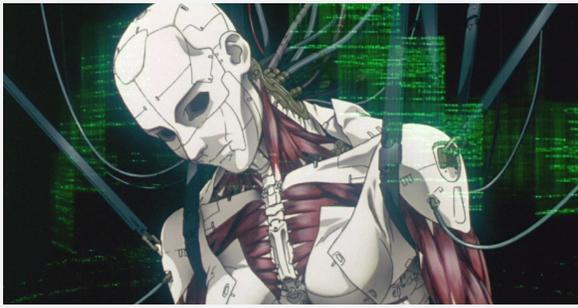


Figure 1. The highly cyberized body of Motoko Kusanagi, with streams of network data continuously flowing into her cybernetic form.

condition that precipitates a profound existential crisis regarding her human identity.

In Mamoru Oshii's directorial vision, Motoko Kusanagi is portrayed as possessing a highly cyberized body, with nearly all components, except her brain, having undergone mechanical transformation. She maintains a constant connection to the network, interpreting data streams as a means of affirming her identity. On the surface, this persistent connectivity and mechanical enhancement might appear to serve purely functional purposes for operational tasks. However, a closer examination reveals that her desire for network linkage and cybernetic modification transcends mere utility, exhibiting psychological traits akin to addiction. For example, disconnection from the network induces feelings of loss and anxiety, while each successful decryption of data or bodily upgrade elicits a moment of intense satisfaction.

At the narrative level, the film employs frequent flashbacks and fragmented memories, blurring the distinction between the virtual and the real. Audiences are drawn alongside Motoko Kusanagi into a complex network labyrinth, where the plot's relentless twists prompt questions about the origins of childhood memories, images of neon-lit streets, and internal monologues. Are these genuine recollections or virtual implants? This narrative technique is deliberately crafted to produce an interactive effect akin to addiction. As the intensity of informational stimuli heightens, viewers are pulled into a state of "obsession" and "disorientation" akin to that of the characters, making disengagement challenging (Silvio 62).

This experiential intensity is meticulously constructed across several pivotal scenes in the film. When Kusanagi interfaces with cyberspace,

the visual tempo abruptly accelerates, shifting from the muted tones of the physical world to the fluorescent blues and greens of data streams, accompanied by a blend of electronic noise and ambient soundscapes that evoke a liminal, dreamlike state. Viewers not only witness Kusanagi's immersion in a digital ocean but also undergo a sensory experience of "information overload" themselves, most notably in scenes where she pursues the "Puppet Master," marked by rapid shifts in perspective, overlapping data layers, and distorted audio effects that incessantly stimulate the audience's perceptual system, thwarting the formation of a stable spatial orientation.

The visual strategy also significantly impacts this process. The film's close-ups on Kusanagi's cybernetic details, juxtaposed with panoramic views of urban data flows, create a dual sense of immersion: on one hand, the camera meticulously captures the junctions of metal interfaces and synthetic skin, enhancing the aesthetic shock of the fusion between flesh and machine, while on the other hand, wide shots or long takes reveal the grandeur of the city's network and the spectacle of information cascades, leaving viewers in awe of the city's brilliance and alienation (Shin 15). Through repeated and reinforced visual motifs, the audience's perception of "network connection" and "cyberization" is continually deepened, leaving a lasting impression even after the film ends.

## 2. *Blade Runner*: Obsession with Memory and Authenticity

*Blade Runner* is set in Los Angeles in 2019 and follows the story of former police detective Rick Deckard, who is rehired to hunt down escaped "replicants." Replicants are bioengineered humanoids created by the Tyrell Corporation, virtually indistinguishable from humans in appearance yet endowed with exceptional physical strength and intelligence. Designed as laborers for off-world colonies, they are subject to strict control measures: their creators impose a four-year lifespan limit and implant fabricated memories, leading them to believe they have experienced a childhood.

While *Ghost in the Shell* portrays technological dependency through network connections and body modifications, *Blade Runner* shifts its focus towards a more fundamental existential dilemma:

the authenticity of memory and self-identity. While carrying out the task of hunting replicants, Deckard becomes deeply engrossed in investigating their "authenticity" (Macarthur 371). For Deckard, this fascination with replicants reflects a profound philosophical question: where exactly does the boundary lie between real and fake when an entity can be entirely "manufactured" through memory data? This shift from technological dependency to existential dilemma showcases the multidimensional exploration of the addiction theme in cyberpunk cinema .

The entanglement between Deckard and the replicants epitomizes this "addiction" to memory and authenticity. Rachael possesses implanted childhood memories, yet in the process of questioning her identity, she becomes increasingly attached to these fabricated pasts. This fixation on memory, whether real or fabricated, transcends mere curiosity and doubt, resembling a recurrent need for some form of "emotional drug" (Abbott 342). This existential uncertainty is echoed in the film's audio-visual language. Endless rain, flickering street billboards, and dark alleys shroud the entire city in a hazy and decadent atmosphere. This audio-visual design has a unique immersiveness, as the repetitive sound of raindrops, reflections of neon lights, and the low hum of electronic music continuously reinforce the interplay of reality and illusion (Bruno 63). The use of slow-motion to capture character expressions and movements further allows viewers to experience a hypnotic disorientation in this ambiance, suggesting the dissolution of boundaries between memory and reality (Carper185).



Figure 2. The rain-soaked urban market scene from *Blade Runner*, providing viewers with an immersive visual experience.

A comprehensive view of these two cyberpunk classics reveals that, despite their differing focuses, both reinforce the imagery of addiction through character development, narrative structure, and visual presentation. *Ghost in the Shell* concentrates on "data connection" and "body modification," portraying dependency on information through the maze of networks and cybernetic upgrades, whereas *Blade Runner* centers on an obsession with memory and authenticity, deepening characters' fixation on "self-existence" through the atmospheric cityscape and the identity conflicts of replicants. Both films adeptly utilize highly recognizable symbols (neon, rain, metal interfaces, etc.) to create a unique immersive experience that both depicts and potentially engenders dependency.

### III. Media Environment and Cultural Memory: From Film Theory to Social Practice

The foregoing analysis of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Blade Runner* reveals how cyberpunk imagery employs narrative and visual techniques to portray addiction. However, this influence extends beyond the textual level into contemporary cultural practices. With the contemporary rise of social media, people's increasing fixation on digital identity confirms that virtual symbols have begun to replace real-life experiences (Nagy, Peter & Bernadett, 284). This phenomenon highlights contemporary society's collective anxiety about technology and identity recognition (Soldatova & Pogorelov, 117).

#### 1. "Simulacra" and Collective Addiction

The addictive experiences depicted in cyberpunk imagery have manifested into new forms of reality within contemporary technological environments. In *Ghost in the Shell*, Motoko Kusanagi's immersion in data echoes simulacra theory's assertions about how the symbolic world transcends reality. Each influx of data brings a profound sense of existential affirmation, offering satisfaction beyond real life experience (Hitchcock, 166). Similarly, in *Blade Runner*, the replicants' pursuit of memory illustrates how simulacra shift from mimicking reality to becoming autonomous realities themselves: when memory can be manufactured, "authenticity" itself becomes something to be repeatedly consumed (Landsberg, 183).

engage in repetitive consumption of existing cultural references. According to Fuschillo, this transformation from passive enthusiasm into active cultural participation makes fandom a source of identity and status, distinguishing cultural dependency from casual interest (Fuschillo, 354).

This phenomenon is substantiated by empirical data: the subreddit r/cyberpunk boasts over 890,000 members ("Cyberpunk - High Tech, Low Life", 2008), while the game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) achieved sales exceeding 13 million copies in its first week (Bankhurst, 2020), and *Blade Runner's* sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) garnered a global box office of \$267 million (Box Office Mojo, 2017). These statistics reflect the formation of substantial cultural communities organized around cyberpunk themes.

Obst et al.'s (87) research illuminates how audience engagement evolves into a psychological sense of community driven by shared emotional connections derived from cyberpunk themes. Fans actively participate in forums, attend conventions, create fan art, and produce fan fiction, reinforcing their attachment to cyberpunk narratives (Reid 3). This participatory culture makes cyberpunk uniquely compelling, fostering a robust "conscious identification" wherein audiences become deeply aware of their membership in a global community (Obst et al., 105).

What was initially confined to science fiction increasingly permeates real-world spaces. Fan groups shift the narrative of addiction portrayed on-screen into collective cultural memories that reflect broader societal anxieties. From this perspective, cyberpunk's addictive aesthetics form a complete cycle from screen to society. These activities expose the collectively felt sense that we are stuck in loops of predefined future imaginations, struggling to break free. When cyberpunk evolves from art form into lifestyle, it offers a unique perspective for understanding the relationship between addiction, desire, and future imagination, and serves as a crucial reference for interpreting contemporary cultural symptoms.

### Conclusion

Cyberpunk cinema's exploration of themes such as technological dependency and identity reflect profoundly resonant cultural metaphors. The immersion in network spaces and obsession with memory authenticity in these films foreshadow the increasingly complex symbiotic

relationship between humans and technology in contemporary society. This "addiction" has evolved into a deeper mode of existence, where individuals seek selfhood in data streams and affirm identity through virtual reflections.

Furthermore, this technological dependency has transcended the boundaries of the screen, permeating all facets of real life. When we craft digital avatars, seek emotional solace in virtual spaces, or transform real-life experiences into data streams, we instantiate and inhabit the "future" foretold by cyberpunk films. This phenomenon thus fulfills Baudrillard's prophecy about simulacra replacing reality and echoes Fisher's concerns about "lost futures"—having lost the ability to imagine genuine futures, we seem trapped in an endless loop of existing cultural symbols.

However, this dependency might also herald a new form of survival wisdom. When technology ceases to be merely an external tool and becomes a crucial dimension of self-extension, we might need to reconsider the boundaries between "real" and "virtual," "natural" and "artificial." Through its unique aesthetic expression, cyberpunk imagery not only reveals this complex phenomenon but also offers significant insights into identity construction and future imagination in the digital era. It reminds us that, when confronted with the deep interweaving of technology and humanity, we must maintain a critical awareness while fostering constructive visions of the future, seeking a balanced path between the virtual and the real.

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## ***The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024), Review by Mehran Abdollahi**

Mohammad Rasoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* is the most recent outcome of Iranian transnational cinema with all of its narrative peculiarities and aesthetic contradictions, which ooze like a fig's nectar once this political thriller is pressed against the axes of martyrdom, social media, radical change, and, perhaps most evidently, womanhood.

Connections to both highbrow arthouse cinema and political activism increase its importance for non-Iranian and Farsi-speaking audiences alike but also highlight its complicated reception. Given the performance of actresses in the film without compulsory veiling, *The Seed* was effectively produced in Iran to be distributed exclusively in theatres outside of the country. Banned in Iran, the film was acclaimed at Cannes 2024, especially for its approach to depiction of Iranian women, and collected the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nomination in the category of Best International Feature Film as a German production. Without any self-reflective, diegetic regard for its European patronage, *The Seed's* narrative unfolds in the midst of the 2022-2023 nationwide cultural revolution known as Women, Life, Freedom.

As an intense political thriller, *The Seed* dramatizes a historical moment in Iran's modern times from the perspective of the faithful man Iman, his devoted wife Najmeh, and their two revisionist daughters, Rezvan and Sana. The narrative begins with Iman's promotion to the role of judicial investigator in the Revolutionary Court when the authorities arm him. The story gradually develops an orientalized Faustian situation regarding Iman's new appointment—a new apartment and a higher salary come at a moral cost: he is now to approve the death sentences of unassessed cases arrested during the protests. As the religious, incompetent patriarch of the film, Iman unequivocally signifies the status quo of Iran's theocratic government, while the women of his family symbolize the variety of sociopolitical opposition.

Visually, the film's domesticized style both contrasts and confirms its proclaimed political objectives. The suffocatingly compact frames of *The Seed* are less the results of artistic choices than coerced decisions made due to discrete filmmaking practice under censorship in Iran during 2022-2023. Yet, state coercion also severely suppressed Iranian women who, unlike Rasoulof's conservative camera, courageously went to the streets during the massive demonstrations and quite literally risked their lives. In *The Seed*, too, we do see pictures depicting Iranian women's historically self-determining acts and the state's brutally violent suppression of their uprising. But these shots are mostly short clipstaken from social media. They stand out not only for their vertical, long-shot framing but also as the most strikingly honest hence impressive images of the film.

The women in these digital guerrilla films captured in/by smartphones remain virtual and uncited, like ghosts of nameless martyrs. But they find a particular fictional counterpart in Sadaf, Rezvan's friend, who is shot in the face by a shotgun while protesting for her civil rights. The melodramatically excessive, ethnomusically codified, extreme close-ups that Rasoulof takes from the young woman's harshly wounded face are nothing short of an overt aestheticization of Iranian women as martyrs to enhance the film's cathartic resolution. Islamic (*Shiite*) iconography of martyrdom in Iman's paternal home also appears to kick-start the film's conclusive act. However, in a politically polarized, emotionally charged condition of production and distribution, the film's sensational appeal to the transnational audiences carries more weight than the politics of Rasoulof's martyring-therapeutic aesthetics in exposing national trauma.

**VIFF** Vancouver  
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2024 Reviews



*The Seed of the Sacred Fig, 2024*



*No Other Land, 2024*

### ***No Other Land* (2024), Review by Jasmine Sanau**

After October 7 2023, the world's eyes have been on Palestine, making the arrival of Oscar-winning documentary of *No Other Land* to international screens more urgent and pertinent than ever before. Intimately following the destruction of Palestinian villages in the West Bank, director Basel Adra plainly and wholly displays the cruelty of life under Israeli occupation. In unflinching swift acts, destruction and death plague the landscape of Masafer Yatta through structures of displacement, dehydration, starvation, and immobilization (both literal and figurative). The film becomes as much about Adra's individual upbringing as it is about the Palestinian identity, splintered and fragmented, learning to move across non-space, non-time, and non-existence. For the revolutionary, the camera's objectivity is our weapon of resistance.

One the greatest talking points is the collaboration between Adra and Israeli director/producer Yuval Abraham, whose unlikely friendship serves as glimpses into a peaceful two-state future for the more apprehensive viewer. However, each conversation between the two men further unraveled their irreconcilable positionalities, in which by the film's end, Abraham's optimism finds silence with Adra's overwhelming exhaustion. As such, *No Other Land* hints towards something far more radical at its core but shies away from saying it aloud. And perhaps, this is the smartest move for now, though we should always remember the words of Frantz Fanon: "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon."

## **Layla (2024), Review by Fernando Vargas García**

Amrou Al-Kadhi's directorial debut follows the titular Layla, a British-Palestinian drag performer, as they navigate the nuances of their relationships—friendships, familial, and romantic—while attempting to stay true to themselves. After a catastrophic corporate gig, Layla meets Max, a businessman with whom they begin a romantic relationship that forces them to confront their own identity, while simultaneously dealing with the pressures of their traditional Muslim family. Described by Al-Kadhi as an “ode to the complications of the queer intersectional experience of what it means to have identities that seem to be in conflict with one another”, *Layla* explores the experience of a racialized, non-binary person, even in the ‘safe-space’ of the queer bar itself.

Bilal Hasna's multifaceted performance as Layla undoubtedly constitutes the beating heart of the film. Hasna is able to connect with the character in a way that grants them incredible nuance, code-switching through social interactions from nightly parties to family gatherings, revealing a tenderness that makes it impossible not to fall for them. In addition to Hasna's performance, Al Kadhi's own experience as a drag performer in the London scene further imbues the script with an authenticity lacking from previous canonical drag film texts. The spaces feel lived in, the connections within queer spaces genuine, the chosen family sincere, and the microaggressions real. Ultimately, *Layla*'s success lies in how true and personal it is; within their journey of self-discovery lies a story that queer audiences will undoubtedly connect with.

VQFF 2024  
Berlinale 2025

## **The 75th Berlinale, Review by Chuiwen Kong**

The 75th Berlinale marks Tricia Tuttle's first year as the festival's artistic director. The most prominent change brought about by this shift is perhaps the discontinuation of the “Encounters” section, established under the previous leadership of Carlo Chatrian and Mariette Rissenbeek from 2020 to 2025. While the Berlinale “Encounters” highlights innovative and independent films (some renowned films from this section include but are not limited to: *Taste*, *Social Hygiene*, *Mutzenbacher*, *Here*, *Orlando*, *My Political Biography*, *Direct Action*), “Perspective”, the section replacing it, focuses on emerging filmmakers. The new unit didn't seem to attract much critical attention, but the festival certainly revived its tradition with the stars - Robert Pattinson and Timothée Chalamet created spectacles on the red carpet, their visible breaths on the cold winter days photographed and posted by the Berlinale social media accounts as the festival highlights. Berlin was never not star-struck, but the festival's embrace of commercial films is particularly noteworthy this year, given the significant decrease in its independent participants. The festival is making an attempt to reconnect with the American blockbusters and therefore its carnivalesque red carpet: a multi-screen video of red carpet highlights played on the stage of the Berlinale Palast before the films, from these videos to the live-streaming of red carpet, the festival celebrates its own legacy and states with images of its unchanged status as an important force in cinema.

Yet the removal of “small films” and the introduction of “big films” puts the festival in a dilemma of positioning itself in the world festival sphere: stereotypically regarded as one of the most radical A-list festivals, the Berlinale seems to be only making such statement by its programming in the fleeting period - the period overlaps and is almost indistinguishable from the disastrous industry condition in the pandemic's aftermath. As a result, the competition section is made up of a series of “medium films”. Self-reflexive cinema, established directors, and a mix of piercing and reactionary political reflections paint the overall picture of this year's selection. The in-between status of these films is best visualised through the viewing experience in the Palast: when Hong Sang-soo and Radu Jude respectively submitted their “smaller” films, the former deliberately downsizing the film file and the latter shot on iPhone, are endearing and accurate descriptions of the festival's current state. The films, one having a “false ending” that predicted the ending by ten minutes and the other ending its story in the first twenty minutes, are representative of these films' half-attached and reliance relationships with the festival's canon. Richard Linklater brought a popular and talented cast for a smaller film, too: *Blue Moon*, a single-location theatre-film where Ethan Hawke contributes one of his best performances. Thematically, these medium-sized competition films collectively cultivate a trusting sense of empathy for the human nature very much in need in the current moment, which, by the form of their exhibition and distribution, is not entirely far-reaching. The Berlinale, while extending the success in its Panorama and Forum sections, still faces the challenge of situating itself and the films in the increasingly divided (art) world.

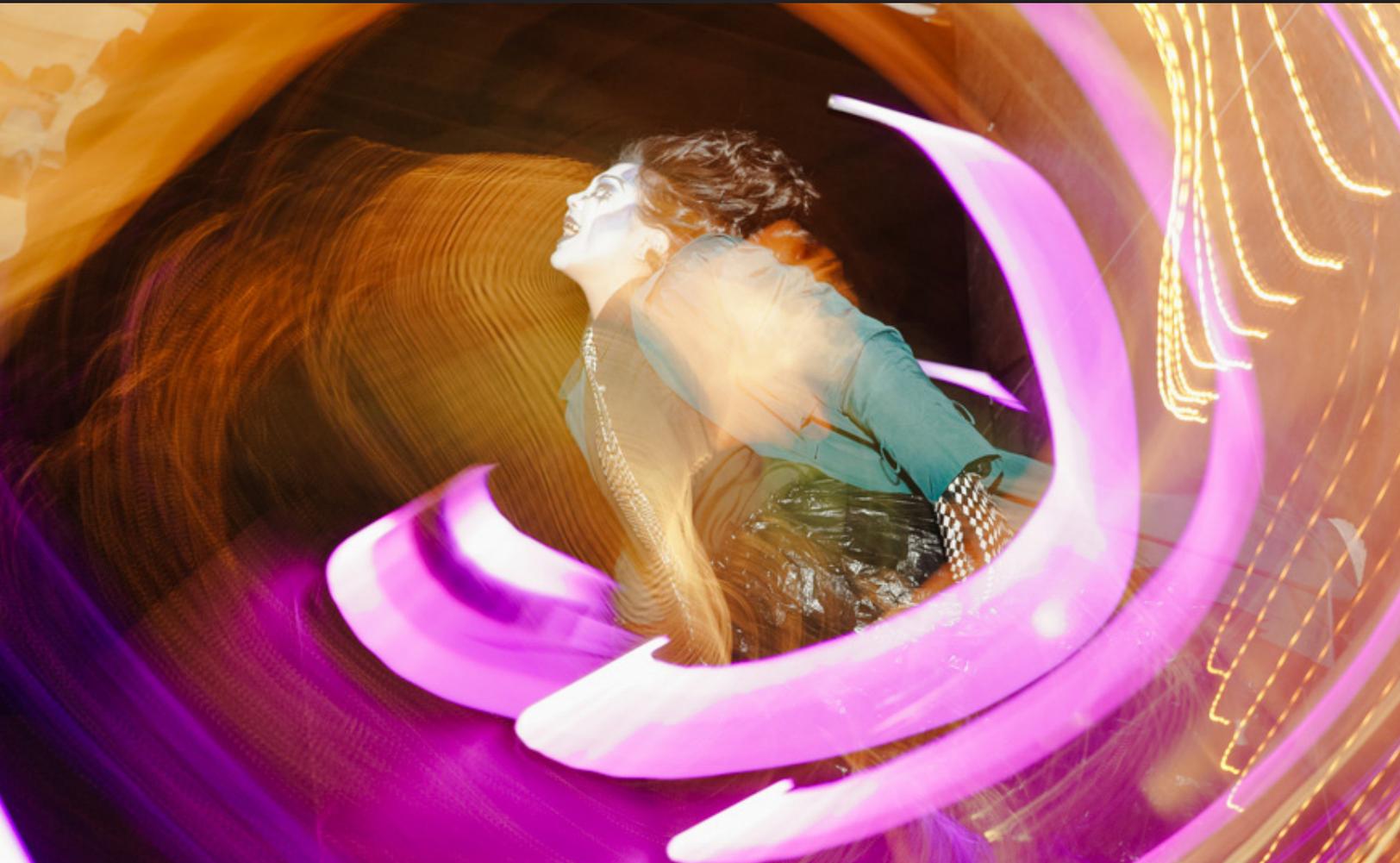


*Layla, 2024*



*What Does that Nature Say to You, 2025*

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A still from the film 'The Devil, Probably' showing a person in a brown corduroy jacket holding a cigarette in their palm. The background is dark and out of focus.

The Cinematheque

# Experience Essential Cinema

*The Devil, Probably*, Robert Bresson, 1977

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